



KIM DARE

ELLERY'S
DUTY

THROWN
TO THE
LIONS

Ellery's Duty

A Thrown to the Lions Story

By Kim Dare

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*To everyone who knows that who you really are,
is far more important than who you are supposed to be.*

Chapter One

“Mr. Ellery!”

Marlin Ellery turned his face toward the voice, as if there was some chance that the leather blindfold some fool had tied over his eyes would conveniently disappear. Of course, it didn't. Ellery remained surrounded by darkness and an unknown number of men.

Rough hands pressed down on his shoulders, forcing him to his knees. A thick rug softened his landing. A second pair of hands wrapped around his right arm and stopped him from falling flat on his face. Neither of those facts provided a great deal of consolation.

He was bound, blindfolded, naked and now he was on his knees in front of a room full of men. The sudden realization that the men weren't all strangers to him, wasn't a blessing.

The voice finally matched itself with a name in the back of his mind. “Marrick?”

“You know him?” one of the men who'd led Ellery into the room demanded.

“Yeah. From the clubs. He's a...dominant.” That was Marrick's voice again, stumbling over the term as he tried to make the title fit the man kneeling before him.

Ellery's hackles rose. His hands tightened into fists behind his back. After so many visits to those local clubs, the boy should have more sense than to think the trimmings could make so much difference to the man.

Holding back a string of curses, Ellery did his best to console himself with the knowledge he was definitely in the right place. This was definitely the lions' den that the local subs kept disappearing to. All he had to do now was keep his temper, and everything would be fine.

“He's a *what?* How do you know him?” One of the men who'd dragged Ellery into the room demanded, from his left.

“Um...are you two sure you got the right guy?” someone cut in from the far side of the room.

“How many men do you think land on our doorstep dressed like this by accident?” Marrick’s friend snarled.

“He’s not very like the other sacrifices...” That was Mr. Worried from the corner again.

And suddenly everyone was talking at once. Voices chased each other back and forth above Ellery’s head. He did his best to build some sort of mental map of the room, but there were too many people, and they moved around too damn much. It was impossible for him to even be sure of the number of men present, let alone calculate which really were men and how many were actually werelions.

“He’s older than most of the other sacrifices...”

“Bigger...”

“Stronger...”

“Not very pet like...”

“He’s beautiful...”

The last two words were softly spoken, yet they seemed to catch the attention of everyone present. Silence fell over the room until a log crackled in the fire.

Nothing else was said, but Ellery still got the distinct impression that someone was creeping cautiously closer to him.

Fingers stroked very softly down his cheek, caressing Ellery’s skin more gently than he’d ever have believed possible. Against all logic, he found himself remaining still and simply accepting the other man’s touch.

“Kefir?”

The man in front of Ellery spoke up in response to the query. All he managed was a hesitant little “I...” but it was enough to confirm a name at least.

Kefir snatched his touch away from Ellery’s face. The dominant sensed him retreat.

“You know what you need to say?” It was the same voice that had said Kefir’s name.

The speaker sounded older than the men who had been arguing with each other a few moments before, his voice was deeper, richer. Even though he seemed to be making an effort to speak gently, his voice was still strong and confident—a natural inclination to dominance still came through loud and clear.

Ellery's spine straightened, as he realized he'd just met the leader of the pride.

"You can't be serious!" Marrick's friend cut in from Ellery's left, before Kefir had a chance to speak again.

"Are you declaring an interest in him, Blaine?" the leader demanded.

"No, but—"

"Then be silent!" The older voice made no attempt to speak gently to the dissenter in his ranks.

"But—"

A roar echoed through the room. Primal instinct kicked in. A shudder tried to run through Ellery's body, but he stopped it in its tracks, unwilling to show any such weakness before the assembled lions. Anyway, he could hardly blame the lions' leader for losing patience. Marrick obviously belonged to a brat.

"Let him go, both of you."

The hands that had led Ellery into the room disappeared. He sensed the lions they belonged to stepped away from him. Bare skin brushed against Ellery's knee as Kefir crept closer again.

"You know what you need to say?" the leader asked Kefir again.

"If you say 'shield', you're free to go," Kefir whispered, making no attempt to make his voice sound deeper, or more dominant, the way Blaine had.

Ellery was so focused on the beautiful, submissive quality in his tone, it took a moment for the meaning of the shifter's statement to sink in. The lions knew about safe words, then?

An answer appeared to be required. "I understand."

"Neatly done, Kefir." The leader sounded very pleased with him. "He's yours for the night."

"But—"

The leader didn't give the brat a chance to say another word. "The decision's been made. There will be no argument."

Other words floated through the darkness surrounding Ellery, infantile silliness warring with impatience at every turn, but they grew fainter as the men speaking walked away from the fireside, to another part of the room.

The only presence Ellery sensed remaining close to him was Kefir's.

“No one will hurt you,” his new friend whispered to him. “You don’t need to be afraid.”

“I’m not.” Ellery’s jaw clenched at the very idea.

Fingertips touched his cheek again, stroking over the tensed muscles, before hesitating.

“May I...?”

A great many widely varying possibilities had made their way through Ellery’s mind when he decided, in his infinite wisdom, to volunteer to be thrown to the lions. But the idea that he could somehow end up being handed over to a submissive feline, had never even occurred to him.

The shifter’s hand disappeared from his skin when Ellery failed to provide immediate permission for it to linger there.

“You may.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“I don’t give orders I’m not sure of,” Ellery informed him, a touch of irritation seeping into his words.

The fingers hadn’t come back, and the dominant suddenly realized that he wanted them to return far more than he should. Unable to reach out and make that very clear to the other man, he chafed at the bondage and the stupidity of the situation more than ever.

Several seconds passed. Ellery couldn’t even be sure if the other man was still there. In the darkness of the blindfold, he silently spat out a string of curses that might even have had a few of the mechanics in his bike shop blushing.

Finally, the lion’s touch came to rest against him again, not on his cheek this time, but on his collar bone. The shifter’s hand stroked across his shoulder and down his arm, tracing out the lines of muscle as if quite fascinated by them.

Kefir’s hand didn’t feel overly large. That wasn’t exactly conclusive evidence of anything, but Ellery had no choice but to piece together whatever he could from the scant clues at his disposal.

A small hand belonging to a relatively small man? He sounded quite young. Most lions were fair haired.

The shifter came closer as he started to explore Ellery’s body a little more confidently, his knees brushed against Ellery’s leg. He did his best to picture the man kneeling in front of him, but it was all just guess work.

“You’re very beautiful.”

Behind the blindfold, Ellery raised an eyebrow. He’d been a newbie on the scene the last time someone had tried to speak to him as if he was some pretty little sub. In the decades that had passed since then, no one would have dared. Yet, the anger Ellery expected to flood through his veins failed to materialize.

The boy sounded so earnest, it was hard to be anything other than amused by him. “If you take the blindfold off, I might be able to say the same about you,” he suggested. A strange desperation to see the lion flooded through him. It was more luck than judgment that kept most of it out of his voice.

The shifter’s hand faltered in his caress. “We’re not supposed to do that.”

The only man his submissives needed permission from to do anything at all, was him. Ellery somehow managed to stay silent, and keep that fact to himself, but he couldn’t stop his wrists pulling irritably at the cuffs behind his back.

Kefir’s attention transferred from Ellery’s arm to his chest. The dominant couldn’t be sure if the man was trying to tease or not, but as the lion stroked his way over his skin, every sensation rushed straight to Ellery’s cock. In spite of everything, he started to stiffen.

As best as he could tell from the younger man’s continued explorations, Kefir didn’t notice that for some time. As the lion’s touch hesitated half way down his abs, Ellery had the distinct feeling that the penny had finally dropped. He waited, blind and impatient, for the shifter’s reaction.

A fingertip brushed delicately against the tip of his hardening cock.

Ellery tensed. His hips attempted to rock forward. He locked his joints and refused them permission, unwilling to put on such a show for anyone who might be watching.

“Do humans like the same kind of touch as a lion would enjoy?”

“That rather depends upon how lions like to be touched,” Ellery informed him, keeping his voice steady through sheer force of will.

For what felt like a long time, Kefir remained very still, very silent. Eventually, Ellery felt the other man’s hand wrap around his shaft. The boy’s touch became a little stronger as he seemed to gain confidence. Apparently, lions liked to jack off just as much as humans did.

It wasn't the kind of information Ellery had been searching for when he volunteered to play the sacrifice, but as the lion's thumb rubbed back and forth across the head of his cock, he couldn't quite manage to feel annoyed by the diversion.

Pre-cum began to leak from the tip, slicking the other man's hand. The shifter was just beginning to build up a pleasant rhythm when he took his hand away without explanation or warning. His fingers transferred their attention to Ellery's leg.

"What—?"

Ellery quickly cut himself short, but the shifter's hand still hesitated against his thigh. "Do you mind?"

The question was so softly spoken, so uncertain of anything and everything in the whole damn world, Ellery couldn't help but think it was the younger man who was really out of his depth and his comfort zone.

"Your choice," Ellery said. He sounded as if he meant it. In some way, he did. He wasn't going to order the boy to keep going just because he wanted to come, not when he couldn't even look into Kefir's eyes and see what the hell was going on with the sub.

Dominance was dominance. Being cuffed and blindfolded didn't change anything. It didn't excuse a dominant from doing his duty and taking appropriate care with the man under his control. It just made it a damn sight more difficult to enjoy the process.

Ellery forced himself to remain still and impassive as the younger man's exploration of him resumed. He'd gone over dozens of submissives' bodies that way over the years. He knew how to make them squirm, with pleasure or with frustration, depending on how well they had behaved up until that point.

He knew how a blindfold could alter a submissive's experience of the world, how it could heighten each sensation, how it could encourage them to give up control and rely on their master. Trust could come quickly to a man who couldn't rely on his own senses to take care of him.

Being vulnerable before another man pulled something out of a submissive.

But he wasn't a submissive, he was a dominant who happened to be in a difficult situation for a while—a dominant who'd given a submissive permission to explore his body.

There was no reason to freak out about it all, like a silly little novice. No reason to get all hot and bothered over what amounted to an incredibly mild scene.

Squaring his shoulders a little, Ellery took a deep breath and chased the tension out of his muscles. The very fact he relaxed and seemed more willing to accept his explorations seemed to give the other man some extra confidence.

A breath caressed his shoulder as Ellery felt the man lean toward him. A moment later, a rough tongue lapped at his skin.

“You taste nice.”

It was said so politely, Ellery had to bite back a chuckle. “Thank you.”

The shifter moved to kneel at his side. Kefir’s hands began to explore his dominant’s back with just as much interest as he’d inspected the rest of him. Kefir’s fingers stroked down his spine until they reached his bound wrists. He hesitated as he touched the cuffs.

He was going to undo them. Ellery had no doubt about that.

“Kefir.”

Ellery mentally cursed as Kefir snatched his hands away from the restraints at the interruption.

“The food’s about to be brought in.”

Ellery had the distinct feeling that some silent look passed between Kefir and the leader of the pride at that point. The younger lion’s hands didn’t return to his wrists when the brief exchange ended.

“There’s a sofa,” Kefir suggested, softly.

With his knees already protesting and his legs cramping in the unfamiliar position, Ellery didn’t need to be coaxed. He quickly nodded his approval of the idea.

The shifter’s hands slid against his skin as Kefir helped him to his feet. Ellery no longer had any hesitation in thinking of the other man as smaller than him then. As their bodies brushed together, he was left in little doubt that he was a good head taller than Kefir—or that the little lion’s cock was just as hard as his own.

Chapter Two

Kefir Tinsley stared up at the pride's newest sacrifice as the other man rose to his full height before him. He was...glorious. There was no other word for him. Strength and dominance radiated off him in a way Kefir hadn't even realized was possible in a human.

He stroked his fingers down the older man's arm as he guided him toward the sofa. Muscles tensed under his touch.

Ellery didn't like being blindfolded. His scent alone made that perfectly clear. Kefir's teeth nipped at his bottom lip. Ellery disliked it far more than any of the humans Kefir had seen thrown to Arslan's pride.

With every moment that passed, Kefir itched to snatch the leather from Ellery's eyes. A desperate need to please the other man and see that he always had anything and everything he could ever want rose up inside him, demanding to be obeyed. It was only Arslan's watchful presence that kept the blindfold in place.

The sacrifice stilled as his shin brushed against the sofa cushion. Kefir guided him down onto the battered leather upholstery as carefully as he knew how. It wasn't easy to direct limbs that were so much longer than his own. The landing was more sudden than he'd have liked. The sacrifice made no comment.

Kefir soon sat next to the larger man, his legs pulled up onto the cushion in front of him as he turned to face Ellery.

His hands refused to stay away from the sacrifice's skin. Humans were supposed to feel ever so slightly cold to the touch. Kefir knew that from hearing the other lions discussing their pets. But he hadn't realized just how tactile, how addictive, a human's skin could be.

That was probably why Luther and Blaine could never keep their hands off Marrick for more than a few seconds at a time. Kefir tore his gaze away from the sacrifice and looked across at the lions crowded around the trestle tables full of food.

Luther and Blaine were both glaring at them. If Marrick really had mellowed the other lions the way Arslan said, there was little sign of it right then.

Kefir turned back to Ellery. The older man's shoulder was right there, barely an inch or two away from him. Leaning forward, Kefir nuzzled against the other man's skin, breathing in his scent, enjoying the simple feel of the human's skin against his face.

There were dark hairs on the other man's torso, more so than on the lions, more than on either of the humans in their pride too. As Kefir let his head drop down and rub against the older man's chest, they tickled his cheek.

Ellery let out a half chuckle. The sound was quiet, but it reverberated through the larger man's chest, making Kefir smile too. He glanced at the food again as he lifted his head, but made no attempt to approach the tables. He wasn't the least inclined to leave his new pet on his own while Luther and Blaine were still frowning angrily in their direction.

A protective instinct he wasn't even aware of possessing made itself felt inside Kefir for the first time. He closed his eyes as he snuggled a little closer to his pet's side, automatically trying to warm the other man's skin with his own body heat.

Someone cleared their throat right in front of them. A plate of food appeared before Kefir as he blinked open his eyes. He looked up. Ryland offered him the plate once more.

Kefir smiled his relief as he realized he wouldn't have to leave Ellery's side at all. "Thank you." He took the dish and watched as Ryland made his way back to Arslan, to sit at his mate's feet.

"Kefir?" Ellery prompted.

"Are you hungry?" Kefir asked. "There's food. Chicken and ham, and—"

"Are you going to untie my hands?"

"I could feed you," Kefir suggested. He'd seen the other lions feed their mates. The idea appealed to him then in a way it never had before. Anything that involved contact with Ellery's mouth was suddenly a truly fascinating prospect.

"No." The sacrifice sounded very certain about that. He didn't seem to like the suggestion at all.

Tilting his head on the side, Kefir studied the older man for some time.

“The others were right when they said you’re not like the men who are usually thrown to us,” Kefir observed, as he picked at a few of the bits of meat on the plate, his appetite quickly deserting him now that he knew he’d be eating alone.

“What were the other men like?” Ellery asked. His tone of voice was different from the other sacrifices too. His words didn’t sound like a plea for reassurance. They were much more like a demand for information.

Kefir thought about it for a few moments, letting images of the other men flash through his mind. “They were...less...” Kefir couldn’t find the right word.

They were simply less than the man before him. Smaller than him, weaker than him. None of them had had his strength, his energy. Raw presence poured off the older man.

Kefir gazed up at him, completely enchanted. “Are there many humans like you?” he asked.

Ellery’s face turned toward him. His eyes remained hidden away behind the leather, but he still seemed to be looking at him in query.

“I haven’t had a great deal to do with humans,” Kefir confessed, dropping his gaze. “I didn’t even know men like you existed until...” Until Blaine and Luther had marched him into the room and all the oxygen had disappeared from the world.

“Dominants?” Ellery suggested.

Kefir thought about the word. “Like the lions who lead the prides?” he hazarded.

“Something like that, yes,” Ellery agreed, his voice all calm certainty.

Kefir nodded, a little sadly. He might not know a great deal about humans, but his work often took him to the leaders of all the different prides. They weren’t the kind of men who would wish to be another man’s pet.

Not all the sacrifices were suited to it. Arslan had made that very clear to all the members of his pride. Potential pets were very rare, that was one of the reasons they should always be cherished and treated with all possible respect.

Kefir glanced at the sacrifice one more time. He had the distinct feeling that Ellery wasn’t a man who needed to be *given* respect. He was more than capable of demanding it.

Setting the plate aside, their food barely touched, Kefir rested his head on the larger man's shoulder as he watched his fingers trail over the sacrifice's skin. There were a series of darker little marks on his shoulder, like freckles. Kefir explored them thoroughly.

There was no point in regretting that there was no way Ellery would wish to be his pet, let alone his mate. The only sensible thing to do was relish the time they would have together that night.

There was a pale scar on the sacrifice's stomach, low down on the right hand side.

"You were hurt?" he whispered, quiet horror running through him at the thought, even though the scar was obviously old and had healed years before.

"Appendix."

He said the word as if it explained everything. Kefir had already parted his lips to ask for more information, when another voice cut through the world.

"Kefir, do you have anything to say?"

Looking up, Kefir met Arslan's eyes across the room as he heard his leader call his attention back to the meeting going on around them.

The older lion was studying him very carefully, and Kefir had no doubt that Arslan was well aware that he hadn't been paying the least bit of attention while the other lions were telling the pride about their week.

Kefir took a deep breath and tried to pull details of his own life to the forefront of his mind. His work on recording the genealogy of all the lions in both the local and the not so local prides was going well. He'd made progress on some of the lines that he'd been struggling to untangle for months. None of that seemed to be significant enough to mention right then.

He shook his head, but Arslan didn't immediately move on to speak to one of the other lions. Kefir dropped his gaze and waited, his pulse quickening as he became aware that the older man might not be entirely pleased with him.

Finally Arslan's attention moved away. Kefir remembered how to breathe.

"Are you scared of him?"

Kefir stared up at Ellery's blindfolded face as he tried to make sense of the strange question. "Afraid of Arslan?"

"If that's the name of the leader of the pride, then yes—are you scared of Arslan?"

Kefir tilted his head to one side and considered the matter very carefully, trying to work out what the human might be trying to get at and failing. “Why would I be afraid of him?” he asked, eventually.

Ellery said nothing. He seemed to be listening to the men on the other side of the room.

“The man Arslan’s talking to now is human?” he asked after a while.

Kefir nodded, rubbing his cheek against Ellery’s shoulder with the movement. “Ryland’s his mate.”

“His submissive?”

“Lions call the humans that belong to them their pets.”

The other man tensed. Kefir glanced up at him through his lashes. “You wouldn’t wish to be a lion’s pet,” he said. It wasn’t even a question. He might have only known him for half an evening, but he was already sure of his answer.

“No.”

Kefir dropped his head back to rest on the other man’s chest. His heartbeat was strong and steady beneath his cheek. Closing his eyes, Kefir let silence descend around them. He had no idea how much time passed before he felt someone approach their sofa.

“It’s time the sacrifice was on his way, Kefir.”

He looked up at Arslan. The older lion studied him in return, his expression very serious. There was no point arguing, Kefir knew that.

“The car will be waiting for you outside,” he whispered to Ellery. Forcing himself to pull away from the older man, he rose to his feet and guided the blindfolded man toward the door.

Until they stepped outside, some part of him clung to a vague hope that the car simply wouldn’t have turned up, that he’d somehow be able to keep the larger man with him a little longer.

But the car was there, black and shining in the second hand light from the house. Kefir led the other man toward it, moving even more slowly than he needed to for the sacrifice to keep up.

He stopped next to the open back door of the car. It was impossible to read Ellery’s expression when only half his face was visible. Kefir had no idea how to say goodbye to him.

A brief hesitation and he rose up onto his toes on the rough gravel and pressed a gentle little kiss to the taller man's cheek. His skin was a little prickly under his lips, rough and perfect. Swallowing down his reluctance, he helped the larger man to fold himself into the car.

Car door closed, Kefir backed away. Arslan stood in the doorway leading into the house. The smaller lion stopped next to his leader and turned to stare at the car.

The chauffeur started the engine. The moment Ellery leaving became a real possibility, Kefir became incapable of remaining where he was.

He rushed forward and wrenched the car door open before the chauffeur had a chance to pull out of the drive. Ellery tensed as he turned his head toward him, instinctively ready to defend himself.

"You're sure you don't wish to be a lion's pet?" Kefir blurted out.

"I'm sure," Ellery said. He sounded as certain about that as he did about everything else.

Pain shot through the little lion, harsher than anything he had ever felt—unable to be understood, and equally impossible to ignore. But there was nothing Kefir could do, except close the car door once more and watch the car drive away.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder, and Kefir knew Arslan was there, watching over him. But, for the first time the little lion could remember, the fact that he was safe and the member of a good pride wasn't enough. He wanted a pet. He wanted a mate.

He wanted Ellery.

As he turned and looked up at Arslan, he knew the older man saw it all in his eyes, all the confusion, and all the pain too. The larger lion led him back into the house. He closed the door behind him, destroying Kefir's attempts to steal one more glimpse of the disappearing car.

"Tell me about him," Arslan ordered, when all the other lions had left and only he and Ryland remained in the room with him.

Kefir gazed at the rug where the other man had knelt such a short time ago.

"He's..." The words still weren't there. He was perfect. In a way Kefir hadn't believed possible, the other man was faultless. He'd fitted against him so effortlessly as he curled up with him on the sofa. Everything meshed, just as it should, within Kefir's own mind while he was near him.

Eventually, Arslan stepped in and saved him from the silence that filled the room. Ruffling his fingers through Kefir's hair, he excused him from trying to find the right words.

“Don’t worry, little one. I understand.”

Kefir’s teeth nipped at his bottom lip. He understood the situation too. Understanding it and liking it weren’t the same thing.

Chapter Three

Ellery looked up as the door leading into the lounge room at the back of the club swung open. Two men stepped inside. The dominant ran his eyes over them, quickly taking stock of the strangers who'd asked to meet with him.

The first man was roughly the same age as Ellery, tall and broad across the shoulders, a thick mane of dark hair tied back at his nape with a length of leather. And he was indeed a stranger. He might have exuded dominance, but Ellery never recalled seeing him in any of the local clubs.

The second man to make his way into the room was smaller, younger, and no more familiar to Ellery than the first. The only thing that he could be sure about as the men made their way toward him, was that the smaller man belonged to the larger—a man would have had to be a fool not to see that.

“You wished to speak to me?” Ellery asked.

“Yes.” No apology. No small talk. The elder of the two men didn't waste a single word.

Ellery indicated the leather arm chairs set around a low table with a brief wave of the hand. “We haven't met.” He didn't bother to make it a question.

“Not officially.” The dominant extended his hand to Ellery over the table. “Professor Joseph Arslan.”

The name sent a wave of emotions shooting through Ellery, making it harder than ever for him to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that had been growing inside him since he left the lions' den. Pushing away the memories, he calmly shook the other man's hand, before turning toward the submissive at Arslan's side. “That makes you Ryland.”

The younger man nodded.

“I take it Kefir mentioned us by name last weekend?” Arslan said.

Ellery nodded, just once, as he took his seat.

Arslan folded his large frame into the chair opposite him. Ignoring the other seats, Ryland quickly settled himself on the floor at his master’s feet.

Ellery had the distinct feeling he was being inspected, judged, by both men. He met Arslan’s gaze and held it, cheerfully willing to be damned before he looked away first.

“You agreed to be thrown to my pride last weekend,” the shifter said, after several minutes of silence.

“I did.”

“Why?”

Ellery slowly ran his eyes over the other man, making sure Arslan would be well aware that he was being judged in return. “The dominants who run these clubs have a duty of care toward the local submissives. They say they’re well treated when they visit you. I needed to be sure they were telling us the truth.”

The room turned perfectly silent, perfectly still. Unless Ellery was very much mistaken, Ryland was actually holding his breath, unsure how his master would react.

“Last Saturday’s meeting of the pride wasn’t...typical,” Arslan said, guardedly. Ryland started to breathe again.

Ellery raised an eyebrow, all apparently polite curiosity while his heart raced faster and his palms turned sweaty. “Oh?”

“The pride invites you to return to the den this weekend, so you may see how a sacrifice is usually treated.”

There was more to it than that. Ellery could see it in the other man’s eyes. Arslan evidently wasn’t someone who made a habit of saying anything other than exactly what he thought, but it was equally obvious that there was some ulterior motive behind his invitation—something that made Ellery’s attendance important to the shifter.

He’d be able to see Kefir again. The thought sprung up inside Ellery’s head so quickly it didn’t seem to be born of any real mental practice. It took real thoughts a few seconds to catch up.

There would be no seeing, not if he was trussed up the same way as before.

“How much, exactly, would I be able to *see*?”

“You’d be there as our...

“Guest,” Ryland suggested when the shifter seemed unsure of the right word.

Arslan nodded his acceptance of the term “A blindfold wouldn’t be considered necessary for a guest—nor would the cuffs.”

There was no thought process that could overrule Ellery’s instincts then. Kefir, and no blindfold or cuffs to stop him running his eyes over the submissive, to stop him reaching out and touching everything he saw. Ellery didn’t need to know anything else before he gave his answer.

“I’ll be there.”

* * * *

“What the hell’s *he* doing here?”

Ellery slowly ran his gaze over the dining room as he stepped through the doorway. Three young men were busy undressing each other on the opposite side of the huge dining table.

“Manners, Blaine,” Arslan said, as he closed the door behind them. “You too, Luther. Ellery is our guest.”

Ellery didn’t need to hear the lion’s name, or even see him standing next to Marrick in order to place the voice. The brat from the previous weekend—Ellery looked him up and down. Blond, beautiful, brainless—and apparently part of a well matched pair with the man standing on the other side of Marrick. No doubt the other one, Luther, owned the second set of hands that had led him into the den the previous weekend.

Ellery dismissed both shifters from his thoughts, not particularly inclined to label them as real dominants, even if it was obvious that Marrick was submitting to them.

Taking off his leather jacket, Ellery draped it over the back of one of the dining room chairs. The meetings of the lions were always conducted naked. Ryland, who seemed to consider himself some sort of unofficial interpreter for his feline master, had made that clear toward the end of Ellery’s conversation with Arslan.

The elder lion had already been naked when he answered the door that night. As Ellery stripped out of his own clothes, he noticed several other sets of garments scattered around the room. Apparently there were already several naked men waiting for them in the den.

Kefir might be one of them. Ellery’s pulse shot up a notch. Jeans and shirt quickly dispensed with, it wasn’t long before he was as naked as he could get. Kicking his boots under the chair so they wouldn’t be tripped over, he turned back to Arslan.

The leader of the lions led the way across the entrance hall and into another room. The whole house was well heated—enough so that it was comfortable to walk through it naked, but the room he walked into then, was even warmer.

Heated air engulfed Ellery as they stepped inside, just as it had a week before. He quickly scanned the room.

Ryland he knew. There were half a dozen other men—half a dozen *lions* who he had no way of recognizing from his previous visit. And there, standing just next to Ryland, was a smaller lion. The shifter was staring straight at Ellery, as if a ghost had walked into the room.

Any questions that might have lingered in Ellery's mind regarding whether or not Arslan had informed Kefir that the man he'd met the previous week would be returning to the lions' den, were answered in that moment. No one was that good at feigning shock

Stepping forward, outwardly calm and in control of his every action, Ellery stopped directly in front of the young blond man. He was beautiful. There was no other word for it.

Big brown eyes stared up at Ellery. His lips were slightly parted. As Ellery watched, his tongue flicked out to moisten them, calling up the memory of that same tongue exploring his skin a week before.

Ellery nodded a greeting. "Kefir."

The younger man swallowed. "You...you came back."

"Yes." Ellery smiled slightly. Kefir was pretty when he was speechless.

Settling his hand on the small of the younger man's back, he gently led him away from the rest of the group, toward a sofa in a quieter part of the room. "Are there any rules about where men sit at these meetings?"

Kefir shook his head as he lowered himself onto one end of the sofa. Ellery sat next to him.

With the blindfold finally gone, he was more than entitled to make up for lost time. He ran his eyes leisurely over the younger man's body. He was all lean lines of muscle, his form barely obscured by a smattering of pale blond hairs.

As he watched, Kefir drew up his feet onto the sofa in front of him and curled his arms around his legs. The posture hid far too much of his body. It seemed to do so more by accident than design, but it still grated on Ellery's nerves.

He itched to reach out and rearrange the boy into a more pleasing shape, but he forced himself to resist the temptation as he cautiously felt his way forward in a culture he wasn't familiar with.

Knowing exactly what he'd do with Kefir if such a blatant submissive wandered into a leather club was one thing, but it didn't really help him in the lions' den. Far better to move warily and have everything he wanted in the long run than grab at something he'd like in that moment, and see everything else slip through his fingers.

"I'm glad you came back," Kefir said, as their eyes met again.

"So am I."

The sound of a car stopping on the gravel driveway pulled at Ellery's attention. He looked up, just in time to see half the lions in the room turn their gazes away from him and Kefir toward the window.

"Luther, Blaine."

Ellery glanced across to the two brats. The car didn't seem to interest them in the least, they were both still glaring at him as if he were offering them some sort of mortal insult merely by existing.

He raised an eyebrow, silently inviting them to speak up if they had anything to say.

"Whenever you're both ready," Arslan bit out, any small amount of patience that had been in his voice a moment before, rapidly draining away.

Luther caught hold of Marrick's wrist and tugged him along in his wake as they strode out of the room. The boy's back was covered with deep scratches, vivid scars that would probably never fade from his skin. Ellery frowned after the trio as they moved out of sight. It had obviously been too much to hope for, that all the subs would have found good masters among the shifters.

"He likes them."

Ellery turned back to Kefir.

"The scratches," the little lion whispered. "Marrick says they make him feel good—alive."

Blaine and Luther marched back into the room before Ellery had a chance to question the statement. A new human sacrifice stumbled along between them. Marrick obviously had very

little part to play in retrieving him. He wandered in behind them, looking slightly embarrassed, and more than a little bit amused by the fuss his lovers were making.

The moment the sacrifice reached the rug in front of the fireplace, both lions abandoned him to flank Marrick again. The newcomer stood alone before the fire.

His anxiety was obvious. It only increased as no one approached him for several long minutes. The whole room seemed to be waiting for some sort of signal, for another shifter to move first.

As many pairs of eyes still rested on Ellery as upon the bound and blindfolded man being offered to them but, eventually, someone stepped closer to the other man.

He reached out to the offering, his fingers tracing a line down the submissive's spine, making him startle. A glance to Arslan and the lion seemed to remember his manners.

"If you wish to be released, you must say the word 'lance'. Understand?"

Ellery glanced across at Arslan. As soon as the sub had agreed the terms, the older lion nodded his permission for the other lion to do as he pleased with him.

Within a few brief moments, the shifter and the sacrifice were rolling about on the rug together, both men evidently enjoying themselves immensely.

Ellery looked toward the other lions. Several of them were taking a great deal of interest in the scene playing itself in front of the fire. Ellery had no doubt that a large part of what they whispered to each revolved around deciding who would get the next turn with him.

It was no more interesting or dangerous than what happened in a dozen different human clubs every weekend. Ellery turned his attention back to Kefir. The younger man was watching him with an intensity that took the dominant off guard.

He apparently had the ability to go for hours at a time without blinking, but when he did, the slow dip of lashes over those huge brown eyes was breathtaking.

"Luther and Blaine don't seem to have any interest in playing with the sacrifice," Ellery observed.

"Not since Marrick. Neither does Arslan—not since he found Ryland," Kefir said. "Only the unmated lions need to learn how to lay with humans."

"Learn how to lay?" Ellery prompted.

"Humans are..." Kefir seemed to think very carefully about his choice of words. "Not as resilient as lions."

Ellery tore his gaze away from the little lion and glanced across the room. Arslan was watching the proceedings, but he didn't seem the least interested in enjoying his voyeurism. He observed it all in the same way a referee observed a football game, analytical rather than admiring, most of his mind devoted to making sure everyone followed the rules rather than enjoying the game himself.

"And if a lion forgets that?" Ellery prompted.

"Arslan won't let anyone get hurt," Kefir said, with complete certainty.

Ellery had the distinct impression his faith in his leader was rather well founded. He forced himself to pay attention to the scene in front of the fireplace for a few more minutes, just so he could be sure he wasn't merely letting himself believe the boy there was fine, because it would be far more enjoyable to devote all his time to Kefir and forget there was any such thing as a human submissive in the room.

"You have no interest in the sacrifice either?" Ellery asked when he finally allowed himself to look back to him.

Kefir blinked. He shook his head. For a moment he looked down, but the big brown eyes were soon focused in on Ellery again. "Do you?"

Ellery bit back a smile as he shook his head. "If I were looking for a human lover, I'd go to a human club."

He'd picked his words carefully. Kefir held his gaze. He didn't seem worried by the suggestion, but just a fraction confused by it. "You've changed your mind?"

It took Ellery a second to work out what he meant. "About being a lion's pet? No. I haven't changed my mind about that."

Kefir nodded, very slowly. Ellery had the distinct feeling that every single word he said was being filed away inside the younger man's head. If Kefir had turned around and proved able to recite everything he'd ever said to him word for word, he wouldn't have been entirely surprised.

The boy seemed to be waiting for him to say something else. Ellery considered his options and which course of action would be best to take with a feline. Reaching out, he stroked his thumb along the other man's jaw line, tilting Kefir's head this way and that to admire him properly. "I was right about what I'd see when I took off the blindfold. You're stunning."

Kefir smiled, evidently both pleased and surprised by the compliment. He obviously had no idea how spectacular he was. Any traces of doubt about his lack of experience with humans vanished from Ellery's mind. There was no way in hell he could have failed to realize he was gorgeous if he was used to human society.

"If you need money, I have—"

Ellery's mind quickly focused in on the words that were leaving the younger man's lips rather than just how pretty those lips were and how magnificent they would look wrapped around his cock. "What?"

"If you need money, I can—"

Ellery held up a hand to silence him. The little lion tilted his head on one side as he looked at his palm, all curiosity.

"What makes you think I want your money?" Ellery snapped, not even trying to hide his annoyance.

"That's why a lot of the humans agree to..." Kefir looked to the sacrifice for a moment, hesitation creeping into his voice as he seemed to sense his new friend's anger.

"Arslan invited me to observe the meeting, because I had concerns about how the humans who are thrown to the pride are treated. That's why I agreed to be thrown to your pride last week. I wasn't paid for my time."

Kefir turned back to him, his eyes full of confusion. "I..." He looked down for a moment. "May I know what I did last time that you disliked?"

He was such a serious little thing. Ellery reached out and stroked his fingers through the younger man's hair, not quite able to keep his hands to himself. "What makes you think I disliked anything at all?"

"Your concerns for how you were treated..."

"Were about how other lions treat their sacrifices—not you."

Kefir smiled again, still a little uncertain, but perhaps more optimistic in his confusion now.

A commotion on the other side of the room seemed to herald a break from the scene.

Food was brought in. Huge quantities of meat were retrieved from the laden tables and eaten. Other lions took their turns with the sacrifice, who still seemed to be having the time of his life. Arslan spoke to each of the lions in his pride. And, through it all, while Ellery alternated his

time between speaking quietly to Kefir and observing the other shifters, the little lion's attention never once wavered from him.

Even when the other men started to be herded from the room and the sacrifice was taken out to the car, Kefir stayed exactly where he was, curled into a ball on the seat next to Ellery, torso still half hidden behind his pulled up legs.

Luther and Blaine were the last to leave, loud, as ill-disciplined as ever, and apparently not too happy with being thrown out while Ellery was still there.

"Are they always such brats?" Ellery asked, forgetting for a moment that he was trying to be polite about the boy's family.

"They're showing off for you," Kefir observed shyly.

Ellery raised an eyebrow. "For me?"

"Because Marrick knows you from the clubs."

Before Ellery could make it clear that he'd barely exchanged more than half a dozen words with the other submissive, Arslan walked back into the room, Ryland in his habitual place at his side.

He'd done his duty. He'd seen how the subs were treated. He'd played nicely, minded his manners and showed all possible respect for the lions' traditions for the entire evening. No one could reasonably expect him to put off taking Kefir back to his own house a moment longer.

Ellery turned toward them. "Kefir and—"

"Kefir will be staying here with us for the next few weeks," Arslan cut in.

Chapter Four

Kefir managed to drag his gaze away from Ellery for a moment. He looked across the room to Arslan. He knew the leader of the pride well enough to know when the older man made a decision he had no intention of going back on it. He'd be staying with Arslan and Ryland for the next few weeks.

Ellery didn't seem to have such a good understanding of what Arslan's tones of voice meant, yet. He stood up and seemed about to say something, when Arslan spoke again, before he had a chance.

"Our traditions are very clear. The matter is not open for negotiation. However, if Kefir wishes to invite you to stay here with him, that's his choice."

Ellery turned to face Kefir.

He stared helplessly up at the larger man, unable to think of the right words. Ellery seemed to see the question in his eyes anyway. He looked back to Arslan, before nodding his acceptance of the silent invitation.

"You'll stay?" Kefir managed to check, his voice rough with hope.

Ellery nodded, but he didn't actually look away from Arslan for a moment. There seemed to be some silent relay of messages passing between the older men that Kefir didn't understand. He looked to Ryland, wondering if perhaps, someone needed to be the kind of man that both Ellery and Arslan were, in order to fathom it out. Ryland was watching it all with a smile, as if he knew what was going on too, and was enjoying seeing it pan out before him.

Finally, Arslan turned toward Kefir. "You can use the blue room. You know the way."

Kefir obediently led Ellery out of the room. Picking up their clothes on the way past the dining room, they were soon upstairs, nudging open the door into the guest room nearest Arslan and Ryland's own bedroom.

As the door swung closed behind them, the atmosphere seemed to change. Setting his clothes down on the top of the dresser, Kefir turned to the older man, already past all his previous experience and eager to see what might happen next.

Ellery left his clothes on a chair and sat on the bed facing him.

"How much do you really know about humans?"

Kefir crossed the room and sat next to him on the edge of mattress. "I've spoken with Ryland and Marrick many times since they joined the pride."

"But you've never taken part in the games the other men play with the sacrifices?" Ellery asked.

Kefir shook his head, suddenly realizing that could be considered a problem. He looked down at the strip of blanket between them. He wanted to reach out to Ellery so badly, but his hands stayed resting lightly on the bed on either side of him as he felt the older man's eyes rake over his skin.

Lions were expected to have experience with sacrifices, experience with humans. What they learned in the den kept the men they took to their beds safe. An inexperienced lion was dangerous.

Suddenly, Ellery's fingers stroked against his jaw, guiding him to look up. He didn't look disappointed in his discovery, or scared by it, either. His scent made Kefir wonder if perhaps he liked the idea of taking an untrained lion to his bed.

"You've thought about it?" Ellery suggested, in that same calm, controlled tone. "You've imagined yourself in the place of one of the men playing on the rug?"

Kefir nodded, his skin brushing against Ellery's fingertips with the motion. He'd imagined it almost every hour of each day since Ellery had walked out of the den the week before.

Back in his own flat on the other side of the town, he'd tossed and turned his way through every night, unable to push the thoughts out of his head. His hand had worked around his shaft and his cum had spilled against his skin. Somehow, he'd found himself no longer able to achieve real satisfaction on his own, but even then, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it.

“And whose place did you imagine yourself in?” Ellery asked.

Kefir blinked at him.

“Did you picture yourself taking the lion’s role or did you imagine yourself in the human’s place?”

For just a brief moment, Kefir’s eyes dropped closed. The images that had teased him all week rushed to greet him. Ellery’s body covering his as he lay on the rug. Him, kneeling with his hands spread out on the rug before him as the other man—

The shifter’s eyes sprung open. In all the times he’d seen the lions playing with their sacrifices, there was only one kind of man who found himself pinned beneath his lover, only one person who’d shuffled his knees further apart on the carpet, offering his body to his lover that way.

The light in Ellery’s eyes burned brighter, as he seemed to realize what his answer was going to be.

Kefir frowned slightly. The images had seemed so natural inside his head, he hadn’t even noticed how different his fantasies were from what seemed to be the usual way of things between shifters and their pets.

“Do you mind?” he asked, as he tilted his head to one side and studied his pet for any sign of disappointment.

Ellery chuckled.

Glad that the other man was happy, Kefir returned his smile, even if he had no idea what was so funny.

Ellery’s hand slid behind Kefir’s head and guided him forward, encouraging him to tilt his head back as he was pulled closer. Their lips met perfectly, the older man’s mouth strong and determined against his. Ellery’s tongue traced the line of his lips, nudging against the seam between them until Kefir parted them and let him in.

The little lion whimpered as an impossibly soft human tongue explored his mouth. Ellery’s fingers twined into his hair, holding his head still, not allowing him to move in any way that his pet didn’t completely approve of. Except, no matter how hard he tried to remember that Ellery was supposed to be his pet, that all humans were supposed to be lions’ pets, the word seemed less like the truth every time he tried to apply it to the older man.

Unable to leave his hands resting idle on the bedspread a second longer, Kefir reached out to Ellery. His hands skittered over the other man's shoulders. He'd rested in a mess of limbs with other members of the pride so many times. Lions knew how to fit their bodies together and be comfortable with each other, but right then, he had no idea where to put his hands, what he should be doing with them.

All he could think about was Ellery's mouth against his. Kefir cautiously lapped against the other man's tongue, tasting him, tentatively exploring him in return. Ellery allowed it, to an extent. He let Kefir kiss him back, but he pulled away when it seemed possible that he might actually take control of the kiss.

For reasons Kefir didn't quite understand, that just made the kiss even better when Ellery leaned forward and let their lips meet again. Not interested in trying to take control, he let the older man lead them in whichever direction pleased him, until Ellery finally broke the kiss.

Kefir blinked up at him, his head muzzy with unfamiliar pleasure.

"Is that the first time a man ever kissed you?" Ellery asked, his knuckles brushing against Kefir's cheek.

Kefir nodded, licking his lips as if there might be some way he could lap up every single sensation and keep it forever.

"What else haven't you done before?"

Kefir tilted his head to the side a little.

Ellery smiled slightly. "Would it be easier if I asked you what you *have* done with another man?"

Kefir continued to stare silently up at him.

Ellery nodded, apparently more to himself than to Kefir. His eyes left Kefir's face to travel down his body. The little lion followed his example. His fingers stroked along the other man's shoulders, down his arms. Leaning forward he pressed a kiss against the larger man's skin, lapping at it and savoring the stolen taste.

Ellery's hand came to rest on the back of his head and he encouraged him to continue his explorations. Purring his approval, Kefir let his lips and tongue explore the older man's shoulder and his chest. Ellery leaned back on the bed, resting a pillow against the headboard and lifting his feet up onto the mattress in front of him.

His whole body seemed to be laid out for Kefir to investigate however he pleased. He pressed a kiss a little lower down, flicking his tongue against the other man's nipple. It pebbled unexpectedly under his tongue. Glancing up at the larger man, Kefir saw how much he liked it. His scent echoed his pleasure, encouraging Kefir on. He ventured lower.

He'd seen hundreds of sacrifices take place in the den. He had a fair idea what human men liked. Licking and kissing his way lower still, he eventually reached Ellery's cock. The older man was already hard, curving up toward his stomach from a patch of short dark curls.

Pre-cum glistened on the tip of his shaft. Dipping his head, Kefir lapped it up. Hot salt spread across his tongue. He quickly licked again, but the luscious taste had already faded away. Frowning, Kefir instinctively sucked the tip of the other man's erection into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the glans looking for more.

Ellery's hand moved against the back of his head, tightening its grip on his hair. Kefir glanced up at the older man through his lashes. Pleasure flashed across the pet's face. He liked that. Knowing men in general liked other men doing something wasn't the same as knowing that Ellery liked him doing it.

Success rushed through Kefir, mingling with his own pleasure as it raced through his veins. More enthusiastic than ever, he dipped his head a little more, trying to bob it over the other man's lap the way he'd seen both men and lions do so many times.

He let his eyes drop closed, all the better to savor every detail. Ellery was huge inside his mouth, he seemed to permeate his mind too, as his scent filled his lungs and his skin moved against Kefir's body.

The hand on his hair seemed to guide him down, but just a fraction of a second later, it felt more like he was pulling him away. Sure that couldn't be the case, Kefir ignored the possibility. But Ellery continued to tug, gently but insistently, at the strands until he lifted his head.

Wiping his lips, Kefir looked up at the man. Confusion and disappointment raced through him. He had no idea what he'd done so wrong that the other man would make him stop when he was enjoying himself so much.

"There's lube and condoms in my wallet. Fetch it from my jacket." His voice was deeper than ever, the edges of it rough enough to bring a purr to Kefir's throat.

Springing lightly from the bed, Kefir quickly did as he was asked, bringing the little square of leather back to the other man.

Taking what he wanted from it, Ellery tossed the rest on the bedside table. Sitting a little further down the bed, Kefir watched the process, all interest and curiosity until Ellery reached out and tugged at his wrist, pulling him up the bed and guiding him to lie on the mattress with his back to the older man.

Watching him over his shoulder, Kefir saw Ellery spread the lube on his fingers. He knew what to do then. Working half on instinct and half on voyeurism, he arched his back a little, offering his backside to the other man to use as he pleased.

A spark of delight rushed through him as the tip of his cock brushed against the blanket in front of him. Another wave of adrenaline chased after it, apparently inspired by nothing more than making the offer.

Strong digits slid against his hole, smearing slickness against him. Tilting his head to the side, Kefir concentrated on the peaks and swirls of pleasure the other man's attention sent shooting through him. The touch was almost gentle as Ellery's digits circled the tight ring of muscle again and again, with just slightly increasing pressure behind them on each revolution.

Kefir purred as he started to relax under the other man's care. Arching his back further, he pressed against the fingers more firmly as he lost himself in the sensations. His breath caught in his throat as one slid inside him. He looked over his shoulder. His gaze locked with Ellery's as the digit started to move back and forth.

As fantastic as that felt, it soon wasn't enough. Another finger was added as Ellery seemed to realize the same thing. That was better. Then the older man found something. Kefir yowled as sudden, unexpected bliss shot through him, harsh and almost painful in its perfection.

His hands scrabbled at the bedspread, tiny claws creeping out to leave tears in their wake. He quickly pulled them back, scared that the other man might notice them and consider it a sign that he didn't yet have enough experience to keep his instincts under control and his lover safe.

Ellery chuckled behind him. "I thought you might like that."

Kefir nodded quickly.

"More?"

Kefir nodded more vehemently than ever. More. He wanted more of the other man, more of this, more of everything.

But Ellery took his hands away. Worse still, Kefir felt the other man's whole body pull back. He tried to turn toward him. Over his shoulder, he saw the larger man rolling latex down his shaft and smearing it with more lube.

He didn't bother to argue that it wasn't necessary. Arslan had explained that humans could be difficult about things like that, and Kefir wanted the other man inside him so badly he couldn't bring himself to care about such minor details.

Ellery didn't make him wait too long. He rolled onto his side behind Kefir. His cock kissed against his hole. The lion tried to wriggle back against him and squirm his way onto the other man's shaft, but Ellery's hand settled on his side and held him still. He was strong for a human. If he forced the issue, the lion knew his pet might get hurt in the process.

A frustrated little sound escaped from the back of Kefir's throat, but that seemed to make no difference to the other man.

Finally, Ellery began to move. He pushed forward slowly. Kefir gasped as he felt the other man's cock stretch him wide open. He whimpered at the unfamiliar sensation, even as he tried to thrust back and get more of it.

"Hush." Ellery's hand stroked against his skin as he whispered the words into his ear.

"I—"

"You'll do as you're told," the older man cut in. The words were still whispered, but there was no arguing with them.

Kefir let his eyes drop closed. All that existed was Ellery. All he wanted was the other man. And, as he felt their bodies come together for the first time, he could barely breathe for the sheer bliss that flooded through his veins.

He reached back for his lover, desperate to feel his skin under his hands. Ellery caught his wrist and pinned it to the bed in front of him instead.

Kefir nipped at his bottom lip as he realized that the other man must have seen his claws creep out after all. But then it didn't matter why he thought his hand needed to be held down, because their bodies rolled forward. Ellery's larger frame half covered Kefir's, his weight pressing him down against the blankets as his pet's cock settled even more deeply inside him.

Kefir purred. That was even better, and when Ellery rolled him completely onto his stomach and he found himself entirely trapped beneath the larger man's body, it became perfect.

Ellery rocked his hips, slowly at first, as if determined to make sure Kefir felt every single inch of the shaft buried inside him. Then faster, making him desperate for more friction, more speed, more everything. The bedding rubbed against his cock as he rocked in time with the other man's thrusts.

Kefir pushed back against the larger man's body, trying to compliment his movements, eager to offer his lover anything and everything he could think of in return as instincts he hadn't been aware that he possessed started to take hold of him.

Every moment stretched out for a lifetime, but they still rushed by far too quickly, until he felt himself on the edge of his orgasm and found he was helpless to stop himself falling headlong into more pleasure than he'd ever known could exist inside one small lion.

Ellery thrust into him harder as Kefir mewed his pleasure against the blanket. The dominant's grip tightened around his wrists, until Kefir was sure he'd have left bruises on a human's skin. Another thrust, another, and Ellery came, plunging as far inside Kefir as any man would ever be able to get, before letting more and more of his frame rest against Kefir's body as he finally stilled against him.

Snuggled between his lover and the mattress with the strength and the weight of the dominant pinning him down, and Ellery's cock slowly softening inside him, Kefir purred his delight at this amazing new world he'd stumbled into.

Ellery moved away from him after a little while, but Kefir quickly followed him across the bed. Dispensing with the condom, Ellery lay back. The little lion immediately moved nearer still, desperate to stay close to his new pet.

Reaching out to him, Kefir rested his fingertips on the other man's arm. Ellery seemed a little surprised, but he still welcomed him close. Kefir smiled, as he snuggled against the larger man's body and quickly felt sleep creep into the corners of his mind. Suddenly, all the fuss the other lions made over the sacrifices and their pets made so much more sense.

Chapter Five

Kefir hesitated just outside the kitchen door as he heard the sound of other lions in there. He loved his pride, he really did, every one of them—even the very annoying ones. But in that moment, he wasn't at all inclined to be surrounded by lions.

Stepping in amongst the other members of his pride would have felt far too much like taking a step back to a reality he wasn't ready to return to. He rocked back on his heels as the temptation to rush back up the stairs, snuggle against his pet and hide under the covers with him almost got the better of him.

But the coffee was in the kitchen, and he'd promised the older man he'd fetch him a mug. A lion couldn't break his promises to his pet. He took a step closer to the kitchen, and nudged the door open a little further. The voices transformed from a muted hum into something that could be easily heard and understood.

“Something has to be done!”

Kefir frowned as he peeked past the door. Blaine and Luther stood on the far side of the kitchen. A few of the other members of the pride were there too, lounging against the wooden cabinets and sitting up on the marble counter tops.

One didn't look too sure. “Maybe we should just let Arslan—”

“Maybe you should grow up and stop expecting Arslan to do everything for you,” Blaine snapped, in a fair imitation of the way Marrick so often spoke to his mates. “The man needs to learn how things have to be between lions and humans.”

“Surely—”

“You know what Kefir's like!” Luther cut in.

Kefir tilted his head to the side, wondering what his friend thought he was like.

Blaine sighed. “You all know Ellery will walk over him if we let him. There’s no way in hell *Kefir* can turn him into a real pet.”

“Arslan will freak,” one of the other members of the pride muttered, shuffling trainer clad feet against the tile floor.

“We’re not going to hurt him,” Luther said, firmly. “Just...give him a nudge in the right direction. He’s as human as all the other sacrifices. He’ll take to submission just as well as all the others, once he gets used to it. All we’ll have to do is insist he gets used to it and...”

The shifter’s words faded away as they all picked up their mugs of tea and walked out through the patio doors into the garden. A few of the other lions still sounded far from certain about the idea, but *Kefir* had no doubt that Luther and Blaine would talk them into it—the same way they always did. The plan they were concocting would go ahead and...

Stepping into the kitchen *Kefir* looked out over the garden to where the other men were talking to each other around the patio table, heads bent together as they plotted Ellery’s downfall. A slight frown gathering on his forehead, *Kefir* poured the coffee on automatic pilot, his mind devoted to other matters.

Ellery wasn’t a submissive.

Humans were submissives, and Ellery was human, but in some way *Kefir* wasn’t sure of, the logical math didn’t quite work from that point on. Ellery wasn’t a submissive.

Kefir had a vague suspicion that he’d seen that in him from the start. He’d certainly felt it in him the night before, when the older man’s body had pinned his smaller frame down against the bed and the world had suddenly morphed into a perfect place that *Kefir* had never even guessed at the existence of before.

Picking up the coffee mug, he walked slowly back up the stairs and into the bedroom. With every step he took, more and more of Arslan’s words swirled about inside his head. Lessons. Reminders. Traditions. Orders. They all collided and ricocheted off each other, but certain things couldn’t be denied.

Lions were masters. Humans were pets. *Kefir* was quietly sure that applied to humans who weren’t the least bit submissive too.

And it was a master’s job to look after his pet, and make sure no harm ever came to him. A master stood between his pet and the world and defended the weaker man from any threat. *Kefir* had known that for so long, heard it repeated so often, he knew without doubt it was true.

Ellery might have said he didn't want to be a pet, he might not act the way pets tended to act, but he was Kefir's lover, and that made him Kefir's pet.

It made Kefir responsible for him.

Pushing open the bedroom door, the little lion stepped inside. The curtains were open now. Sunlight streamed in. Ellery had propped a pillow up against the headboard, much as he had just before Kefir went down on him the previous night.

The blankets were half pushed back. They didn't cover a lot. In spite of everything rushing and colliding inside his mind, the sight of the other man caused Kefir to harden behind his jeans.

Walking carefully across the room, he handed the mug to Ellery.

"Thank you."

As much as he wanted to crawl onto the bed, curl up next to his pet and forget about his newfound responsibilities, Kefir forced himself to move away, all the way to the other side of the room.

Ellery glanced over the rim of his mug as he sipped the scalding hot liquid.

Kefir frowned slightly as he folded his arms across his bare chest. In a desperate attempt not to take a step toward the older man, he took a step back instead and reversed into a chest of drawers.

Sitting up on top of the sturdy piece of furniture, he brought his bare feet up in front of him and studied his pet across the room, but Kefir couldn't keep the image of him sitting comfortably on the bed they'd shared in the front of his mind. Other pictures kept trying to take its place.

Ellery hurt. His mate being forced to submit to other lions, lions who didn't understand that wasn't who the older man really was. The look in the human's eyes as he was surrounded by shifters—every one of them stronger than he was.

Kefir's claws came out and scratched at his own legs, leaving tears in his jeans. But they were small rips, left by comparatively tiny claws. They would be no match for Luther's claws or for Blaine's.

He closed his eyes, but that only made the horrible pictures all the more vivid. His ears joined in the attack. He heard the older man cry out as he tried to get away, heard him call out to his lover for help, only to realize his master was incapable of helping him.

Kefir forced his eyes open.

The facts of the matter were unavoidable. They couldn't be dismissed from his mind either—not while playing ignorant might see his pet get hurt.

“When you've finished your coffee, I think it would be best for you to leave,” Kefir said, as politely as possible. Each word was harder to say than the last, but he forced them out regardless.

Ellery raised an eyebrow, his lips twitched into an amused little smile. He didn't seem the least offended, which Kefir had to consider a good thing. But he half found himself doubting what words had actually left his mouth.

The dominant took another sip of his coffee and rested the mug on his thigh as he studied his feline master.

Kefir didn't know what else to say. Silence reigned until the older man finally spoke up. “If you're throwing me out, the civil thing to do is tell me why.”

The lion stared down at the rips in his jeans for a little while. His hands looked just like human hands, now that the claws had been drawn back. They'd be little more use than human hands in a fight with another lion. “I just don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here.”

“Because...” Ellery prompted, obviously not the least impressed with the evasion.

“It would be a bad idea for you to join the pride,” Kefir managed. At least, it would with a lion like him as his master. He kept that part of the confession back, not wanting his pet to think any more badly of him than was absolutely necessary.

“Oh?” The older man calmly continued to drink his coffee.

Kefir met his eyes.

Ellery seemed to see something in him then, something that displeased him a great deal. His spine straightened. His scent changed. He smelled concerned. “Come here.”

Kefir looked at the bed. If he went too near it or Ellery, he was sure he'd forget why it was a bad idea for his pet to stay with him. He shook his head.

Ellery's chin tilted back, his eyes narrowed. He stood up, his coffee cup was abandoned onto the bedside table. The bed sheet fell away, leaving the older man completely bare as he crossed the room.

He stopped a foot or two away from Kefir.

“Look up.”

Kefir had no intention of following the order, but somehow his gaze lifted itself without bothering his brain for permission.

“There are already more than enough brats in your pride, there’s no need for you to try and join their ranks. Sulking in the corner isn’t going to impress anyone.”

Kefir held the older man’s gaze. Half his instincts as a lion demanded that he bring himself back together with his mate, that he do whatever it took to make the older man pleased with him and everything right between them. The other part of him needed to know that Ellery would be safe and steadfastly refused to be the reason why his pet might get hurt. And there was a little bit of him that wanted to spring forward, throw himself at the larger man’s chest and have his pet tell him everything was going to be okay.

Paralyzed by indecision, unable to work out what was the best thing to do for his pet, Kefir remained sitting on top of the dresser.

Apparently running out of patience with him, the older man simply picked up his master and put him to stand on the floor next to the cabinet. Kefir looked up at him, eyes opening wide in surprise.

“Tell me what happened when you went downstairs,” Ellery ordered.

He had much the same way about him that Arslan had when he gave orders. It was hard to believe a world existed where his commands weren’t obeyed.

Kefir looked down. They were so close together, there was no floor to be seen between them. All he saw was the older man’s body.

He was big and strong for a human. That meant nothing among lions.

“I can’t keep you safe if you stay here.” He’d never known it could hurt so much to have to admit such a thing. For the first time in his life, Kefir truly wished he’d been born a larger, stronger shifter, that he was the type of man who other lions would obey without question.

Ellery stared down at him in silence for a long time, his expression impossible to read. “You think that *you’re* the one who’s supposed to protect *me*?” he asked, apparently amused and bemused by the idea in equal measure.

Kefir nodded, perfectly serious.

Ellery laughed, and Kefir regained the ability to look him in the eye. The older man stroked his knuckles along Kefir’s jaw line as he smiled down at him, humor still dancing in his expression.

When Kefir didn't join in with the joke, he seemed to make some effort to adopt a more solemn expression. "Your protection isn't necessary."

"Lions are responsible for their pets," Kefir tried to explain.

Ellery's knuckles moved to cover his lips. Some of his usual gravity came back. "I'm not your pet."

Kefir moved his hand away from his mouth, as politely as possible. "Humans who lie with lions are either sacrifices, or pets or mates."

"Every rule has exceptions."

Kefir stared up at him, quite sure that the whole point to rules was that there *weren't* any exceptions to them. He nibbled at his bottom lip as he tried to find another way to explain it.

"And I can take care of myself." Ellery turned and walked away, as if he just saying it made it the truth.

If he carried on believing that, he was going to get hurt.

"Not among lions," Kefir whispered.

Ellery spun back around to face him.

"If you stay here, they'll hurt you. They won't mean to. They'll think they're helping, but...but they'll hurt you, and I won't be able to stop them," Kefir forced himself to say.

"What makes you think they want to hurt me?" Ellery let out a rough half laugh. "What makes you so sure I'd be the one who got hurt if they did?"

He didn't get it. And the idea of him being hurt was running around and around inside Kefir's head making him quietly more frantic by the moment. The younger man closed his eyes for a second. If there really was only one way to make his pet understand what the real difference between humans and lions was, then so be it.

Chapter Six

One moment Ellery was glaring across the room at a rather concerned looking submissive, about to remind him in no uncertain terms exactly who was the dominant and who was the pet in the room. The next, a fully grown lion hit him square in the chest. The room spun. His back landed hard against the bare floorboards. The air rushed out of his lungs. Claws caught at his shoulders as huge paws pinned him to the floor.

A mouth containing more sharp teeth than anyone could have any reasonable need of, flashed in front of his face. Big brown eyes stared down at him, full of frustration and anger.

A lion. An honest to God lion, with a short golden mane and a throat that produced the kind of roar humans were genetically predisposed to run away from. Ellery stared up at it, fight and flight too shocked to make up its mind and prompt him into any sort of action.

And, just as suddenly as he'd been floored by the so called king of the jungle, Ellery found himself with a pretty little submissive huddled against his chest. Kefir dipped his head and nuzzled against his shoulder.

For several long seconds, nothing happened.

Finally, Ellery managed to move. Without any clearer orders being issued by a brain that wasn't really ready to face the world yet, his arms instinctively moved to cradle the smaller man against him. Patting him vaguely on the back as his other hand stroked through his hair, Ellery automatically hushed his submissive with a low noise in the back of his throat.

Werelions. Of course, he'd known the theory long before he'd even met one. Apparently, the practical would take a little bit more getting used to. Ellery took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. Kefir moved against his chest with the motion.

“Humans aren’t a match for lions,” the boy whispered to him. “Not even for a small lion.”

Ellery stroked his hand up and down the younger man’s back again, as the warmth of the little lion’s body slowly sunk into his skin.

“They said that you needed to learn how to be a proper pet, and if I can’t teach you, they would see that you learned from them.”

The words were whispered so softly, Ellery had to strain to hear them, but they made the world around him morph into some sort of focus.

“They were wrong.” Ellery made no attempt to gentle the words. They hit the air, strong and loud after the little lion’s whispers.

“They’ll—”

Ellery hushed him again. Kefir obediently fell silent.

“I may not know as much as you do about lions, and you may well be right that shifters are stronger than humans. But I know more than you ever will about human dominants and submissives, and I’ll promise you this right now, sweetheart. There’s *nothing* they can do that will turn me into a submissive.”

Kefir lifted his head and blinked down at him, his body still resting comfortably on top of Ellery’s.

“There are people who switch, but they don’t do that because someone changes them,” Ellery explained. “And there’s no way in hell they can change me.”

Kefir dipped his head to rub his temple against his lover’s chest. Ellery wasn’t sure if that meant the younger man was going to accept that he knew more than him about such things, or not.

“Are you still going to try to throw me out?” Ellery prompted when no words were offered.

He took the lapping kiss Kefir pressed against his skin as a no. The little lion, for all he looked like the real thing when he shifted into his feline form, had something undeniably kittenish about him when he was in his human shape. And he really was an affectionate, snugly little thing.

Ellery allowed that, he even quietly encouraged it, but he wasn't about to let the younger man acquire the idea that everything could be cured with kisses and licks. Eventually he made the other man look up.

"One thing will be clear between us, right from the start. You don't look after me—I look after you. Understand?"

Kefir's head tilted to one side, as if he wasn't sure what to make of such a strange new idea. "Lions and humans—"

Ellery silenced him with a fingertip. "Not lions and humans, you and me. Forget about everyone else."

"Arslan says..." he hesitated as if he expected to be interrupted.

Ellery forced himself to stay silent, and let the boy continue.

"He says things are the way they are for good reasons."

"That's nice." And completely irrelevant—Ellery let his tone of voice tell that part of the story.

Kefir stared at him, curiosity shining in his eyes. He looked down then, to watch his fingers trace patterns on Ellery's chest. "I've never met a man like you."

Ellery rearranged them slightly, encouraging the smaller man to lie next to him, kick off the tatters that were all that remained of his jeans and curl comfortably into his side, but he didn't go so far as to move them off the floor. Kefir seemed quite content there and learning was more important than moving right then.

"Are there lots of humans like you?" the younger man whispered after a little while.

Ellery laughed. If Kefir didn't understand his amusement, at least he didn't seem offended by it.

"Are there lots of lions like you?" Ellery tossed back at him.

Apparently lions weren't hot on sarcasm. Kefir considered the matter very carefully before shaking his head.

Ellery stopped laughing.

"Most lions are more like Luther and Blaine. Some of the leaders of the different prides are more like Arslan."

Ellery nodded. Not just the only submissive in his pride, but one of the few in his species by the sound of it.

“Do you mind?” Kefir asked, softly.

“I wouldn’t be interested in you if you were like them.”

Kefir pulled away then, to sit up on the floor next to him. “You’re interested?”

Ellery bit back a smile, not willing to let it loose until he was sure they were on the same page. “Not in being anyone’s pet.”

Kefir nodded, very seriously.

“But I’m interested in you.” Except interested wasn’t a strong enough word. He’d been interested in a lot of men over the years. He hadn’t been fascinated by one before.

“In being my…” Kefir looked for a word that fitted, but he didn’t seem to have one in his vocabulary.

“Dominant,” Ellery finished for him.

Master.

Ellery forced himself to ignore the part of him that wanted to use that word from the very first moment. One step at a time. Even if there was part of him that knew that’s what he’d become to the younger man in due course, there was no reason to throw it all at the boy in one fell swoop. A boy like him needed careful handling, a gradual introduction into his master’s world.

“Like a master?” Kefir asked, cautiously.

“Yes.” Omission was one thing, but there was no way in hell Ellery could bring himself to actually lie about it.

“That would make me your pet,” Kefir pointed out.

“Yes.”

Kefir took it all in, seeming to think it all through very thoroughly. “Your submissive,” he ventured.

“Yes.”

The little lion nodded his understanding. “I think… I think I might like that.”

Success rushed through the dominant, harsh and electrifying. Ellery sat up, rolling his shoulders to work out the knots pushed into them by the hard floor. Reaching out to Kefir, he stroked his fingers through the other man’s hair, taking a tight grip on the short blond strands in the process. When he tilted the lion’s head back and brought their lips together, Kefir didn’t even try to take control of the kiss.

His submission was completely instinctive. Ellery was all for having a well-trained human sitting at his feet—far better than a *badly* trained man. But that couldn't compare to a truly natural submissive.

Kefir lapped gently at the tip of his tongue, asking for permission to kiss him back. When Ellery ignored the request, he didn't push the issue, but parted his lips and gave his would-be master everything he had.

Ellery rolled the smaller man onto his back, staring down at him as he let his hands wander freely over the younger man's body. He was hard again and thrust eagerly against Ellery's palm as he wrapped his hand around Kefir's shaft.

A purr vibrated against the dominant's lips. Kefir's hands came to rest on his shoulders, but their only agenda seemed to be to touch rather than to try to control. When Ellery pulled back from him and the kiss, Kefir didn't try to hold on to him. He lay back on the floor boards, a sweet little smile on his face as he stared up at his newly declared master.

As Ellery pulled back further and got to his feet, a shake of the head was all it took to keep Kefir where he was, looking content and curious while he watched his master walk across and sit on the edge of the bed.

“Come here.”

Kefir rolled over and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He wasn't far away. He didn't bother to get to his feet. He simply crawled toward Ellery.

If the dominant hadn't been hard from the start, that sight would have seen to it that he was. The little lion didn't seem to need anything explained to him. As soon as he reached his master, he immediately lapped at the tip of Ellery's cock, his hand rising to wrap around the base of the shaft and steady him as he sucked him slowly into his mouth.

He'd never done that with any other man, Ellery would cheerfully have bet his life on the fact. He was the only man that Kefir had ever gone down on—*would* ever go down on. Ellery didn't consider himself to be a man who made a habit of falling in instant lust with a submissive, let alone in instant anything else, but in that moment, he didn't have to think about it. He wanted Kefir collared and kneeling at his feet for the rest of his life.

As soft lips and a rough agile tongue worked enthusiastically around his shaft, he knew exactly what he'd love the younger man to be doing most of the time he kneeled there too.

He smiled as he met Kefir's eyes. The little lion stared up at him, stunning and dangerously addictive in equal measure as his lips thinned into a pale pink line around his master's shaft and his tongue danced over Ellery's cock.

Still, for all his wonderful instincts, there were some things that needed a degree of practice and experience Kefir simply didn't have. A few minutes later, as Ellery came, the younger man pulled back, startled by the suddenness of an orgasm that had even taken his master by surprise.

Some of Ellery's cum spilled into Kefir's mouth, more of it fell over the submissive's lips and even more into the lion's hands, as he continued to work the shaft with his palm and fingers regardless of everything else. A little spilled down the younger man's body before he leaned in and took the tip back into his mouth.

Pleasure rushed through the dominant, hot and uncontrollable, and for a few minutes there was no room in his head for anything but that. No thoughts, no realizations, no words, just several successive waves of bliss. Ellery stared down at his lover as he began to recover and found himself able to focus on the real world again.

Kefir looked so innocently shocked, and so deliciously cum splattered at the same time. Lifting one of his hands to his lips the little lion wiped some of the drops of come from his face. Ellery watched, waiting for his reaction. Kefir lapped at his fingertips.

For all the world like a little kitten, licking up spilled cream, he began to clean the cum from his skin with every sign of enjoyment. There was no pretence. No show. Kefir didn't even seem to be aware that his master was watching, completely enchanted, until he chanced to look up, and their eyes met.

Kefir hesitated for a moment, before offering his fingertips up, to share his treat with Ellery. A shake of his master's head didn't seem to offend him. The little lion went back to contentedly cleaning his fingers himself.

As Kefir finished his self-appointed task, Ellery took him by the wrist and guided the smaller man up onto the bed. Leaning back against the headboard, he soon had the shifter sitting between his outstretched legs, resting back against his master's chest.

Kefir's shaft curved up toward his stomach, begging for his attention. Ellery stroked his fingers against the length, making the younger man purr and arch his back as he rubbed himself enthusiastically against his master.

“Do you want to come?” Ellery whispered into his ear.

Another purr, and a definitive nod of the head.

“No.”

Kefir tried to look over his shoulder, arch his back and thrust into Ellery’s hand all at the same time. It was both an unsuccessful and a very pretty move.

“If you’re to be my submissive, that’s one of the decisions I’ll expect you to give up to me.”

Kefir slowly gained a little control of his limbs. He fell still, devoting all his energy to listening to what his master had to say to him.

“I’d be the only one who could touch you like this. You wouldn’t be allowed to reach for your cock whenever you wanted. You’d have to wait for me to decide if you should come. You wouldn’t even be allowed to ask for the privilege.”

Kefir whimpered. Turning his head, he rubbed his temple against Ellery’s shoulder. His hands settled on the dominant’s forearms, but he made no attempt to try and control the way Ellery touched him.

“And you?” he whispered.

“I’ll be allowed to come whenever I want—and to order you to service me however and whenever I want to come, too.”

Kefir made a sweet little noise in the back of his throat, half way between a whimper and a purr.

“Would you like that?” Ellery asked him.

Kefir half nodded, then stopped himself short. “Just me?” Ellery could barely make the words out. “You said you could order *me* to...just me, or...?”

Ellery considered the suggestion very carefully, his fingers still teasing the other man’s cock as he thought it through. Would he really need another submissive if he could collar the little lion and keep him at his side forever? Would he even want one? He found himself surprised at how easy the questions were to answer.

“Just you,” he agreed.

Kefir gave him his nod then. He made no comment when Ellery took his hand away from him. He remained, leaning back in his master’s arms, apparently content to rest with him, even if Ellery was the only one who was sleepy with afterglow.

“Good boy.”

Ellery smiled, as Kefir purred, apparently as easily pleased by a kind word as he might have been by the abandoned hand job.

Chapter Seven

Kefir sighed as he drew another circle around a lion's name. A few second's thought and he added a string of question marks next to it. Pushing the pad of paper away in disgust at his own inability to track down the lion and thereby finish his work on an entire family line, he leaned back in his chair.

Not for the first time that morning, his gaze was drawn to the computer on the other side of the room.

The leader of his pride had no objection to him using it for any research he might want to do on the various family lines, he'd made that very clear on numerous occasions. And he hadn't exactly forbidden him to use it to research other things—not in so many words. Arslan had merely advised them all not to try to gain insight into the human world before they were ready for it. The television programs and computer games humans were so fond of weren't reliable indicators of normal human behavior.

On the other hand, accurate factual information was available on certain things. There was no reason to believe the reference material he suddenly found himself in desperate need of wouldn't be on there.

Rising from the deeply cushioned office chair in front of the huge mahogany desk, Kefir cautiously made his way across the room. Another, equally luxurious, chair stood in front of the computer. Within seconds the machine was ready for action.

A few key strokes and the search engine spat out a huge list of websites. Nibbling gently at his bottom lip, Kefir glanced over his shoulder at the door. No one was there, no one would see what he was doing. He clicked on the first link.

A web page sprung up. For a full minute, he just stared at the screen, slowly tilting his head from one side to the other as he studied the pictures.

A slight frown slowly gathering between pale blond eyebrows, he clicked his way further into the website. He certainly seemed to be in the right place. He recognized some of the words that littered the text.

The man who wrote the website spoke about many of the things that seemed to fascinate Ellery, and Marrick, so much. The site used the same words they did. The main difference was, it also provided a glossary, explaining what all those words actually meant to humans.

Most of them didn't appear to represent the things Kefir had thought they had. Pulling his feet up onto the chair in front of him, he stared unblinking at the computer as thoughts raced around and around inside his head.

That was what Ellery wanted. That was what they'd been talking about earlier that day, before the older man had to go back to his motorbike shop to accept delivery of a bike someone wanted him to work on.

That was how things were going to be between them when the dominant came back—when Kefir's human *master* came back.

The shifter dropped his gaze to stare at the backs of his arms, where they rested on top of his knees.

He tried to imagine what they might look like with thick leather cuffs wrapped around them, just like the ones the sacrifices wore when they were delivered to the den. Working his way up from that point, he tried to imagine some of the other things the website talked about.

His frown deepened.

The pictures on the website had certainly been...interesting. He just wasn't sure if the men in those images had been enjoying what they were doing or not. Their cocks had been very enthusiastic, but there were far too many times when the expressions on their faces hadn't matched their erections.

Ellery liked things like that. And now, Ellery was his master.

Kefir might not have been sure how much he'd enjoy the things he'd seen in the pictures, or if he wanted the older man to think of him the same way the website spoke about the human submissives. But there were other things which he was completely certain about—more certain about than he had ever been in his life.

He wanted Ellery. He wanted Ellery to be his mate, and his master. He wanted Ellery to be pleased with him and to smile at him in exactly the same way he had when Kefir first agreed to be the other man's submissive.

His submission had brought that smile to his lover's face. Seeing that same expression back there would be worth a certain amount of...discomfort. Kefir shut the computer down, but he didn't leave the chair immediately. He stayed there, meticulously thinking through the whole situation for some time.

It was over an hour before Kefir made his way up the stairs, back to the bedroom he was sharing with Ellery. Taking up a position on the window seat, he stared out over the gravel drive.

He didn't have to wait long. His master's bike soon sped down the road and pulled up in the drive. The roar of the motorbike's engine quieted to a purr before it finally slid into a silent sleep.

Rising from his perch in the window, Kefir turned his attention to the bedroom door. As Ellery pushed it open, his new submissive was ready for him.

Lowering himself gracefully to his knees, Kefir put his hands neatly behind his back, just as some of the more easily understood pictures on the internet showed. His gaze remained firmly on the floor.

The door clicked closed behind his master. The sound of Ellery's boots came closer. The older man's fingers stroked through Kefir's hair. "Hello."

Temporarily forgetting everything he had so carefully learned on the internet, Kefir glanced up and met the older man's eyes for a moment. Then he remembered that it was no longer his place to make eye contact with the man who owned him. He quickly lowered his gaze.

"Hello, sir."

Sir. The website had been very clear about that too. The honorific was important. A submissive should always call all dominants sir. It was a sign of respect. A signal that he knew he wasn't worthy of being on first name terms with someone who was so far his superior.

A little voice in the back of Kefir's mind piped it. It was also what Ryland called Arslan. That fact appealed to him even more than recalling the information on the website. Kefir tried to tell himself that the human protocols were more important than feline traditions, but he wasn't sure he was successful in that task.

Ellery's fingers stroked along Kefir's jaw line, guiding him to tilt his head back. It was impossible to do as the other man said, and keep to the rules the website thought were so important at the same time.

Kefir hesitated. The older man's touch became more insistent. He gave in and looked up. The dominant studied him carefully for several long seconds, before turning and walking away from him without another word. Kefir watched him stride all the way across the room and fold his frame into the armchair where he usually threw his clothes before they slept.

Ellery clicked his fingers, low down by the side of his leg. Kefir looked at them, curious as to what the gesture might mean. The website hadn't mentioned anything about clicking fingers.

"Come here," Ellery said after a while.

Kefir did as he was told. His master welcomed him to the floor at his feet, tangling his fingers in his hair and pulling him forward to rest against the larger man's body. His scent radiated pleasure as Kefir automatically snuggled in against him, nuzzling at his shirt.

"A very pretty way to welcome your master home," Ellery said, as he guided Kefir to tilt his head back again, and offer up his mouth to be kissed.

The other man's lips were strong against his, determined to control and possess with every touch. Kefir let his eyes drop closed. Whoever wrote all that information on the website, he hadn't said enough about kissing. He couldn't have known how marvelous Ellery was at it.

When the older man pulled away and sat back in the chair, Kefir nuzzled his way closer to his master's body again. His cheek slid against the inside of the older man's thigh. Kefir found himself automatically working his way higher up the older man's leg toward his crotch.

Ellery laughed and nudged him away. Kneeling at his feet, Kefir stared up at him, wondering how a man could ever want to say no while his scent screamed out such a very enthusiastic 'yes'.

"Someone's had a good day," the dominant said. "What have you been up to?"

Kefir looked down as he nuzzled against the other man's hand. "I worked on the family lines. And I did some research," he added, conscientiously.

"Did it go well?"

Kefir thought about that. Ellery would almost certainly be pleased with what he had learned. He nodded. That counted as going well as far as the little lion was concerned. “Tell me about your day, sir?”

“The guy brought a second extra bike in to be overhauled alongside the first. Complete custom job.”

“That’s a good thing?” Kefir checked.

Ellery smiled down at him, his fingers still toying with his hair, tugging gently at the strands in a way that went straight to Kefir’s cock. “Yes. A very good thing.”

Kefir nodded his satisfaction, pleased his master was happy.

“Arslan’s invited us to join them for dinner,” Ellery mentioned then. “They’re expecting us downstairs.”

“Do we have time to...?”

Ellery shook his head.

That was his master’s decision. Both Ellery and the website had been very clear on that point. Kefir did his best to hide his disappointment.

“We do have time for something else instead,” Ellery said.

Kefir nodded enthusiastically.

“Don’t you want to know what before you agree?” his master asked with a chuckle.

Kefir shook his head. “I trust my master, sir.”

Ellery just stared at him for a few seconds, but Kefir knew he’d said exactly the right thing. Scent didn’t lie.

The dominant reached into his pocket and took out a length of thick silver chain. There was a little padlock on one end of it, complete with a key. The dominant held it up.

“It’s a collar, sir,” Kefir said, keen to show off his new found knowledge.

“Yes, it is.”

Kefir nodded. Collars were important. Wearing Ellery’s collar meant he belonged to the other man.

It meant that he was Ellery’s submissive. And it meant Ellery was his master. Which, Kefir was pretty sure, had to mean that a little part of Ellery belonged to him, just as much as he belonged to the dominant.

“Yes, sir.”

“Wait until you’re asked before you answer.” Ellery sounded very serious.

Kefir closed his mouth and waited as patiently as he could for the older man to speak up.

“This is what you want?” Ellery finally said.

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll need my permission before you’ll be allowed to take it off.”

“And the key, sir,” the lion pointed out, eager to be helpful.

Ellery smiled. “Yes, Kefir. You’d need the key too.”

Kefir nodded. “Yes, sir.” It seemed worth saying twice—worth saying over and over again until the other man locked it around his throat.

Hands strong and steady, Ellery reached out and wrapped the chain around Kefir’s neck without another word.

It felt surprisingly heavy as it settled against his skin, solid and wonderful, almost as if the older man had a permanent grip on him. Lifting a hand, Kefir ran his fingers over the metal links and the padlock.

A decisive click and it was sealed in place. Ellery looked very pleased with the sight.

“Stunning.”

Tilting his head on the side, Kefir looked up at the other man. “Thank you, sir.”

The key was quickly added to a bundle of other keys and pushed into the older man’s pocket. Ellery held out his hand to him and pulled him up onto his feet as he stood up. “We’ve kept our hosts waiting long enough.” He turned toward the door.

His hand connected sharply with Kefir’s backside a moment later, hurrying him out of the room when he’d have liked to linger and admire the chain in the mirror.

His master’s hand falling against his skin like that was...Kefir slowed down again as he tried to work out exactly how it had felt.

In a very strange way, it had felt...nice, just like it did when the other man took a strong hold on him. He’d felt the strength in the older man, felt the care Ellery had taken with him too. Heat radiated out from the point of contact. A fair amount of it rushed to his cock.

The dominant’s eyes were sparkling when Kefir met his gaze over his shoulder.

“Dawdling won’t get you another one.” He strode out of the room.

As he hurried to keep up with the other man, Kefir couldn’t help but wonder what would earn him a repeat performance.

Before he was quite ready to have to share Ellery with other people, they were in the dining room. Arslan and Ryland had obviously got bored waiting for them. They were already sitting down, eating.

Both men looked up as their guests came in. Arslan appeared serious and disapproving in equal measure, Ryland more like he was trying to appear serious and was failing miserably.

“I wasn’t sure what you like, but it’s chicken casserole,” Ryland told Ellery, as the dominant took his seat.

“It smells wonderful,” Ellery said.

Kefir slipped into his seat next to him, well aware that neither Arslan nor Ryland had failed to notice the chain around his neck. When Kefir looked up from his food a few moments later, he saw the older lion staring intently at it.

The little lion’s pulse kicked up a notch as he started to wonder what Arslan might think of it. What the other lions would think of him? More importantly, what would they think of Ellery for giving it to him? Had he painted a target on his pet’s—on his *master’s* back by accepting it?

“You’re very quiet, Kefir,” Arslan said, eventually. “How is your work on the family lines progressing?”

Arslan had asked him about the project dozens of times since his hobby had become his job, but never in that tone of voice. That day, he seemed to be asking him about everything except the topic he’d actually raised.

“It’s going well.” Kefir looked down, for a moment. “I didn’t get as much done as I expected today.”

“Oh?”

“I got a bit distracted,” Kefir admitted. When he looked up from his plate, everyone was staring at him with entirely different expressions on their faces.

Ellery broke the moment by reaching for the water in the center of the table. Kefir glanced at the older man’s empty glass and sprung up to reach the jug before he had the chance.

The dominant looked at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“I’ll do that, sir,” Kefir rushed out, eager to demonstrate what he’d learned about service. He poured the water and sat back down.

“Thank you.”

Kefir smiled slightly to himself, basking in the approval in his master's voice. From then on, the dinner conversation, such as it was, went on around him, without seeming to need a great deal of contribution from Kefir. He sat contentedly at the table as Ellery and Arslan spoke to each other, none of their words seeming to match up to any of the meanings that constantly swirled beneath the surface.

When Ellery stood at the end of the meal, Kefir jumped up to pull his chair back for him. The older man made no comment on the service, but he rested his hand on the small of Kefir's back for a moment as he moved past him toward the door. It felt like praise.

Ryland started to clear the table. Kefir joined him at the task, and earned a little smile from the dominant in the process. He smiled back, rather pleased with his day's work, even if he hadn't managed to find out where the hell Arslan's cousin had disappeared to when he came of age.

Chapter Eight

Ellery couldn't help but think it a peculiar sensation—leaving a naive little lion in a house one morning and coming back that same evening to find a partially trained submissive had taken his place. Whatever had happened to the younger man while Ellery had been at work, it had been a strange and rather idiosyncratic process.

As he and Kefir closed their bedroom door behind them that night, the dominant wasn't quite sure which version of the man he was going to be sleeping next to, or just what the little lion had learned while he'd been out of his master's sight.

“Have you spoken to Marrick today?” Ellery asked, as he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it on the back of a chair in the corner of the room.

Kefir stared across at him from his position right next to the door. He'd barely taken two steps into the room. “No, sir.”

Ellery mentally crossed the other submissive off Kefir's list of possible sources. Ryland belonged to Arslan, there was no doubt about that, but while it was possible Kefir had acquired the honorific from his studies of the other men's relationship, nothing else appeared to have anything to do with the men they were currently sharing a house with.

Kefir either had no clue what his master was asking about, or he had no inclination to volunteer any information on the subject. Either way, Ellery wasn't about to play twenty questions with the boy. Especially not when he was sure it wouldn't take anything more drastic than a little silence, to have the younger man confessing everything of his own volition.

Stripping off the rest of his clothes, Ellery was soon sliding between the crisp white sheets. Kefir still stood on the other side of the room, watching his master's every movement and, apparently, waiting for instruction.

Kefir looked from him to where he'd put his clothes, then quickly back to his dominant. "May I, sir?" he suggested after a little while.

Ellery nodded his permission. Leaning back against the headboard, the blanket covering him up to the waist, he watched the smaller man remove every stitch of clothing on his body and set each item neatly aside. There was no hint of embarrassment. The shifter was entirely unselfconscious, perfectly at home in his own skin, and still beautifully unaware of how stunning he was.

The dominant's eyes carefully inspected every inch of the little lion's body as he moved across the room toward his master.

The submissive was hard and making no attempt to hide that fact. There could be no doubt that he hoped to do far more than sleep that night, as he came and knelt by the side of the big double bed.

Ellery let him wait there a full, silent minute before he tapped the mattress next to him. Kefir clambered up onto the bed. He smiled a little shyly at him as he slipped under the blankets beside his master. Turning toward him, he waited expectantly, not making any request, but his hopes still clear in his eyes.

Without a single word, Ellery reached out and switched off the light. Darkness descended on the room. The dominant made himself comfortable as if to go to sleep, curious to see if that would spark a response from the younger man, if a feline submissive would find his master's silence as disconcerting as a human sub would.

In the shadows, he was aware of Kefir still sitting exactly where he was, watching his master. With no idea how good a lion's night vision was, Ellery wasn't going to take any chances. He made a point of laying very still and letting his breaths fall into a slow, easy rhythm, as if he had fallen asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Eyes closed, he sensed Kefir lie down on the other side of the bed. Minutes passed. Ellery was almost ready to believe that the little lion had simply fallen asleep and was silently cursing himself for bugging about with silly games when he could so easily have demanded the information he wanted, and enjoyed a nice scene before bed. Then he felt a movement on the mattress. A few seconds later, the blanket stirred slightly above him.

Ellery remained motionless as he sensed Kefir slowly creeping closer to his supposedly sleeping master. Another full minute passed before he felt bare skin brushing against his arm.

Then more skin, more of the little lion moving against his body.

For a moment, he thought that the younger man was trying to start something. Another silent minute had passed before he realized that the careful movements had nothing to do with sex and actually had everything to do with sleeping. The boy was trying to snuggle against his master before he drifted off.

Ellery lay very still, letting his breaths remain in a sleeping rhythm as Kefir continued to try and fit himself against his body in just the way he wanted without waking him.

It was like laying next to a living hot water bottle. That hadn't been a trick of the mind the previous night. Kefir really was running hot—in all ways. The little lion's erection rubbed against Ellery's hip as the boy's cheek came to rest against his shoulder.

He didn't go so far as to hump against him, but Ellery could feel his temptation to do it. He smiled into the darkness above the bed as the younger man finally fell still with a content little sigh.

“Are you under the impression I'm asleep, Kefir?”

Anxiety flooded into the shifter's body. Every muscle tensed.

Ellery expected him to retreat, and he wasn't inclined to prevent him doing that. But he'd also assumed that he'd stop before he reached the opposite side of the mattress. He didn't. Kefir got off the bed altogether. Ellery opened his eyes just in time to see a shadow walk around to his side of the bed before disappearing from sight.

Frowning, he fumbled for the switch above the bed side table. Light flooded the room. Kefir was nowhere to be seen—until Ellery looked down. The little lion lay curled up on the bedside rug.

Ellery glared down at him. Kefir blinked back up at his master.

“What are you doing down there?”

“It's where human submissives sleep, sir,” Kefir informed him.

Ellery studied the younger man's serious expression. “And what do you think of that?” he asked, when no further information was offered.

The younger man sat up, his arms looping over his knees as he fell into his habitual pose. “Lions are more used to sleeping close to people they care about, sir,” he observed, each word carefully neutral. “I didn't realize that submissives weren't allowed to do that before.”

“And what makes you so sure they're not?”

Kefir looked down for a moment. “There was a website...” he began. He must have sensed his master’s attitude change then, because he fell silent.

“I own one website. It’s about bikes, not dominance. Whatever site, you found, I didn’t write it,” Ellery pointed out.

Kefir nodded his understanding of that point, but he didn’t seem to leap ahead and realize anything more than that.

“You belong to me, not to the man who did,” the dominant added.

Kefir nodded again. He thought about it all for a little while. “He was wrong, sir?”

“Yes,” Ellery bit out, as anger at the idea of the boy going to a stranger for information rather than his master raced through him. “Probably about a great many things.”

The little lion seemed to ponder on that, the same way he dissected everything his master said to him. “Which things, sir?”

“I wouldn’t have invited you onto the bed, if I wanted you to sleep on the floor,” Ellery suggested for one.

Kefir looked up at the mattress. “Invited me onto the other side of the bed, sir?”

He was doing his best. That much was obvious—even if he was screwing things up in the process. Ellery held out a hand to the younger man. He guided him to clamber back up onto the bed and to climb over his master, so he was back on the right side, but he stopped the smaller man short when he’d have moved too far away from his master.

“Close is fine,” he said.

His lover purred, as he took full advantage of the permission, snuggling up against him as if he’d been granted something more wonderful than he’d ever dare hope for.

Ellery shook his head at himself. “Happy now, kitten?”

Kefir didn’t stop rubbing his forehead against Ellery’s shoulder when he gave his answer. His response was too muffled to make out.

“Kefir?”

“A cub, sir, not a kitten. Lions young are called cubs.”

“You don’t remind me of a cub. You remind me of a kitten.”

The submissive lifted his head and looked up at his master. Ellery could almost hear the words turning over inside his head. Still on the steepest part of the feline-human learning curve,

Ellery found himself unable to guess how the shifter would react, what the word might mean to him.

A brief, beautiful smile, a quick nod, and his head returned to Ellery's shoulder. If nothing else, he seemed to realize it was an affectionate label and not an insult.

"And the only time I'd send a submissive to sleep away from his master was if he'd behaved very badly and I was very displeased with him," Ellery told him

"Always be pleased with me, sir?" Kefir requested, as if that was all that needed to be done.

Ellery thought for a few seconds. "No." He made no attempt to soften the word.

Kefir squirmed his way even closer to him.

Ellery stroked his palm down the younger man's back as he tried to think of a way to explain the whole world to a man who didn't seem to have any idea how leather worked, even if he did have a wonderful instinct for submission. "I'll promise you that I'll always treat you fairly, and that I'll always look after you, but I won't promise that I'll always be pleased with you."

He had to be brought to understand. Ellery felt the need to draw the other man into his world more strongly than ever. The very idea that he could fail in that task made him tighten his hold on the younger man, as if he was afraid Kefir might be snatched away from him at any second.

Kefir didn't speak as his master considered his options.

"There'll be times when you displease me, when you're careless or when you disobey the rules I've set for you. And you'll be punished."

Kefir still didn't say anything, but Ellery could almost hear the sheer effort the boy put in to listening intently to every word his master offered him.

"Sometimes it'll be a physical punishment, you'll be spanked or whipped. Other times, the punishment will be different. But it'll always hurt," Ellery wasn't going to lie to him about that. A dominant had a duty to let his submissive know exactly what he was getting himself into. "Punishments should hurt—they should make you determined never to make the same mistake again."

Kefir nuzzled against him, seeming to instinctively look for reassurance from the same man who was saying the things that appeared to frighten him so much. Ellery held him a little

tighter as he let one hand settle itself in the younger man's hair while the other continued to stroke up and down his spine. The little lion had come so close to him, he was practically lying on top of his master.

“Then, after you've accepted your punishment, you'll be forgiven, and your master will be very pleased with you,” Ellery went on. “I'll hold you close, just like this, and tell you how good you've been in accepting your punishment. And you'll know that your master still...cares for you.”

He swallowed down the words that had almost slipped through his guard when he was too busy thinking about the younger man's reactions to notice if he was giving away far more than he should.

And you'll know your master still loves you.

After just a couple of days, he knew it couldn't be true. He had far more sense than that. But the thought was still there in his head, in a place where it had never been before. There weren't many things he hadn't said to a submissive over the years, but that phrase was one of those rare things, and there was no way in hell he was going to blurt them out right then.

“Yes, sir.” The words were whispered very softly against his chest, but there wasn't the slightest hint of uncertainty or fear in them then.

In a few minutes, Ellery slowly became aware that Kefir was fast asleep, his head resting over his master's heart, their bodies moving gently against each other every time either of them took a breath.

Chapter Nine

“He put a damn collar on you?”

Kefir looked up from his place on the rug in front of the fire in the den. Luther and Blaine loomed over him. They liked looming. But, as someone who was already aware that he was significantly smaller than all the other lions in his pride, Kefir wasn't quite sure what they thought it was going to achieve with him.

He stared up at them until they got bored with standing over him and sat down next to him on the rug.

Kefir managed to scrape up a welcoming smile. “Marrick is—”

“He's fine,” Luther cut in.

Kefir nodded and turned his attention back to the flames. They danced very prettily in the fireplace, but the heat they gave off wasn't the same as the warmth of another man's body pressed against him. Humans might be somewhat cool to the touch, but it was amazing how they could heat a bed when they were snuggled close to a lion.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, but his muscles remained tense as the words he'd overheard played around and around inside his head. The way they'd spoken about his p—his master, the way they planned to treat him. Anger and fear battled for control of Kefir's mind. He pushed them both down, but he couldn't make them disappear altogether.

“A collar,” Luther muttered, his tone making it clear how much he loathed it.

“I like it,” Kefir said, still facing the fireplace.

“Kef, listen—” Blaine stopped short as Kefir turned toward him.

“I'm listening,” Kefir said, quite calmly. “Whatever you wish to say, say it—to me.”

“What?”

Kefir swallowed, his collar moving against his skin with the motion. “I know what you’re planning.”

The other two lions exchanged a look above his head. He knew better than to try to read the silent message that passed between the lovers. He waited patiently for it to be transferred into words. But no words came.

“If you have a problem with the relationship a lion has with a human, you take your complaints to the lion,” Kefir reminded them. “I’m the lion.” He might not be a master, but he was still a member of his pride. He was still a lion.

“You’re not acting like a—” Blaine yelped as Luther elbowed him in the ribs.

“Don’t hurt him.” Even Kefir himself wasn’t sure if he meant it as a warning or a plea. Whatever it was, if it didn’t work, he knew what his only other option was. “I don’t wish to leave this pride and find another, but if I don’t think he’s safe here, then—”

“No!” Blaine and Luther said, at exactly the same time.

Kefir looked from one of them to the other and back again. “You’d leave if you didn’t think Marrick was safe with—”

“Of course we would, but he’s our mate...” Blaine trailed off.

“Bloody hell!” Luther whispered. “You’re in love with him.”

“Yes.” There didn’t seem to be anything else for Kefir to say on the matter. It was a simple statement of fact. He was in love with his master. “But if he’s not safe here then...”

Luther brushed the whole issue aside with a rather embarrassed wave of his hand. “Gave up on that idea days ago.”

Kefir frowned. They never gave up on any of their stupid plans until they were caught. “Arslan hasn’t mentioned—”

Blaine made a distinctly unimpressed sound in the back of his throat. “Like *he* could have talked us out of it!”

Kefir kept diplomatically silent on the subject of exactly who would have won that argument.

“You should have heard the temper tantrum Marrick threw when he heard about it,” Luther muttered. He winced at the memory.

Kefir couldn’t keep the smile back. If there was one man who might be able to call them to heel even more easily than the leader of the pride...

“I still don’t like seeing you wear this,” Luther reached out and tugged a little at the lock on his collar.

Keeping everyone in the pride content was important, but not compared to keeping his future mate happy. Kefir shrugged. “You don’t need to like it. You’re not the lion he gave it too.”

“Ellery gave it to you?”

They all looked up as Marrick crossed the room.

Kefir nodded.

As Marrick knelt on the rug next to them, the submissive’s eyes feasted on the collar as if he’d never seen anything like it before. He looked up then, and met Kefir’s eyes. Whatever he saw there, it made him smile. “Congratulations.”

Luther looped his arm around Marrick’s waist and pulled him roughly back so he collapsed in a heap between his two mates.

“It’s not a good thing,” Blaine hissed in his ear.

“It means Ellery’s serious about you,” Marrick said, all his attention still on Kefir despite his mates attempts to distract him. “There are two things everyone on the scene knows about him, Kef. He’s a good dom, and he doesn’t give out Velcro collars. If he put it on you, he means it to stay there for a long time.”

Kefir reached up and traced his fingertips along the silver links. He nodded. Serious. That sounded right. They were serious about each other, about what was going to happen between them. Serious.

When he turned his attention back to the other three, all of Luther’s and Blaine’s attention was on Marrick’s neck.

“You have to have one.”

“You said they were a bad thing,” Marrick reminded him, in the mild tone he only ever used when he wanted to wind his lovers up.

“On lions,” Blaine hissed. “Not on humans—that’s different.”

The door leading to the hallway swung open. Kefir immediately looked up. As Ellery strode in, Luther and Blaine jumped to their feet and squared up against the other man.

When Kefir would have moved to stand between them, Marrick reached out and caught hold of his arm.

“Let Ellery handle them.”

Kefir looked back toward the submissive, to the *other* submissive. Marrick knew far more about human dominants than he did. Reining in his instincts, Kefir subsided back to the rug, but he couldn't quite bring himself to relax. He remained ready to leap up if he was needed, for whatever good it would do.

“They'd never have actually hurt him,” Marrick whispered. His grip tightened on Kefir's arm, as if what he was saying was urgently important. “I know them, Kef. I know they've got big mouths but they wouldn't—they *couldn't* hurt him. It's not in them. Hell, it took me forever to convince them to hurt a damn masochist! They just need to shout a bit and get it out of their systems.”

Kefir glanced back at the three men squaring off against each other, too distracted to care if his concerns were warranted or not.

Ellery stood his ground. No trace of fear or submission in him. His spine was straight, his chin tilted back. He looked more like the leader of a neighboring pride than a human who'd arrived in shackles just two weeks before.

He owned whichever room he occupied in much the same way Arslan did, and he was glorious. A human dominant equal to a feline leader...

“I can learn,” the little lion whispered.

“Kef?”

“I can learn how to be like a human submissive for him, how to be the kind of mate he wants.” Tearing his eyes away from the men in the center of the room, he forced himself to trust the older man to take care of himself for a few brief moments and turned his full attention to Marrick.

“I'm learning,” Kefir promised. “He's teaching me about what kind of submissive he wants to own, and I'm learning.”

Marrick nodded as if he understood what Kefir was trying to tell him. A moment later, as Ryland and Arslan stepped into the room, they both rose.

When Kefir would have stepped forward to stand next to his lover, Marrick kept him back again. “Make sure you teach him about what kind of master you want, too.”

Kefir looked over his shoulder at him.

“That’s the way it works,” Marrick told him. “Sometimes you have to speak up and tell your master what you want. Ellery’s a good dom—he’ll understand if you speak up about what’s important to you.” He thought about that for a moment. “It probably wouldn’t hurt if you kind of stress your submission and throw in an extra couple of ‘sirs’, though.”

Kefir nodded. Taking his arm out of the other man’s grip as politely as possible, he stepped forward to stand next to Ellery. The older man caught hold of his arm and guided him to stand behind him instead.

Dominants look after submissives. Ellery knew full well that his submissive was stronger than him, stronger than any human, but in that moment, as he squared off against the other lions, his first instinct was to put his submissive behind him out of harm’s way. Kefir studied the back of the other man’s head.

“If you’d all like to stop making fools of yourselves before the others get here,” Arslan drawled, as he walked calmly through the middle of the standoff and took his seat. “Now would be a good time.”

Luther spun around to face the older lion. “You can’t think it’s right! You’re the one who says that our traditions exist for a reason.”

“They do,” Arslan said, as he welcomed Ryland to kneel at his feet. “Every one of them.”

“Then Ellery is Kefir’s pet—if anyone should be wearing a collar, it’s him!” Blaine snapped.

Arslan looked past them both to where Kefir stood, just about able to meet his leader’s gaze over his lover’s shoulder. Pulse racing, all he could do was pray.

“I’ve never said he’s not Kefir’s pet,” Arslan announced. “If a man wants to give his lover a piece of jewelry, that’s his business. It changes nothing in the eyes of the pride. Kefir is still responsible for Ellery. He’s still answerable for his conduct the same way any other lion would be. Our traditions still exist.”

Kefir continued to stare across the room at Arslan, while the leader of the pride transferred his attention to Ellery.

At that exact moment, the door opened, several of the other lions in the pride bounded into the room, all of them talking at the same time. Arslan turned his attention to them and began a conversation with the first lion to catch his attention, as if the newcomers were all far more interesting than the standoff that had been playing out a moment before.

Luther and Blaine turned back to Ellery, but they didn't seem to know what to do with him. While Kefir watched, they retreated toward Marrick. The grip they took on him turned his skin white, and brought a smile to his lips. He grinned at Kefir as he was dragged away to a quiet corner of the room.

Ellery turned his back on them all as he gave his complete attention to Kefir. The little lion looked up at his dominant, waiting for his verdict.

“What exactly are they to Arslan?”

The question sounded very important, in ways Kefir didn't really understand. He tilted his head on the side. “They're the same as we all are—members of his pride, sir.”

“And what exactly does that mean,” Ellery demanded. “That they're answerable to him?”

Kefir nodded.

“That they belong to him,” Ellery pushed. “That *you* belong to him?”

Kefir hesitated. The question didn't seem to be about Luther and Blaine at all. “We all belong to the pride, sir.”

The car pulled up outside then, dragging everyone's attention to the window, and the drive beyond it. A second later, Luther and Blaine strode out, a rather happy looking Marrick being dragged along in their wake.

The sacrifice was led in, but Ellery didn't seem at all interested in watching what happened in front of the fire that night. He led Kefir over to a chair on the other side of the room and turned his back on the ritual and the human taking part in it.

Sitting down, he encouraged Kefir to rest with him, half on the chair and half on his master's lap.

Snuggling against the larger man, doing his best to warm him up to a lion's temperature, Kefir glanced across the room. His gaze fell on Marrick. A human dominant expected his submissive to tell him important things.

“I don't think most lions like doing as they're told,” Kefir whispered.

“Oh?”

“Arslan, he doesn't...he's not like a human dominant. He doesn't want anything like that with us.” He looked up at the older man, not sure how to explain it. “Like at the university?” he offered.

Ellery stroked his fingers along his spine, encouraging him closer.

“Arslan doesn’t own his students, but it’s his responsibility to look after them while they’re in his lectures, to teach them all the things they need to know to be good historians. Sometimes that means he needs to give them orders—to insist that they do as they’re told.”

“And it’s his duty to teach his pride how to be good lions?” Ellery asked.

Kefir nodded.

“And what does that make him to you?”

Kefir tilted his head on the side.

“You’re not like most lions. You like doing what you’re told, don’t you?”

He offered his master a silent nod. He’d known that for a long time. The instinct to demand that he be allowed to do whatever he wanted had never existed inside him the way it seemed to in the other lions

“Do you like doing as he tells you?”

Kefir looked across the room at Arslan, even as his fingers drew intricate patterns on Ellery’s skin.

“I never wanted to be his mate, sir.” He looked up and met the dominant’s eyes, needing him to believe him. “I’ve never wanted to be anyone’s mate until...” Dropping his gaze, he remembered all the advice he’d overheard Arslan give the other members of his pride about humans needing time.

“Kitten?”

Kefir nuzzled against the older man’s neck, enjoying the simple sensation of skin moving against skin while he tried to think of the right words for the situation.

Ellery’s fingers wound into his hair. He tugged at the strands, in that way he had of letting him know that it could feel really good when another man did that—when the right man did that.

Chapter Ten

Ellery studied his submissive very carefully, as Kefir blinked up at his master, all big serious brown eyes and silence.

“Finish what you were saying,” Ellery ordered.

The little lion hesitated for a moment. “Arslan says that humans need more time than lions to be able to work out what they want, because they don’t have a lion’s instincts.”

“Do you belong to me or to Arslan?” Ellery hadn’t intended the question to leave his lips, but somehow the words wriggled free of his control and they were suddenly there, hanging in the air between them.

Kefir’s hand went to his collar. He seemed to realize it was an important question, but it was hard for Ellery to be sure—he always looked as if he took everything so seriously.

“You’re my master, sir. He’s the leader of my pride.”

Ellery pushed the answer aside, too impatient to deal with semantics and labels. “If we each gave you a different order, who would you obey?”

The younger man stared up at him as one minute passed into another, then another.

He was actually thinking about it. Ellery felt himself tense a little further as the seconds went by. He had to think about it?

“You, sir.”

The dominant met his submissive’s gaze. It hadn’t been an automatic answer. He wasn’t saying it because he was expected to, or even because he wanted to please his lover. He said it because he meant it.

His master had asked him a question and he'd answered it honestly. Slowly, but honestly. Ellery nodded his approval as the true value of his response finally sunk in. Hooking his fingers into the little lion's collar, he pulled him forward to be kissed.

There was no hesitation. Kefir purred into his mouth, rubbing his whole body against his master in simple, submissive enthusiasm.

Ellery was vaguely aware that they weren't the only ones losing themselves in pleasure. The sacrifice was already enjoying the attentions of his second lover on the rug. Marrick was caught between both his feline masters on one of the sofas flanking the hearth. To the other side of the blaze, even Arslan was enjoying Ryland's mouth as he watched over the others.

The urge for Ellery to mark his territory, to make it clear that regardless of whatever place Kefir might occupy in the pride, no one owned his submissive but him, was overwhelming.

His grip on the younger man tightened. Sliding his palms down Kefir's arms, he dragged the submissive's hands behind him and kept them in place, one of his larger fists wrapped around both the little lion's wrists.

Kefir looked over his shoulder as he broke the kiss, apparently more than a little curious about what his master was up to back there. The kitten moved his hands slightly within Ellery's hold on him, but he didn't try to pull away from it. His hands flexed, his fingers twitched, and he smiled, pleasure slowly spreading across his face.

Ellery hooked the fingers of his other hand back into the kitten's collar. He barely had time to start to tug him forward before Kefir leaned in for another kiss. His lips caressed Ellery's very gently, begging for whatever his master was willing to grant him. Within seconds, a kiss wasn't enough.

With Kefir cradled easily in his arms, Ellery rose from his chair. Kneeling on the floor, he lay his submissive on the carpet before him.

No survival instinct, no doubts, as Ellery knelt between Kefir's spread legs and looked down over his body, all he saw in the lion was perfection.

The younger man wriggled a little then. Ellery hadn't released his grip on the kitten's wrists until he was already on the floor. The shifter's hands were still behind him, making his back arch awkwardly.

"Keep your hands where they are."

Kefir swallowed rapidly, his chest rose and fell with each deep breath he dragged into his lungs. His tongue crept out to lap at his lips as a rush of nerves seemed to turn his mouth dry.

Ellery made the boy wait a long time while he looked his fill. He was a curious mixture of strong lines of muscle and a delicately small frame, all masculine strength bundled up in a small, compact, and thoroughly stunning parcel.

Running his hands down Kefir's sides, Ellery felt the muscles twitch as he twisted and wriggled, trying to get as much contact as he could with his master.

A kitten indeed... Ellery's lips twitched into a smile, as he brushed his knuckles across the younger man's abs, just to see if he'd react the same way a real tabby cat would.

Kefir let out a little purr.

The sound changed to a mewling little whimper as Ellery snatched up a tube of lube from the supply on the table next to him. The little lion tried to pull away, as if to turn over, but Ellery easily kept him where he was with one hand spread out on his stomach and a serious expression.

A flash of confusion shot through Kefir's eyes. Grabbing a cushion off the chair behind him, Ellery pushed it underneath Kefir's hips. The lion cooperated and lifted his backside a little off the floor, but the confusion didn't fade.

Fingers slicked, Ellery rewarded the younger man's collaboration by teasing his hole with the digits. With his legs pulled back, there was no way the lion could find the leverage to move. All he could do was accept what his master gave him, and whimper beautifully as the dominant's fingers slid in and out of his body.

Cock hard and curving back to his stomach while he was played with, Kefir was the most stunning thing Ellery had ever set his eyes on. No matter how much he wanted to rush, he forced himself to take his time, to see that the novice was well prepared and damn near desperate for more before he quickly rolled on a condom and slicked it with extra lube.

Guiding Kefir to rest his ankles on his master's shoulders, Ellery pushed into him very slowly. Their eyes met over Kefir's contorted torso. He saw the light in the lion's eyes change as his lover sheathed himself deeper inside him.

He kept his gaze until he was buried to the hilt, his hands keeping a tight grip on the shifter's flanks as he held him in place to receive him. Kefir's breaths came quicker as his body struggled to adapt and accept a whole host of sensations Ellery knew the younger man didn't have enough experience to be accustomed to.

The dominant remained still inside him, waiting him out. It took every scrap of control he knew he had and more to be patient with the boy. The urge to mark his territory still pounded inside him, but as he stared down at the kitten, something else took over—the duty to take good care of his territory was far stronger than anything else.

Finally, as Kefir's eyes dropped closed, the dominant turned his attention to the tight little hole stretched around the base of his shaft. Rocking his hips, just a little, Ellery watched his cock slide out of him a fraction before quickly disappearing inside the lion again.

Kefir gasped his approval. Ellery made him wait to feel his master move again. He gained a whimper in reward for his fortitude. The lion started to squirm.

Gradually building up the movement, Ellery began to thrust deep inside the younger man in earnest. Letting go of his hips, he moved his hands to Kefir's ankles. Pushing them away from his shoulders, he bent Kefir's knees back toward his body. The angle of his thrusts changed.

The kitten let out a little cry. He tossed his head back. His body tensed frantically around Ellery's cock. The lion's own shaft twitched and pulsed between them as pleasure shot through him. His wriggling increased, until Ellery was sure he was going to topple them both. His legs kicked out within the dominant's grasp, until it took all of Ellery's strength to hold the kitten in place.

Another thrust and Kefir arched off the floor, his entire weight falling on his shoulders as he bucked under the bliss that seemed to pour into him with each thrust. His clenching hole pulled Ellery over the edge after him.

The dominant's orgasm caught him off guard. He thrust again, his grip tightening around Kefir's ankles again as he spilled into him in a series of deep thrusts. Seconds passed, and all Ellery was aware of was a glorious cascade of bliss and pleasure. His eyes fell closed as his climax tore through him, sudden and desperate.

It wasn't until several moments had passed that he became aware of the noises in the room around him. The fire crackling on the other side of the den. Kefir's ragged breathing. His own racing heart and... and that was it.

Ellery forced open his eyes.

All the other lions were watching them, seemingly more than a little fascinated by what was unfolding in their little corner of the room. Ellery's attention automatically went to Arslan as

he sought the reaction of the only other dominant in the room who seemed to have any sort of clue what he was doing.

The other man's expression was impossible to read, but there was little sign of the anger or the disapproval that Ellery suddenly realized he'd expected to see there. There was no hint of surprise either. He'd known what role each man would take when they were together. Maybe most important of all, there was no sign of jealousy or inclination to fight for possession of the submissive.

If Ellery doubted that the other lions in the pride would accept him so easily, he couldn't bring himself to be concerned with that. The only one who seemed capable of making a significant amount of trouble for Kefir was Arslan, and the leader of the pride seemed to know how things stood now.

The rest of the world dealt with, Ellery turned his attention back to the kitten.

Kefir blinked open his eyes and looked up at him. He made no attempt to move until Ellery pulled gradually away from him. The submissive waited patiently until his lover had dispensed with his condom and was ready to move back to his chair.

A nod was all he needed to encourage him to wriggle around and pull himself up onto his knees, his hands still behind his back.

Kefir never once looked toward anyone else in the room. Ellery could almost believe that there wasn't anyone else in the world as far as the kitten was concerned. His thoughts were all on his master.

Leaning into Ellery's body, Kefir lapped at his skin as he rubbed his forehead against his dominant's stomach. A tug on the collar brought him easily up onto the seat.

He let out a contented little murmur as he settled himself on Ellery's lap and snuggled against him, obviously not in the least doubtful of his welcome there.

Shaking his head slightly, Ellery found himself disinclined to put any uncertainties in his head. He liked the purity of the trust Kefir had in him far too much to want to damage it just for appearances sake.

He slowly ran his fingers over the younger man's skin as they rested together, enjoying the way his touch made the lion snuggle in all the closer to him. As Kefir's eyes drifted closed, and Ellery's attention turned to the room around them, he couldn't help but wonder what Kefir would think of some of the other places he'd taken his submissives to over the years.

While his eyes roved over the other lions, he found himself impatient to find out just how his submissive would handle being the only lion in a room full of humans. It was one thing to make sure his submissive knew that his master respected the world he came from, but maybe it was well past time he took Kefir on a field trip into his master's domain, too. A little time away from the pride would do them both good.

It would also do Arslan a world of good to realize he couldn't play dictator to another man's submissive.

Kefir chose that moment to purr, as if he sensed his master's plan and agreed with it wholeheartedly.

Ellery nodded to himself. Decision made.

Chapter Eleven

“If you want to go through the questions you have about Cameron after dinner,” Arslan began. “Then—”

“We’re going out,” Ellery cut in, before the other dominant’s plans could build up any momentum.

The room fell silent. Ellery met the shifter’s gaze along the dining table.

He could feel Ryland’s eyes going back and forth between him and Arslan as he tried to work out which way the conversation might go. Kefir’s attention was also noticeable—it was all on his master.

Arslan raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t mention you had plans.”

“I’m mentioning them now.”

The shifter took a sip of his wine and set his glass back on the table. There was no similar glass of wine in front of Ellery or Kefir that night. Ellery had seen to that.

The older lion looked at each of his guests in turn. Unless Ellery read the other man very wrong, his interest in Kefir was more paternal than anything else. He cared for the little kitten, he looked out for him. And that was all well and good—providing he didn’t get carried away and start thinking he owned any part of the submissive.

Ellery leaned back in his seat. The tension in the room doubled over and over again. Ryland and Kefir were both starting to get nervous as it swirled around them. Ryland was starting to fidget but, if anything, Kefir only became more still.

“Do you believe Kefir needs your permission to leave the house?” Ellery asked, his tone as polite as he could make it.

Arslan looked to the younger lion. Ellery followed his gaze. Kefir tilted his head slightly to one side, apparently quite curious about the answer too.

“No,” Arslan said slowly. “He’s aware of the traditions feline courtships follow, and how important they are.”

Kefir nodded, as serious as ever.

“I trust his decisions.” Arslan turned his attention back to Ellery. *Can I trust yours?* He didn’t say the words out loud. He didn’t need to. Ellery still heard every syllable clearly.

He considered his own words thoughtfully in return. Perhaps a man who seemed to genuinely care about Kefir deserved to receive some sort of conciliatory gesture. “We shouldn’t disturb you too much when we return. Our plans won’t run late.”

Arslan nodded. “And are we to be told where you’re going?”

“No.” Ellery added nothing to the answer. It was complete as it stood, and he’d be damned if he’d take his politeness so far he actually ended up apologizing for the simple fact he refused to be answerable to the other man.

Standing up, he stepped back from the table. Kefir, having finally been cured of the idea Ellery would be pleased with him for moving his chair around behind him, walked to the door at his side. Ellery opened it for him. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

The little lion left without protest.

“You’re taking him to a leather club,” Arslan said, as Ellery closed the door behind his lover.

“Yes.”

“The same one we met at?”

“Yes.” That seemed to Ellery to be more than enough information to offer up to the other dominant. He turned back to the door, eager to follow Kefir up and get his plans under way.

“Does that impress human submissives?” Arslan asked, as Ellery’s hand curled around the door handle.

He turned back and looked his query at the other man.

“Acting like an unpleasant child and refusing to answer a simple question?” Arslan clarified.

Ellery’s lips twisted into a little smile. “Lions don’t understand the concept of offering their lovers surprise treats then? A pity. Perhaps you should have Ryland explain the idea to you

one day. It might be a habit he'd enjoy his master acquiring." And with that, he closed the door behind him, quite pleased with the look on the shifter's face.

Upstairs, he found Kefir sitting cross legged on their bed, staring intently at Ellery's bag.

"There's a lock on your backpack, sir."

"And how exactly did you discover that?" Ellery asked.

Kefir looked from him, to the little padlock and back again. There wasn't the slightest hint of guilt or guile in him. He genuinely didn't seem to have any idea what his master was teasingly accusing him of.

Ellery ruffled the kitten's hair as he took a seat on the bed next to him. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his key chain and unlocked the fastening. "I brought some things for us to wear when we go out tonight."

Kefir leaned forward, apparently eager to see.

Ellery merely undid the smaller pocket on the side of the bag and took out a solitary length of chain and leather. Lead in hand, he locked it again.

Kefir watched Ellery's every movement, appearing curious and clueless in equal measure as his master turned to him and clipped one end of the lead onto the loop on his collar.

The little lion trailed his fingers down the length of it, all the way to where the leather handle rested in Ellery's palm. He seemed to examine every link in turn, as if one of them might hold the key to all the mysteries in the universe.

Rising to his feet, Ellery picked up his bag and stepped back from the bed. A little tug on the lead brought Kefir to kneel on the edge of the bed.

"You said we were going to get changed, sir?"

"Yes—when we get there."

Kefir seemed to accept the decree with the same calm he accepted almost all his master's announcements. He walked neatly at his master's side on the lead, never once letting the chain grow taut between them, as they made their way down the stairs.

He only hesitated when they left the house and stopped in the drive, facing his bike.

"Ever ridden?" Ellery asked, although he already had a fair idea of the answer.

Kefir shook his head.

"All you have to do is hold on to your master."

He didn't seem the least bit scared as Ellery put a helmet on him and arranged both them and the back pack safely on the bike. Pulling out of the drive, Ellery raised a hand in farewell, knowing full well they were being carefully observed from the den window.

Even as he rode down the street, Ellery felt them both leave Arslan's overreaching presence. The bike, the submissive, the freedom to do whatever the hell he wanted with both—it all rushed through him settling something in his soul that had never quite found a way to rest easy in the other man's house.

It was just him and Kefir, and the kitten was bloody good at doing as he was told. The shifter held on tight to his master. So tight, it wasn't easy for Ellery to breathe whenever they happened to turn too many corners in quick succession. Kefir clung to his master as if Ellery was suddenly the only point of safety in a world that insisted on whizzing past his feet at far too rapid a pace for the little lion's peace of mind.

By the time they pulled up in the car park at the back of the club, Ellery was more than a little breathless. Kefir didn't ease his grip on him, until he rose from his seat and dismounted the bike.

As he took off the shifter's helmet Kefir was wide eyed, but still there was no hint of fear. Ellery chuckled at the younger man's enthralled expression. He had the distinct impression that he'd soon be receiving requests which involved Kefir having a bike of his own. Or maybe not. The boy did like being close to his master, and they couldn't have got any closer than they had on the ride over without removing significant pieces of clothing.

“Like that, kitten?”

Kefir nodded quickly before looking at the dank little space around them. Ellery followed his gaze to the crumbling brickwork and graffiti that surrounded them.

“Where are we, sir?”

“Somewhere where you'll be able to see a little bit of my world.”

A sideways tilt of the head was all the answer he received.

“I've learned a lot about lions and your pride over the last few days. Now it's time for you to learn a little about humans—from me and not some pillock with a website.”

“Learn about your pride, sir?”

Ellery considered the matter. A group of men who came together to share a mutual interest. There was certainly a bond between the men who played there. Leaders. Followers.

Masters. Brats. There were probably worse ways for the boy to think of the club. “Something like it.”

Picking up the handle on his kitten’s lead, Ellery led him around to the front of the club. It was no more showy than the alleyway. An untrained eye probably wouldn’t even notice the club existed.

The dominant working the door that night was an old friend. He nodded to Ellery and tossed him the key to the private room Ellery had booked, as they walked past his station.

Catching the key deftly in the same hand that held the lead, Ellery guided Kefir further into the club.

Even that early in the evening it was getting both crowded and rowdy. Ellery heard the howls of laughter coming from the communal changing rooms as they walked past them.

A private room was more Kefir’s pace. As they stepped inside, Ellery glanced briefly at the set up. Three different shaped cages filled various corners. A whipping post and a set of stocks were set up, ready to be enjoyed. Toys filled a wall full of hooks. A suspension kit dangled from the ceiling. Apart from that, there was little decoration. There wasn’t even paint. The walls were merely bare plaster.

Ellery turned his attention to the little lion as Kefir’s eyes went from one item to another, never lingering on any one piece of equipment for very long, but not rushing so fast he missed a single detail either.

Dropping his bag on the table set against one wall, Ellery undid the padlock again. His kitten was immediately at his side, everything else in the room forgotten as he came to investigate whatever it was his master had hidden away from him.

A jumble of leather poured out of the bag.

“Put everything you’re wearing in there,” Ellery ordered as the last items spilled out.

Kefir undressed without ever looking away from the table. He tilted his head this way and that, as if trying to make sense out of the objects piled there, to imagine what kind of garments they might become when they were untangled from each other.

Ellery let him wait and wonder until all their street clothes were locked away and they both stood naked facing the table.

“You can help me with mine first,” Ellery decided.

The leather chaps and waist coat would have taken him mere moments to put on if he were by himself. With Kefir's help it took closer to half an hour. The younger man was blatantly fascinated with the fabric—the texture, the scent, the taste of it. Apparently determined to get the full leather experience, he nuzzled and licked at the clothing as it was layered over Ellery's skin.

The dominant watched it all, enchanted by the little lion, as he took his first wavering steps into his lover's world and seemed to thrive on everything he found there.

Kefir wasn't inclined to neglect his master's body either. That had to be given due attention, rubbed against and caressed at every opportunity. Chaps in place and Kefir on his knees before him, Ellery stared down at the little kitten as Kefir joyfully arched and rubbed his bare skin against his dominant's leather clad leg.

He leaned forward and nuzzled at his master's bare crotch too, but Ellery stopped him from taking his shaft into his mouth with a tug on the lead. Kefir blinked up at him, a little mew of protest escaping from him before he sealed his lips tightly together again as if worried he was wrong to complain.

“Don't you want to see what you're going to be wearing?”

A quick nod and Kefir was back on his feet, the tiny reprimand already forgotten.

There wasn't much left on the table. Ellery picked up the butt plug first. If Kefir had ever seen one before, he gave no sign of it. He looked up at his master, polite curiosity dancing in his eyes.

With a firm grip on Kefir's lead, it took Ellery mere moments to have the younger man crouched up on a bare section of the low table. Slicked fingers quickly stretched him open as he held himself still for his lover's caress. The plug wasn't large, certainly smaller than his master's cock, but it apparently felt different from the submissive side of things.

The kitten gasped as Ellery slid it into place. The flat end settled neatly between the younger man's cheeks as the rounded tip disappeared from view, and Ellery laid claim to a little bit more of his lover with each moment that passed. Stroking his hand over Kefir's buttocks, Ellery let him just rest there for a few moments and get used to the sensation, before guiding him to jump down off the table.

The shifter looked over his shoulder at his master.

“That's going to stay there all night,” Ellery whispered to him, as he pulled him back to rest against his master's body.

Kefir nodded, even as he whimpered.

Ellery slid his hand down between them and gently manipulated the plug, making him squirm. “Every time you take a step it’ll move like this.”

The little lion bit his lip. If his master was any judge, the shifter was half a second away from coming when Ellery stepped back and handed a pair of shorts to him.

They were tight. It took Kefir a lot of squirming to get them on and zip them up over his erection. Leaning back against the edge of the table, Ellery watched the show with due appreciation, knowing that every single movement was going to have the plug dancing inside the submissive, pressing against his prostate and making him even more desperate to come.

By the time he had wriggled into the only true piece of clothing he was destined to wear that night, the younger man was gasping for breath, scrambling for control.

The only thing left to add were the cuffs. Picking him up, Ellery sat him on the table. Kefir’s eyes opened very wide before slowly dropping shut as he apparently relished the pleasure the plug sent shooting through his veins.

Right on the edge, and lacking permission to come, he was glorious. Ellery chuckled gently at his plight as he fastened the buckles on the cuffs. Ankles and wrists quickly surrounded by leather, Kefir was almost ready to face the club.

Ellery tugged at the lead, pulling him in for a kiss. His free hand easily clipped the wrist cuffs behind the lion’s back as their lips molded against each other and his lover purred his pleasure.

When he pulled away, Ellery ran his eyes over the submissive one more time. The scene was set. “Ready, kitten?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ellery smiled, just slightly in love with the fact it hadn’t even occurred to the kitten to ask his master ‘Ready for what?’

Chapter Twelve

Kefir tore his gaze away from the older man as his master led him out of the quiet little room.

The low dark space was crowded with men—far more than Kefir had ever seen at the gathering of any pride. A million and one different scents and noises wrapped around them. He crept a little closer to his master's side. The lead between them stopped being interesting and pretty. It became vital. He had no desire to lose sight of the older man in the chaos.

Music pounded through the room, seeming to fill even the tiny spaces left between the leather clad bodies. Strangeness and confusion pressed in on him from every side.

His hands clenched into fists behind his back. Someone stumbled and collided with him. Kefir moved his bare foot just in time to prevent it being trodden on. Caught between wanting to protect his future mate, and wanting to look to his master for protection, the shifter had no idea what he was supposed to do, or what Ellery would be pleased with him for wanting to do either.

Ellery tugged on the lead. A clear order amid the confusion. As the larger man walked forward, Kefir ducked into the slipstream created by a pair of shoulders far broader than his own. Each step jostled the toy his master had slipped inside him. The leather shorts seemed to shrink around him, until his cock pulsed against the fabric, unable to stiffen further in the tight confines, but unable to soften while the plug danced against his prostate.

The room led into another, then another. Ellery guided him on further, until they walked past a muscular man standing at the head of a quieter corridor. The man nodded to Ellery as the dominant walked past him. When Kefir looked over his shoulder, the man was staring after them, apparently enjoying the view a great deal. Kefir couldn't blame him. In his natural habitat his

master was more magnificent than ever. But that didn't mean he couldn't feel just a little bit jealous that so many other men were seeing his future mate like that.

Ellery was his. Kefir frowned as he tried to reach for his collar and found the cuffs stopping him short.

The next room they stepped into was calm in comparison to all the others. There were fewer men, fewer things calling to Kefir's attention. He took a breath. His lungs filled with the scent of leather, but there was less pressure around it. It became far easier to appreciate how beautiful the scent really was.

Ellery led him to a little group of seats set around a table on the other side of the room. "Thoughts, kitten?"

Kefir blinked up at the older man, as he lowered himself to kneel in front of his seat on the sofa, just the way he'd seen Ryland sit with Arslan so many times. "It's very nice, sir."

Ellery laughed, a rich beautiful sound. His eyes crinkled at the edges in a way they seldom did when he smiled at the den. "You're a terrible liar, pet. Stop trying to be polite and tell your master the truth."

"It's...different than being with lions, sir," he whispered.

Ellery stroked his fingers through Kefir's hair, his touch just slightly rough and entirely perfect. "Yes, it is."

"All the men here are part of your pride, sir?" the shifter asked, cautiously.

The dominant shook his head. "Some of the members of the club are men I've been friends with for a lifetime, but most of the crowd in the public rooms I couldn't even name."

Kefir nodded his understanding. The men in this room were important. The men out there weren't. He dismissed everyone who wasn't in that room, as he looked around him and began to take in a few details.

No one there was entirely naked the way the lions were for their meets, but the clothes they wore were just like Ellery's. They merely seemed to highlight those bits of them that were bare.

A dozen or so men sat around, talking to each other. Some of the submissives knelt on the floor, or stood behind their master's chairs waiting for an order. Two men stood apart from all the others, in the far corner of the room. One was cuffing the other to a big X shaped cross. As Kefir watched, the unbound man stepped back and picked up a whip.

Leather fell against the other man's back—against the *submissive's* back—leaving harsh red lines in its wake. Kefir turned his face away from the sight.

Ellery tugged on the lead, encouraging him to look up at his master.

“He's being punished, sir,” Kefir observed, as neutrally as he could manage.

Ellery broke eye contact for a moment. Looking over Kefir's shoulder, he appeared to examine the scene before him. The little lion could still hear the leather lash striking the man's skin. He hadn't thought the dominant would need to think about his answer.

“Yes,” the older man said eventually. “He's being punished.”

Kefir nodded, even as he felt his stomach clench at the idea of his master ever treating him that way—of ever failing the other man so badly, his mate thought he *deserved* to be treated that way. Unable to look Ellery in the eye and believe that the older man wouldn't see his disapproval and hate him for it, Kefir kept his gaze lowered.

It was important to respect the different way humans did things—especially if a lion wished to take a human for a mate. Arslan had drummed that into them time and time again. It wasn't fair to try to turn a human into a lion. A middle ground had to be found.

Kefir took a deep breath, once more filling his lungs with the scent of men, and sex, and bondage. He had a distinct impression that Ellery wasn't a middle ground type of person. There would only be one kind of ground they stood on together, and it would be human and carpeted in leather.

Another tug on the lead demanded he lift his gaze again.

“Up here.”

When Kefir would have climbed onto his master's lap and snuggled against him, quick to appreciate the reassurance he'd find there, Ellery shook his head.

“No. Turn yourself over my lap.”

He looked his query to his master.

“I'm going to spank you.”

Kefir thought about that for a few seconds.

“Kitten?”

“And afterwards you'll be pleased with me again, sir?” he prompted.

“I'm very pleased with you now.” Ellery smiled slightly. “This isn't about that.”

Kefir blinked up at him, waiting to be told exactly what it was about.

Ellery nodded toward the men on the other side of the room. Kefir didn't look over his shoulder to follow his gaze. He didn't want to see what was going on behind him. "It's about showing you that just because something *looks* like a punishment, that doesn't always mean it's a bad thing."

Kefir nodded his understanding, even if he wasn't entirely sure he understood anything at all. His master guided him to turn his body over the larger man's knees so his head rested on the sofa to one side of him and his legs lay on the other side.

It wasn't easy to arrange himself that way while his hands were still tied behind his back. Robbed of any sort of feline grace, he was left clumsy and clueless. When he eventually found a position that seemed to find favor with the older man, Kefir breathed a sigh of relief and cautiously took stock of his new place in the world.

It wasn't as uncomfortable as it first appeared. Both his master's skin and his leather chaps rubbed against Kefir's stomach each time either of them moved. His body tingled in appreciation.

Ellery reached underneath him then. Undoing the fastenings on the leather shorts, the dominant wrangled them down until they passed over Kefir's backside and wrapped tight around the tops of his legs, binding them just as firmly as the cuffs bound his wrists.

A moment later, the cuffs on his ankles were joined together too, trapping him neatly in place and sending a shiver of anticipation along Kefir's spine as he purred out his unexpected pleasure.

The dominant's hand stroked back and forth over his backside, making Kefir squirm against him. The sharp tap that landed against his arse a moment later made him gasp, and promptly arch his back in the hope of more.

Ellery chuckled. "I thought you'd like that."

Kefir managed to look over his shoulder at the older man. The emotion in Ellery's eyes coaxed another purr out of him. He'd never seen him happier, or more focused on his lover. The larger man's hand struck his up turned arse again. Kefir rocked slightly with the blow, his cock rubbing against his master's lap.

Strokes, taps and real spanks, caressed his skin again and again. The room wasn't cold. Even the humans had to be comfortable in it. But the warmth building up in Kefir's muscles soon had nothing to do with mere temperature. Each touch sent a wave of heat racing through him.

Pain flashed inside him with some of the heavier blows—the ones that seemed to echo through the room and steal the air from his lungs, but it also rushed to his cock. Unable to stay still, he wriggled over his master's knees, too full of sensations to control his own body.

His master's left arm looped over his waist and held him still.

"You're blushing very nicely for your master, now," Ellery observed, with the air of a connoisseur.

Panting for breath, Kefir squirmed until he managed to look over his shoulder and down his body to his reddened arse. He mewed when he saw the flaming skin. Ellery's palm stroked across it, pulling a purr from Kefir as he helplessly writhed for him again.

The older man's fingers stroked down between his buttocks then, to manipulate the plug inside him.

"One day, when you've been very good for your master and deserve a special treat, I'm going to turn you over my lap just like this, and I'm going to keep you there all night. You're going to come just from being spanked. Would you like that?"

Kefir nodded rapidly.

"But not right now."

Pulling the tight shorts up over Kefir's sore bottom and around his aching cock, Ellery began to guide him up off his lap with just one last tap against the thin leather. Frowning slightly, Kefir realized he must have let the other man down in some way he couldn't even guess at. He hesitated as his master arranged him to sit on the seat next to him. He pulled his bound legs onto the cushion in front of him. Flames burned across his buttocks as his weight came to rest upon them, in a strange combination of pleasure and pain.

A little tug on his lead guided him forward to be kissed. His master didn't seem displeased with him as their lips met and lingered against each other, as Ellery's tongue thrust into his mouth and laid claim to Kefir.

"You haven't done anything wrong," Ellery said, smiling as he broke the kiss. "But special treats are always reserved for special rewards. Think how pleased you'll know your master is with you when you get that treat."

Kefir nodded, snuggling a little against his master as he felt the dominant's approval surround him again. They had barely rested for a second, when Kefir sensed someone approach them.

“With the compliments of Mr. Green, sir.” A glass of lemonade and a saucer of milk were set on the table beside them.

Kefir tilted his head slightly to one side as he studied them and tried to make them fit in with what he knew of humans.

“Apparently I’m not the only one who looks at you and sees a pretty little kitten,” Ellery said with a smile. Picking up the saucer, he held it in front of Kefir’s lips.

When he would have drunk from the rim, Ellery took it away. “Lap.”

He offered it to him again.

Dipping his head over the saucer, Kefir obediently lapped at the surface.

“Good boy.”

“A pretty little kitten, and the cat that got the cream...” Another man appeared at the side of Ellery’s seat.

When Kefir would have lifted his head to get a better view of him, Ellery changed the angle of the saucer, tilting it toward him. Kefir had little choice but to keep his head down, lapping at the surface in an effort to make sure it didn’t spill.

“Stunning,” the stranger observed.

“Yes.”

Kefir glanced at his master out of the corner of his eye. Ellery sounded very pleased with him. Success rushed through the little lion as he lapped faster, scooping up the rich, creamy milk with his tongue and quickly swallowing it all down. The liquid was cool, it soothed a throat left dry by purrs and pleasure.

“Private property?” the man asked.

“Of course.”

The man sat down. “Figures—damn near all the good ones are.”

As Ellery and the other man talked beside him, his master continued to tilt the saucer. Kefir found he had to keep all his attention on the bowl to ensure none escaped. He didn’t look up until the last of what he’d been offered was gone and the saucer licked clean.

His master set the empty bowl down on the table. Licking his lips to make sure none of the milk lingered there, Kefir looked across to his master’s friend, his curiosity thoroughly piqued.

Mr. Green was wearing leather too. Just like Ellery, his clothes seemed to conceal everything apart from those bits of him Kefir had been led to believe humans liked to keep covered in the presence of strangers.

Kefir tilted his head slightly to one side as he studied him. The older man smiled back at him as he ran his eyes over his body in return.

“How far along is his training?”

Ellery’s fingers stroked up and down Kefir’s spine in a casual, comforting rhythm. “Just beginning.”

“Complete novice?” Mr. Green asked.

Ellery nodded.

“Lucky sod.”

“Yes, I am.” Ellery met Kefir’s eyes as he said it.

It was all very well to know how important it was to respect human’s traditions, but the little lion couldn’t help but think, just in the privacy of his own head, that humans were very strange creatures.

As the conversation went on and the shifter found himself even less able to follow their meanings, Kefir abandoned any attempt to listen in on anything they said. Snuggling into his master’s side, he rubbed his head against his shoulder as he tried to find a comfortable position to rest. Ellery shifted slightly in his seat to accommodate him, but Kefir still couldn’t quite settle.

Sliding down his master’s body, Kefir let his cheek brush against the dark hairs that decorated the older man’s chest, until he found himself following another trail of hairs that led down his abs and straight to his cock. The plug shifted inside him as he leaned forward. His sore backside rubbed against the inside of his shorts. His cock protested against the tight confinement. But none of that mattered when Kefir’s instincts were screaming at him more loudly than any sensation ever could.

Settling his head comfortably on his master’s lap, Kefir looked from his master’s face to his erection and back again. Thoroughly absorbed in his conversation, Ellery didn’t seem to have any attention left to spare for him.

Unable to resist the temptation, Kefir leaned forward and lapped gently at the tip of the dominant’s cock. Ellery’s hand had been resting high up on his back. It slid up to the back of his

head, and encouraged him forward, never once faltering in the story he was recounting to the other man.

Permission to play granted, Kefir sucked the tip of the older man's cock into his mouth. Sealing his lips around the thick shaft, he began to dip his head lower over the other man's crotch, taking him deeper with each movement. The hand on the back of his head welcomed him there, but there was no pressure behind it. Ellery seemed willing to let him do as he pleased.

Pulling back, Kefir allowed the tip of Ellery's cock to slip from between his lips for a moment. Licking his way down the shaft, he reached the older man's balls. Placing a kiss against them, he slowly started to explore them with his lips and tongue, sucking them into his mouth in turn and swirling his tongue around them, lapping up every trace of his master's taste he could find among the neatly trimmed hairs.

Ellery's scent changed as Kefir's mouth played over his skin. His mind might have been on bikes and club politics, but his body, the pleasure in his scent—that belonged to Kefir. Pet or master, Ellery belonged to him. The shifter mewed his pleasure as he turned his attention back to suckling around his master's cock.

Salt leaked onto his tongue, hot and more-ish. He flicked his tongue quickly against the tip of Ellery's shaft, trying to coax more of it into his mouth. As tension grew in his master's muscles, Kefir knew the older man wanted to come. It wasn't in him to deny the dominant anything he might ever want.

Taking him deeper still, Kefir let the tip of the other man's erection nudge against the back of his throat as he stroked his tongue against the vein along the underside his shaft in just the way he knew the dominant liked so much. A little rock of the hips and Ellery spilled into his mouth, filling him with the pure, unadulterated taste of his master.

Swallowing rapidly, Kefir took everything the older man could give him with pleasure. Eventually, there was nothing more to take. He reluctantly let the dominant's softening cock slip from between his lips and dropped his head back to rest idly on the older man's lap, with just a few more licks to finish everything off.

His master was right there, pleased with him and petting him as he went back to his conversation. His own body was full of contentment and pleasure, his mouth full of his master's taste. As Kefir felt sleepiness creep into the corners of his mind, he curled closer into his master's body and he felt Ellery welcome him there without any reservation.

The little lion smiled quietly to himself. Perhaps the club wasn't so bad after all. Not as good as the pride obviously, but very nice in its own way. All he had to do now, was find a way to make his master as happy at the den as he was at the club.

Chapter Thirteen

Kefir glanced over his shoulder as the skin on the back of his neck prickled, warning him that he was being observed. His first thought was that Ellery might have somehow found a way to come home to see him in the middle of the day.

It wasn't his master, but Kefir still had a smile for the leader of their pride. "You're home early."

"Paperwork's as easy to do here as it is at the university," Arslan said, crossing the room to sit in the chair opposite Kefir's desk.

For a few moments, the little lion gazed blankly at the family lines he was working on, trying to put thoughts that had nothing to do with lineages in order.

"When do you intend to offer for him?"

Kefir's gaze snapped up to meet Arslan's.

The older lion smiled slightly. "If you're under the impression you'll ever make a fine poker player, you're mistaken. You're in love with him. Any fool can see that."

Kefir twirled his pen between his fingers. "Do you think he knows?"

"Have you told him?"

Kefir shook his head.

"Then it's quite possible he doesn't. Humans aren't fools," Arslan said. "But they aren't lions either. Their instincts are...different from ours. Good, but different."

"Did Ryland know before you told him?" Kefir asked, cautiously.

Arslan leaned back in his chair as he seemed to think about the matter very carefully. "I've no idea," he admitted eventually. "I'm not sure he even knew how *he* felt. Humans can be like that at times."

“I don’t think Ellery is very like other humans,” Kefir said softly, his hand instinctively going to his collar.

Arslan followed the gesture, but it was impossible to read his expression as his gaze traced the line of silver links. “Tell me what he’s like.”

Kefir frowned down at his papers as he tried to find the right words. “He’s strong. Certain. He...” his hand left his collar to wrap around his other wrist in pale imitation of the way his master so often held him. “He’s not a conventional pet.”

“Oh?” The sound invited him to continue.

“I think,” Kefir said, very slowly. “If there’s one of us who acts like a traditional pet, it’s me.” Each word seemed to cling to his vocal cords, not sure if it should ever be spoken aloud.

Arslan said nothing.

“He calls me that sometimes,” Kefir admitted. “And kitten—he calls me that too.”

Arslan raised his eyebrow, but he made no comment until the silence had dragged on between them for several more impossibly long seconds. “Does he call himself your master?” he finally asked.

Kefir nodded, torn between wanting to lift his chin and own the facts of the matter, and an instinctive inclination to worry that he had displeased the leader of his pride with his confession.

Arslan shifted slightly uncomfortably in his seat. “If you had a choice between being a pet or a master, which would you wish to be?”

“Ellery would never—”

“I’m not asking about him,” Arslan cut in sharply. “I’m asking what *you* would want. If Ellery wasn’t a consideration, what would you prefer to be to a man you were destined to spend the rest of your life with?”

Kefir turned his attention back to his pen. It was leaving smudges of ink on one of his fingers just the way it always did, but it had a good grip to it. It fitted against his hand far better than any of those that left his digits clean. In a way he couldn’t quite explain, it suited him. Just like Ellery suited him...

“I think...” Kefir shook his head. There was no doubt in his mind, no thinking about it. He dismissed his first attempt at an answer and tried again. “I’m a pet.”

Arslan nodded, he didn't seem entirely surprised. He didn't appear all that sure about what he should say next either. He took a deep breath and stared across the table at Kefir. "Do you think you'll make each other happy?"

Kefir nodded, glancing up from his pen for a moment.

"As far as the pride is concerned, you'll still be responsible for him," Arslan announced, a little brusquely, as he moved forward in his chair.

Kefir nodded again.

Arslan took another deep breath and pushed himself up from the seat. He was on his way to the door when Kefir finally managed to scrape together a few words.

"Are you disappointed in me?" No matter what the answer, he told himself it was better to know, one way or the other.

The other lion's footsteps stopped. "Disappointed?"

"That I'm not what a lion is supposed to be." Kefir's attention was still firmly fixed on the papers before him when he heard Arslan move back across the room and lean against the desk next to him.

"Our traditions exist to make sure that lions treat the humans they take as lovers kindly, that the physically weaker species aren't hurt when a lion gets...over enthusiastic. I'd much rather you're honest with him and find a way for the two of you to be happy than for you to try to pretend you're something you're not and for either of you to get hurt in the process."

"I'll never hurt him," Kefir whispered. He'd have given everything he owned for the words to have sounded more certain.

"But...?" Arslan prompted, as his fears caught the older man's attention.

Kefir tapped the end of the pen on the table. "I can protect him from other humans if I need to." He had no doubt about that. The leather the other man had used to bind him was very pretty, but if he really needed to escape from it to protect his mate, there was no way it would withstand the strain of a lion determined to get loose.

He glanced up. Arslan nodded for him to keep going.

"I know I'm not as strong as the other lions." He dropped his gaze, ashamed of that fact for the first time in his life. "If the pride turns against him then—" he swallowed rapidly, fear robbing him of his voice.

“You concentrate on your...on Ellery. I’ll see to it that order exists within the pride. That’s my place, not yours.”

Kefir nodded.

“Hundreds of humans have walked into the den since I took command of this pride. I haven’t lost one yet. Not even when Luther and Blaine first joined us.”

Kefir dipped his head a little, smiling at the exasperated look that flashed across Arslan’s face.

“Ellery will be perfectly safe.”

Kefir offered the older man another little nod. “Thank you.”

Arslan walked toward the door again but, without Kefir saying a word, he stopped half way across the room. “You still haven’t answered my original question. When do you plan to offer for him?”

“Soon,” Kefir said. As soon as he could gather the courage to face the fact his lover might not give him the answer he wanted.

Arslan nodded before leaving.

Kefir had no idea how long he sat there, silently staring at all the family trees and lineages spread across the table in front of him.

When he felt himself being watched once more, he looked up, expecting to see Arslan back to remind him of something else that needed to be taken care of before he could even think of asking Ellery to join the pride as his mate.

He jumped out of his chair when he saw his master leaning casually against the door frame, as if he had already been there for quite some time.

“Sir!”

“Was it a nice place?” the dominant asked as he pushed himself away from the woodwork and stepped forward.

“Sir?”

“You were in your own little world—lost in your thoughts.”

Kefir nodded, too busy staring at the man to manage to speak.

“A suspicious mind might think you expected to see a different man in the doorway when you looked up,” Ellery went on.

Kefir nodded again.

Ellery raised an eyebrow.

“Arslan stopped by to speak to me. I thought he’d come back.”

“Does he often do that—stop by to talk to you in the middle of the day?”

Kefir frowned slightly, not sure he understood why his lover’s voice sounded so strange.

“Sir?”

“What were you talking about?” Ellery asked—except it sounded more like a demand than a simple enquiry.

“You.”

Ellery’s lips twitched as if he was holding back a smile, the way he so often did at the den. “I can’t fault your honesty, at least.” Hooking his fingers under his collar, he tugged Kefir forward for a kiss.

The atmosphere around them changed as Ellery explored his mouth with his tongue, easily making his submissive’s brain melt and his cock rise.

“Did you have a good day, sir?” the shifter managed to ask, as he was released.

Ellery nodded. Sitting in the desk chair, he pulled Kefir back to rest on his master’s lap. Reaching out to the mess of paperwork on the table, the dominant picked up one of the top sheets.

“This is the work you were telling me about before? The lineages?”

Kefir nodded, arranging himself a little more comfortably against the larger man’s body, until the arm Ellery had wrapped around his waist tightened its hold on him, in a silent command to stop fidgeting.

The older man picked up another piece of paper. “What’s so special about Cameron?” he asked.

Kefir looked at the circled name and the line of question marks that followed it. “No one knows what happened to him, sir.”

“Oh?”

Kefir frowned. “He left his parents pride years ago, but no one knows which pride he joined. I’ve been making enquiries but…”

“Maybe he didn’t join any of them,” Ellery suggested as he ran his gaze over the page. He looked up when Kefir shook his head vehemently enough to make the chair wobble beneath them.

“Lions have to belong to prides, sir. It...a lion without a pride would be...” Kefir shook his head again, a flash of pain shooting through him at the very idea.

Ellery was silent for some time. “I don’t suppose this Cameron you’re looking for was a dancer?”

Kefir tilted his head on the side.

“Rumor has it one of the dancers who works in the local clubs is a lion-shifter. His stage name is Caramel,” he went on.

“A dancer?” Kefir echoed.

“Mostly,” Ellery murmured, his attention already back on the page he was reading.

“Sir?”

Ellery’s expression turned more serious as he set the page down and gave his submissive his complete attention. “I’ve heard that he works for street money too.”

Kefir blinked at him.

“Men pay him to have sex with them,” Ellery explained.

Kefir frowned, helpless to stop himself imagining the other lion’s life. To be without a pride, to be forced to...

Ellery stroked his knuckles down Kefir’s cheek, pulling him back to reality. “Do you want me to ask around, see if I can find him for you?”

Kefir nodded. “Please?”

Ellery smiled encouragingly, before looking back to the table. “Tell me about one of the other lines you’re working on.”

There were a dozen different lineages spread out across the desk. Squirming forward a little, Kefir managed to catch the edge of one particular page. He offered it silently to his master, testing his reaction.

“Marrick’s family tree?” the older man asked, as he studied the neatly arranged names and dates and all the careful lines connecting them.

Kefir nodded. “He joined the pride, sir.”

“And are you adding in the records of all the lions’ human lovers?”

Kefir shook his head, very firmly. “Just their mates, sir.”

“The difference being?”

“Mates don’t leave,” Kefir whispered, his voice suddenly rougher than it had been a moment before.

Ellery nodded very slowly, as if filing that away for future reference. “What about Ryland? Is he here too?”

He loosened his hold just enough for Kefir to retrieve the appropriate piece of paper, but his arm slid back around him as he curled back up onto the other man’s lap, his grip on him as firm as ever.

“There’s not as much information on Ryland’s as on Marrick’s,” Ellery observed.

“It makes Ryland sad, sir, talking about his family.”

Ellery pressed a seemingly absentminded kiss onto the top of his head. The same sympathy that had come into his expression when he realized how wrong it was for Cameron to be living without a pride came back. He seemed to understand Ryland’s situation without needing to be told any more.

Kefir glanced up at him. He appeared interested and inclined to talk. It was too good an opportunity to waste.

“Luther and Blaine went to visit Marrick’s family,” he mentioned, as casually as he could manage.

“That must have been interesting,” Ellery murmured, most of his attention back on the lineage in his hand.

“They explained to his parents that they were going to take good care of him.”

Ellery’s lips twitched, as if he found something funny, but he didn’t try to share the joke with Kefir.

Kefir pushed on. “Who’s the leader of your pride, sir?”

Chapter Fourteen

For a few seconds, Ellery continued to stare at the complicated family tree on the page before him, but he suddenly found himself unable to give it his full attention. Something was jumping up and down in his hindbrain shouting at the top of its voice. Kefir wasn't recounting an amusing story about his two bratty little friends, or even the three brats, if Marrick was counted among them. The little lion wasn't even blithely displaying his lack of understanding of human families.

"Kitten, are you trying to find out who you'd need to speak to if you were attempting to propose to me?" A lifetime spent on the club scene came to Ellery's rescue, the question sounded perfectly calm.

Kefir nodded, big brown eyes perfectly serious.

Ellery stared down at him, trying to work out how the hell he could sincerely think that was a good idea, while some insane little part of him wondered what his younger sister would think if a werelion turned up on her doorstep, asking for her permission to mate with her brother.

He bit back a chuckle when it threatened to break loose. No doubt Annabelle would calmly invite him in for a cup of tea and ask him what exactly his intentions were. In any other situation, it would have been hilarious.

But the kitten was actually serious. Ellery turned his gaze back to the paperwork in front of him while his mind raced in a dozen different directions.

"Propose us being mates," he clarified.

Kefir nodded again.

Mates don't leave... The younger man had stated it so calmly. The words echoed around and around inside Ellery's head.

What they were entering into wasn't some sort of temporary possession that would fade away when a collar was removed. It wasn't some hookup in a club. Part of him had been aware of that for some time—maybe even since the very first moment he'd met the younger man.

There was something about Kefir that made it impossible for him to think about him the way he had other submissives that had come and gone from his protection over the years.

"I can speak for myself," he said eventually. "If there's a leader of my pride, it's me." Even if Annabelle might not agree with that assessment.

Kefir seemed to let that settle into his mind for a little while. Then he nodded, almost to himself. "Arslan says—"

"What does Arslan have to do with anything?" Ellery said. Jerking Kefir's gaze up to meet his, he held the shifter's chin back, refusing to let the younger man look away.

"Says that humans don't have the same kinds of instincts as lions, sir," Kefir finished mildly, confusion flickering in his eyes as he seemed to see his master's jealousy, even if he couldn't make sense of it.

"Meaning?"

"If you need more time to decide what you want to happen between us, I can wait, sir."

Because it wasn't right to expect too much from a human. Ellery felt his spine stiffen. He'd heard as much in the older lion's tone far too many times already. In Arslan it was annoying, but the other shifter's poor opinion of humans in general spreading to Kefir was entirely unacceptable.

"I'm perfectly capable of making up my own mind," Ellery said, pushing his anger down so it didn't vent against the wrong man. "There's no need to coddle me and assume I'm incapable of reaching a decision just as quickly as any shifter could."

"Yes, sir." And the lion just sat there, staring up at him, evidently waiting to hear what his oh, so instantaneous decision was.

Ellery glared down at him in return. "I wouldn't have given you this if I didn't care about you," he said eventually, reaching out to hook his fingers under the younger man's collar. And in that moment, he knew it was the truth. It had never been about just marking his territory so no one else would lay a hand on Kefir while he belonged to him.

It had always been about more than that. He stroked his fingers along the edge of the chain.

Kefir smiled. Dipping his head, he licked at the back of his hand, and that seemed to be the end of it. Ellery had the distinct feeling that there was nothing left to be said. At least, not to Kefir. Words often seemed entirely unnecessary with Kefir.

“You told Ryland you’d help him with dinner tonight,” he reminded his lover a few minutes later. Kefir snuggled a little against him, apparently not at all inclined to leave his master’s lap. He offered a lick to his dominant’s neck, but when Ellery failed to encourage him, the shifter slowly pulled away. Standing up behind him, Ellery sent the kitten on his way with a sharp tap against his backside.

Kefir smiled his delight over his shoulder at him as he went.

Ellery didn’t linger in the room on his own. Striding across the hallway he rapped on the door leading into the den.

“Enter.”

Ellery stepped inside. Arslan was alone, sitting in an arm chair on the far side of the room. As Ellery closed the door behind him, the other dominant set down his book and gave him his full attention. If a lion was expected to ask the leader of the human’s family for his blessing, Ellery guessed that he should do likewise, in respect for Kefir’s traditions if not those of lions in general, but the words stuck in his throat.

Kefir already belonged to him. Asking another man for him would be tantamount to suggesting he’d walk away if Arslan’s blessing was refused. Like there was any chance in hell of that.

“Are you under the impression that Kefir belongs to you?” he asked instead, taking up a position next to the mantle place.

“No.”

Ellery felt a little bit better about the world, just hearing the other man admit it.

“But he is a member of my pride,” Arslan went on. “And all members of a pride are answerable to their leader.”

Ellery met his eyes across the hearthrug. The difference between being answerable to someone and belonging to someone was far too subtle to find favor with him, right then. He longed to be back in a nice, simple human club, with humans who made sense and who understood all the usual rules.

If Kefir had been human it would have been so easy. As it was... Ellery took a deep breath and forced himself to be patient. Kefir was worth it.

“His future mate, whoever that proves to be, would also be considered a member of the pride,” Arslan mentioned, almost casually, as he leaned back a little more comfortably in his chair.

“And therefore also considered answerable to you?” Ellery asked, raising an eyebrow at the idea.

The lion seemed to think about that for a long time. He wanted to blurt out a simple yes. Ellery could see the tension building in his muscles as he fought against the urge. “In certain respects,” the shifter eventually decided.

“Namely?” Ellery said, in much the same taunted tone of voice.

“Lions are traditionally considered responsible for their mates—for making sure they treat them with respect and kindness. To make sure that they don’t hurt a weaker man, by accident or design.”

“I think it’s safe to say that’s not something you have to concern yourself with in Kefir’s case,” Ellery bit out.

“Kefir will be held to the same standards as any other lion,” Arslan said firmly. He’d steepled his fingers in front of him when he put his book down. The fingertips turned white as they pressed together. “Although, I acknowledge there may be less need for him to be reminded of such concerns than there has been with other members of the pride.”

Ellery nodded for him to continue.

“The difference, perhaps, would be that his mate is the one who could so easily hurt him. He may not be the weaker man, but perhaps he’s the man with the more yielding spirit.” Arslan’s voice turned more serious than ever. “The pride will not allow him to be harmed.”

“I’d be held to the same standard as a lion?” Ellery asked. The idea held a curious appeal. If the lions were the doms, then he had no interest in being treated like a human sub. A light seemed to be switched on at the end of the tunnel.

“I’ve found there are humans who can achieve such standards in various ways,” Arslan said.

He sounded so bloody shocked at the revelation. Ellery found his hand tightening into a fist at his side as he reminded himself how upset Kefir would be if his master throttled his leader. It was just possible the light in the tunnel belonged to an oncoming train.

“I’ve no objection to Kefir’s pride wishing to see him safe and happy with his mate,” he snapped, with increasingly forced politeness.

“The pride would see no need to interfere in whatever understanding he reached with his mate, unless we thought one of you was in danger.”

“Reasonable,” Ellery allowed.

Arslan nodded, he seemed more than a little smug right then, as if a difficult and complicated procedure had been undertaken successfully, and that victory was all down to him.

“You realize, of course, that his mate would expect to have a similar scope, when it came to his protection.”

The lion blinked.

“You’re the leader of this pride. I’ve no interest in challenging that.” Ellery pitched the tone of his announcement carefully. It wouldn’t do to let the other man think he was incapable, far better to inform him that he was merely uninterested.

Arslan rose, apparently no longer content to sit while another man stood tall in his presence.

The very suggestion that he could present a challenge was obviously enough to set him on edge. When Ellery wanted nothing more than to let his own hackles rise in response and have out with him, he forced himself to be practical.

“You said that in lion tradition, a lion looks after his mate. In my tradition, it’s a master’s duty to look after his submissive. I’ll respect your ways, providing the courtesy is returned.”

“Meaning?” Arslan snapped.

“The pride’s yours to control. Do your job and I won’t have to step in and set any of the brats in their place.”

Arslan paused then, not so much a hesitation as a slight rethinking of his current perception of the world. “You heard about Luther and Blaine’s...foolishness?”

“Kefir told me,” Ellery said. “Immediately.”

Arslan remained silent as he fitted that into his mental map of the situation too. “You have no need to be afraid of—”

“I won’t have Kefir upset by their stupidity,” Ellery cut in, no longer making any attempt to restrain his anger. “If you don’t take your pride properly in hand, I will.”

He saw the light slowly dawn in the shifter’s eyes. Any idea that he was worried about himself seemed to fade away. What replaced them looked suspiciously like a seedling of respect.

Kefir had been upset. He’d taken his concerns to his master, and they’d been dealt with. Anyone who upset the little lion in the future would be dealt with too.

Arslan turned and walked away from him then, across to a set of decanters tucked away safely in a side board on the far side of the room out of range of Luther and Blaine’s roughhousing. He poured dark amber liquid into two glasses and carried them across to Ellery.

“I believe it’s a human tradition to toast when an understanding has been reached.” He handed Ellery a glass.

Taking it from the lion, Ellery held it up and let the light shine through the liquid. Touching the rim of their glasses together, he waited politely for Arslan to lift his drink to his lips first.

The shifter tossed the contents back the same way a child might swallow down some foul tasting medicine, in the hope he might be able to make it jump over his tongue and miss his taste buds all together.

Ellery sipped cautiously at his own drink, wary now of what might be in it. Brandy slid past his lips, full and rich and undeniably superior to any he had tasted in the past. It caressed its way down the dominant’s throat like molten perfection. He took another sip, holding it in his mouth to savor it, warmth embracing his tongue as the brandy danced on his taste buds.

It obviously wasn’t to a lion’s taste. A nod toward humanity, perhaps. Ellery smiled slightly over his glass, as Arslan quickly set his own empty vessel aside. Unwilling to rush such fine liquor, he continued to appreciate it while the other man alternated his attention between him and the fire.

He’d only just finished the last drop when he felt someone other than the shifter watching him. At the same instant, he saw Arslan look over his shoulder.

Kefir stood in the doorway, his eyes darting from his master to his leader and back again.

Ellery nodded for him to approach. He slipped easily into the gap between his master’s arm and his body, more sure of his welcome at his lover’s side than any human submissive Ellery had ever set eyes on.

“The food’s ready, sir,” he whispered.

The leader of the shifters obviously had bloody good hearing. Arslan nodded to them both, before walking briskly out of the room, leaving them alone together.

“Are you under the impression I need a babysitter, kitten?”

Kefir shook his head, but the concerned little line between his eyebrows didn’t fade.

Ellery dipped his head and brought their lips together. His hands settled on Kefir’s back, holding him close. He felt the younger man tense as their mouths met. He pulled away just a fraction, before quickly leaning back into the kiss.

The kitten licked delicately at his master’s lips. For a moment, he seemed to be trying to take control of the kiss. Ellery’s grip tightened on him. He was just about to reach for his wrist and remind him exactly who was in command of the situation when he realized he was being an idiot.

Apparently there were lions who liked some human tastes more than others. Kefir purred his pleasure at the second hand taste of fine brandy. Ellery smiled as he let him explore his mouth, wondering just how many other things he had yet to be introduced to. He made a mental note to acquire some to toast with after the collaring ceremony he was about to arrange.

Chapter Fifteen

Kefir sat very still on the edge of the group of lions, studying the other shifters. He'd watched the other members of the pride, and their mates, so many times, but he hadn't really understood any of it.

As Ellery stepped through the door, the atmosphere in the den changed. Kefir got it now. He understood the way the other lions smiled when the men they loved walked into their lives.

Ellery's eyes ran over the room. He always did that, as if he thought every space needed to be checked for threats, or maybe for other dominants, before he could rest easily there. But his attention eventually settled on his submissive, just as it always did. His expression lightened when their eyes finally met.

Pulling himself up off the rug in front of the fire, Kefir went immediately to his master's side.

"Did you have a good day, sir?"

Ellery nodded as they brushed their lips together. He didn't taste the same way he had when he'd caught him speaking to Arslan. His lips were still perfect, but that touch of something else that had lingered there that day wasn't back. The slight scent of leather and petrol was all present and correct though. It clung to Ellery's bare skin in exactly the same way it always did when he first came home to...to his pet. Kefir smiled slightly as he applied the word to himself.

He was allowed to call himself that now, and not feel like he was letting his leader down every damn time. Kefir leaned into his lover's body as the taller man stood up straight and took his lips out of range. Burying his face in the older man's shoulder, he couldn't help but try to soak up his scent, his feel, everything about him.

"Kitten?"

Kefir managed to make a little sound in the back of his throat to let the other man know he was listening and wanted to hear whatever he had to say, but that didn't seem to be enough.

Ellery made him lift his head.

"Tell your master what's wrong."

"Nothing, sir."

He didn't believe him. Kefir knew that without the older man needing to say a word. A slightly different look in his eyes was all it took to make his submissive aware of Ellery's moods. His master had good instincts when it came to his pet's disposition, too.

Kefir took a deep breath as his fingertips traced along the other man's skin. "You said that if I did something wrong, you'd punish me. But afterward it would be forgotten about and everything would be okay again," he reminded him.

Ellery continued to stare down at him, his expression growing more serious by the moment. "Have you done something wrong?"

"No, sir." *Not yet.*

The rest of the pride tumbled into the room. A car crunched over the gravel in the driveway just a second later, heralding the arrival of that week's sacrifice.

Ellery glared at the world around them as if its very existence offended him. He began to lead Kefir out of the room.

Planting his bare feet as firmly as he could on the carpet, Kefir stopped them both short. Ellery looked over his shoulder at him, askance, as he seemed to realize that, just this once, his lover was reluctant to follow meekly in his wake.

"May we stay for the meeting, sir?"

Ellery looked at the men around them. "Respecting your traditions is one thing, kitten. Letting you hide behind them is another."

Kefir shook his head, denying any such inclination. "I'll make sense later, sir."

Ellery didn't look happy about receiving the request, let alone granting it.

Kefir scrambled for something to say that might make his lover change his mind.

"Promise?"

For all their differences, the word seemed to have the same effect on Ellery as it did on Marrick when Luther or Blaine said it to him. It was obviously an important word for humans. They took people seriously when they said it.

Ellery still didn't seem thrilled, but he finally stopped trying to leave the room. If a degree of tension remained in his muscles, and a little suspicion lingered in his eyes as he looked at the other members of the pride, then at least he didn't try to stop Kefir from curling up close to him on one of the big leather sofas, as the sacrifice was made welcome on the hearthrug.

His master let him remain snuggled up against his side, with his hands stroking idly over his skin as they watched the others play with their temporary pet. Kefir didn't want a temporary pet. He burrowed a little closer into his master's side. He didn't want a pet at all.

He could still feel the tension in the older man's body, but Ellery didn't try to question him about his nervousness. His promise still seemed to be keeping the other man's curiosity at bay.

In what felt like mere seconds, the food was brought in and eaten. Arslan seemed to begin his talks with the lions in his pride just moments later. And Kefir knew it would only be a matter of minutes before he'd be called upon to speak.

He hated himself for it, but part of him hoped that one of his friends would be in trouble and need to ask the leader for his help and advice—anything that would delay the older lion's attention turning toward him.

“Kefir is there anything you wish to say?”

And suddenly, he didn't have any more time to worry or doubt what he was about to do. His heart raced faster than ever, but somehow Kefir managed to nod, his cheek moving against his master's shoulder with the gesture.

Ellery's tension doubled. His scent signaled that he was less impressed with the world than ever. When Kefir sat up and pulled away from him, he caught sight of the older man's expression out of the corner of his eye. It took every scrap of courage he knew he had in him, and more, to stand up and move even further away from his lover.

He stood on the rug for a moment, his gaze on Arslan. Their eyes met. The older lion's expression betrayed nothing. There was neither approval nor disapproval there. Very slowly, Kefir turned his back on the rest of his pride, and looked toward his master.

Ellery stared up at him, his eyes full of questions. It felt wrong, standing over him that way, as if he was trying to loom the way some of the larger lions did. Kefir gradually lowered himself to his knees, just a few inches away from his master's feet.

He doubted the move was as practiced or as perfect as some of the humans at the clubs were capable of, but he gave his master what he could of a world he was used to, fitting it in to what was going to happen that night as best he could. He'd have done anything to give himself a better chance of success.

For what felt like a lifetime, their eyes remained locked, the whole room stayed silent. In that moment, he had no doubt he was making a mistake. Masters did this, not pets. The fact he was a lion was suddenly irrelevant.

“You said you have something to say?” Ellery prompted.

Kefir nodded. But he couldn't get the words out. If his master said no that night, he knew there might be another chance to ask him in the future. Humans didn't always say yes first time. He'd seen evidence of that himself. But he wanted Ellery to say yes to him, so badly. He wanted his master to accept him so desperately he could barely breathe.

The dominant moved forward in his chair. A slight frown grew across his forehead as he reached out and stroked his fingers along Kefir's jaw. Turning his head toward his master's hand, Kefir gently lapped at his skin.

The moment he tasted the other man on his tongue, the words rose to his lips. “If you come to us willingly and of your own free will, with no thought for your own gain and only wishing to add to the pride, then you are welcome.”

He couldn't look up at his master. He whispered the invitation into his hand instead.

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

Another lick against Ellery's skin and he managed to lift his gaze for a moment. When he would have looked down, Ellery fingers moved out of range of his tongue, to tuck beneath his chin and keep him looking up.

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

He had to swallow then, to work some moisture into his throat.

His master nodded to him, encouraging him on, even while his expression was unreadable and Kefir remained clueless as to what his answer would ultimately be, if he was ruining everything by trying to play the master.

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

Kefir took a deep breath and dipped his face toward his master's body. Ellery's hand slipped around to the back of his head. The fingers threaded through his hair, holding him close and safe against the larger man's skin.

His master's heartbeat echoed through him as Kefir rested against his chest.

"Yes."

That was all the older man said.

Lifting his head, Kefir peeked up at him.

No questions, no hesitation, no need to ask a second time just... 'yes'.

A smile twisted his master's lips. "Did you really think there was any chance I'd say no?"

Kefir simply snuggled into the other man's body again as the reminder of the fear that chance had created inside him echoed along his spine again. He could have said no. He could have said a pet had no right to even ask. Kefir nodded.

"Silly little kitten." Ellery's gentle chuckle reverberated through him as well as the larger man, making him smile against his lover's chest.

The dominant let him rest there for a while, before gently nudging him to lift his head. "Your friends are waiting to congratulate you, kitten."

Kefir looked over his shoulder. All the commotion that usually came with such an announcement hadn't descended on the room, but he could feel the other lions' attention on him. He rose and turned toward the center of the room.

All at once, everyone else was on their feet too, with hugs and good wishes. The whole pride seemed to swirl around him, and through it all, he was aware of his master's gaze tracking his every movement, watching over him in a way that wasn't the least bit necessary, but which still felt very nice all the same.

"You're sure he'll look after you?" Luther asked, skeptically, as he pulled back from the hug he'd offered him.

Kefir blinked at him, at the other lion's apparent acceptance of the fact Ellery liked to be the one who did the looking after.

"He will," Ellery said, from right behind Kefir. The larger man slid his arm around his waist and pulled him away from the other lion, back to rest against his master's body.

Kefir leaned into him. Ellery was hard again. The knowledge made Kefir purr.

"Later," his master whispered into his ear.

Turning within his embrace, Kefir looked up at him, wondering what he had done wrong, what could possibly make the other man not want to do everything there was in the world right at that very moment.

“When you’re home, in your master’s bed,” Ellery whispered to him.

“Your home, sir?” Kefir asked, just a little shy, still not entirely sure how a human dominant might intend things to be between them.

“Your home, too,” Ellery corrected, tucking his fingers under Kefir’s collar.

Kefir nodded his understanding.

“We’ll just take a few of the things you have here with us tonight. We’ll have to bring a car to pick up everything you want to take to your new home from your flat tomorrow.”

Kefir nodded again.

Ellery seemed to be waiting for him to make some sort of comment, but he had no idea what the other man might want him to say.

“Prides don’t interfere between mates until there’s serious cause for concern. If you’re waiting for someone to object to Kefir leaving with you, you may find yourself lingering here for a very long time.”

Kefir turned to see Arslan standing next to them, a slight smile on his lips.

“Congratulations,” the leader said to him. He glanced at Kefir’s mate too. “To you both.”

Ellery reached out and shook the other man’s hand.

Kefir was quite sure that there was something passing between them that he didn’t really understand. It didn’t feel like he needed to understand it right then. The little lion smiled slightly. He had enough to do, making sure he understood everything that was going on between him and his master. Everyone else in the pride would just have to take care of themselves for a little while.

Only a few more minutes had passed between them, when Kefir saw his master looking toward the door.

“The sacrifice has already left, sir.” He’d seen Luther and Blaine lead him out to the car a few minutes before.

Ellery raised an eyebrow.

Kefir cleared his throat. “The pride is expected to remain here while the sacrifice is in the den. No one would think us rude if you wanted to leave now.”

Ellery chuckled, and sent him out of the room with a tap on the bottom. It didn't take either of them long to pull on their clothes and throw a few of their other possessions into Ellery's pack.

Before Kefir knew it, he was on the back of Ellery's motorcycle, clinging tightly to his master as they sped toward his new home. If anything, the older man seemed to ride even faster that night than before.

The air whipped against them. The engine roared, sending vibrations singing through Kefir's body. His fingers fisted against Ellery's leather jacket. Behind the visor on the borrowed helmet, he closed his eyes tight and concentrated very hard on keeping his claws to himself and leaving the leather unmarked.

As the bike pulled up outside an old house on the far side of town, Ellery lifted him off the machine and set him neatly on the pavement. Kefir's legs weren't very steady beneath him. They still seemed to shudder in time with the vibrations that had purred through the bike, and with the nerves that swirled inside him too.

He remained upright as he followed his master up a path to a front door, but he wasn't sure how.

"Would you like a tour, kitten?" the older man asked, as he dropped the latch and sealed them into their new home.

Kefir nodded.

Ellery's hand came to rest on the small of his back as he led Kefir through the house. It wasn't a sprawling maze of rooms like the pride's den, but it was Ellery's—Kefir could feel the dominant's presence in every inch of it. The older man seemed to fill the whole place. The scent of leather seemed to wind through it all, with just an underlying hint of petrol and oil.

Kitchen. Living room. Kefir took in every detail, relishing the look the other man was giving him into his life. It was all perfect, except for the fact that the more the little lion studied the space around him, the more aware he became of the fact it wasn't quite as full of Ellery as he first thought. As Kefir walked around the house, he couldn't help but notice that there was something missing from the picture he was getting of his master's life.

There were shelves that were empty. There was an empty wardrobe in the bedroom, an empty space on one side of the shelf above the bathroom sink. In the office Ellery had set up in

one of the spare bedrooms, so he could do his paperwork from the bike shop at home, there was a practically empty desk. An empty filing cabinet stood next to all the overflowing ones.

There was a void in Ellery's life, but it didn't feel like a space that had been left empty for long. There was no dust on the bare shelves. The gaps had the new feeling of something that had only recently been created.

There were two notebooks on the otherwise empty desk. Kefir glanced toward them. A moment later, he was standing directly in front of the desk. A family tree was roughly sketched out on the top page of one of the pads. Ellery's name was listed there, along with a great many other Elleries.

It was his master's family line.

Kefir tore his gaze away from it and looked at the other page. There was a heading at the top of that one. *Clubs where Cameron/Caramel might be working*. The first few were already ticked off.

He'd promised to help Kefir find the missing lion. He was keeping his promise.

And he'd been listening when he'd told him about adding information about human mates to the information he was gathering on the prides too. He'd made out his family tree for him, as if he knew he was going to be his mate. And he'd left the information there on the desk for him to find, as if he knew he'd be visiting that room.

Kefir turned back to his master.

Ellery spoke before the lion could find a single word. "Tour's not quite over yet." He walked out of the office.

As Ellery led him into another room, Kefir quickly found himself looking for spaces the other man might have in there. For the first time, the shifter didn't find any. The room was full. There were no gaps that needed to be filled.

He couldn't help but feel a little sad about that.

Chapter Sixteen

Ellery bit back a smile. His newly acquired kitten looked thoroughly fascinated by his new surroundings—the vanilla bits and pieces as much as the hints of leather dotted around the house. As Kefir stood in the middle of the playroom there wasn't any vanilla for him to rest his eyes on. It was all leather in there. All kink.

As Kefir's eyes ran over the rack of toys on the far wall, Ellery leaned against the door frame and admired the picture he created, sweet and clueless in the middle of it all.

The younger man's curiosity might as well have been a flashing red light above his head.

"If you have a question, ask it," Ellery ordered.

"You knew what was going to happen tonight, sir?" Kefir asked, as he looked over his shoulder toward the rest of the house.

There were a lot of questions he expected the kitten to put to him. He even had answers mentally prepared for some of the more important ones, but that query hadn't even made his list of possibilities.

"Meaning?" Ellery prompted, as he leaned back against the workbench that ran down one side of the room.

"You made a space for me out there, sir." He looked back to the rest of the house again.

Ellery didn't try to deny it. A good master didn't lie to his submissives, not about the important things. "I knew I wanted you here," he told him. "But, no, I didn't know you'd be here tonight."

He might not have had his chance to invite the boy into his life with a formal collaring ceremony the way he planned, and he might have found himself in the submissive's role, not

able to do anything more than give his consent to someone else's offer, but he couldn't bring himself to regret any of that right then.

Kefir was in his home. Ceremonies could wait. Details weren't important.

The space he'd made in his life would have still been there waiting for the younger man, no matter how long it took. It hadn't even occurred to him to doubt that in what felt like forever. The timing might have been feline. His need to have him there eventually, and his desire to be ready for him when that day came, was undeniably human.

"But not in here, sir?" Kefir asked, his voice softer than ever.

Ellery looked around the room. There were no shelves that had been cleared. That much was true. But a space he'd been made for him. Mostly by cancelling any upcoming play dates he had planned with other men, and making it clear that he wouldn't be available to play with them in the future. Kefir didn't need to know that.

"By human tradition, dominants don't make room for their submissive's toys—they make room for their new submissive to join them in playing with those toys they already own."

Kefir's eyes ran over the room again, and Ellery knew he was fitting himself into the picture. Imagining his wrists in the cuffs, his eyes behind the blindfolds, his skin under the paddles. Without saying a word, he turned and walked across the room toward him.

Kneeling in front of his master's feet, Kefir looked up at him, eyes very serious as he seemed to wait for his lover to reach out and pet him.

"Tell me what you want," Ellery ordered, his thumbs still hooked into the loops on his jeans.

Kefir shook his head, a slow determined motion, never once breaking eye contact with him.

Ellery raised an eyebrow.

"You said I wasn't allowed to ask for that, sir," the kitten reminded him. "You said that was my master's decision."

Ellery smiled as he gave in and ran his hand through the younger man's hair in quiet praise for such determined obedience. A few seconds passed, and his touch trailed down to his collar. He was a good submissive, with a little bit of training, he could be fantastic.

"This will never come off now." He reminded the younger man, just for the joy of hearing the words said aloud.

Kefir hesitated for a moment. “Never, sir?”

“You have a problem with that?”

Kefir thought about it. Part of Ellery tensed at the very idea he should need to think about it, but somehow he forced himself to wait while the shifter worked out what he wanted to say.

“A lion’s neck is bigger than a human’s, sir.”

Ellery ran his fingers inside the submissive’s collar. As much as the more possessive part of him hated to admit it, the boy probably had a point. Reaching out into his pocket, Ellery took out a key and unlocked the padlock to let the collar lie open around his neck.

He nodded to the submissive. Ellery had no doubt that he understood the silent order, but Kefir still didn’t shift forms immediately.

“My clothes, sir?”

Ellery allowed him permission to take them off, but even when he stood naked in the middle of the play room, it seemed to take him a few minutes to build up the courage to shift in front of his master. When it finally began, the process was seamless.

Within seconds, an honest to God lion looked up at Ellery, big brown eyes wearing the same serious expression Kefir was so fond of. Reaching out, Ellery scratched the rather large feline behind the ear, just as he would any other kitten.

Kefir came cautiously closer, and rubbed his side against Ellery’s leg, just like a tabby—albeit a tabby who was almost strong enough to accidentally knock over his master. Crouching down, Ellery ran his hands over the lion’s fur, examining him carefully. A huge, rough tongue caressed his hand when it came in range of his mouth.

The submissive nuzzled against him, rubbing his forehead against his master’s body as he looked for reassurance and comfort, no different in his feline form than the human.

As his fingers ran over the kitten’s head and down to his neck, the dominant found the collar nestled between the longer fur where the lion’s mane was just starting to grow in and Ellery remembered what he was supposed to be doing. If he’d tried to shift when it was locked, he’d have either choked himself or broken his collar. Neither outcome was acceptable. Frowning slightly to himself as he turned his complete attention to the problem before him, Ellery rose to his feet, collar in hand.

He took a step forward. Kefir did the same.

“Stay.”

Ellery walked away. His submissive stayed where he was. The lion mewed a little, as if he didn't like being left behind, much less left behind without his collar, but Ellery resolutely ignored the call back to his lover's side. It wouldn't do to let his submissive, even one with as sweet a temper as Kefir's, think he could be summoned to heel that easily.

On the other side of the playroom, he took out an extra length of chain. A little bit of rummaging around in his toolbox and a few appropriate fixings were found and fastened in place. Carrying them back to Kefir he knelt down in front of him and silently fixed the collar around his neck once more.

Never a man to find himself short of an order under normal circumstances, he found himself unsure how to command his lover.

"Show your master the other side of you, kitten," he settled on.

Kefir obeyed.

Ellery's attention remained on the collar as the more familiar version of his lover appeared before him. The extra length of chain hung down around his neck like a fancy necklace. A circular loop was fastened to one end, a bar to the other. Pulling more of the chain through the loop, Ellery doubled the links around the submissive's neck, bringing them back to the loop again and fixing it in place. When the padlock was clicked onto it, it was more decoration than anything else.

Ellery weighed the lump of metal in his palm. The extra weight would remind Kefir of the collar's presence, it added a bit of extra psychological weight to the collar too. He left it where it was.

Kefir looked up at him, blinking his eyes as he seemed to struggle to regain his focus through entirely human eyes. "Sir?" he finally managed, his voice more like a purr than ever.

Ellery caressed the hair just behind his ear again, in exactly the same way as he had when he was a lion. That made the little kitten smile. Kefir reached up and touched his collar.

"If you forget to alter the catch before you shift, the bar doubling it up will give way, but the main catch will hold strong. It won't fall off completely." He joined Kefir in running his fingers over it again. "You didn't think that changing shapes would stop your master letting the whole world know who you belong to, did you?"

A lick to his hand, from a comparably dainty human sized tongue was the only answer he received.

“You were going to tell your master what you want,” Ellery reminded him. “You’re allowed to answer me if I ask you.”

Kefir parted his lips, but he didn’t seem to be able to find the right words. Ellery let him struggle against his innocence for a while, curious to see what he’d come up with.

“I want...you, sir,” the kitten finally whispered. “I want you to...to tie me up, or screw me, or spank me, to do whatever you want with me.” He thought a little bit more. ”Be my master, sir?”

Ellery smiled down at him. It still wasn’t quite the collaring ceremony he had planned. He was still the one doing the accepting rather than the asking, but there was no way he could do anything other than nod his complete approval.

Wrapping his hand around the smaller man’s wrist, he held onto him tightly as he looked around the room and considered his options. So many toys, so many bindings he could choose, and not just in the playroom.

Kefir would look stunning locked in the cage under the glass topped table in the dining room, big brown eyes staring at his master through the bars. The St. Andrew’s cross set up next to the television in the living room cried out to be brought in to play. The eye hook above the bath only needed a pair of cuffs attached to it to be a perfect proposition.

There’d been other men he’d looked at and wanted to do everything with, all at the same time. But there hadn’t been other men he needed to bring into his home and make a part of every room, a part of the very fabric of his life. It was a slightly terrifying realization.

Still grasping the younger man’s wrist, Ellery led him out of the playroom into the hallway.

A sling was set up on the landing at the top of the stairs, where the man restrained by it would be visible to anyone who entered the front door, or ventured out of any room along the landing. It put the submissive who was bound by it, at the very center of the house, of Ellery’s world.

Perfect.

Ellery led his submissive to the web of leather and chain without a word. Kefir tilted his head on one side as he looked it over, apparently entirely clueless about what he was looking at. Polite curiosity flashed across his face as he looked up to his master for more information.

When Ellery picked him up, there was no sign of uncertainty, no hesitation, just complete trust in his master. As he sat him down on the seat of the sling, Kefir made no attempt to cling to him. He let his master slip away from beneath his hands, completely confident that his lover would soon come back to him, that he wouldn't leave him anywhere where he wouldn't be perfectly safe.

Running his hands over the submissive's bare skin, Ellery began to put the buckles and fastenings around his limbs, locking him in place, ensuring he'd always be safe and content, exactly where his master wanted him. With every restraint he added, something inside Ellery settled a little further, the world became a little more perfect.

“Gorgeous.”

The kitten smiled at the compliment, apparently still entirely unaware how true the label was.

A small leather bag of supplies hung from one of the sling's supports. Lube was quickly retrieved and spread onto Ellery's fingers. As two digits began to slowly work their way into Kefir's hole, the dominant's other equally slicked hand wrapped around the shifter's cock. Kefir was half hard from the first. Within seconds he was stiff and curving back toward his stomach.

If the mews and whimpers that soon filled the landing were anything to go by, the little lion really enjoyed being jacked by a lube coated hand. Kefir rocked as much as he was able to within the sling's restraints, but all he really succeeded in doing was setting the whole contraption swaying and rattling around him.

His eyes were open very wide as he stared down his body, watching his master's fist move around his cock. Ellery's own shaft ached inside his jeans. Tearing his hand away from the submissive, he wrenched open his fly and allowed himself the pleasure of the same slick touch from his other hand.

The height of the sling was perfect. All he needed to do was lean forward an inch or two and the tip of his cock kissed against the submissive's hole. Research done and dutifully double checked, he knew there was no need to have anything between them, and right then he'd never been more thankful for anything in his life. Kefir was his, and nothing would ever come between them.

He slid into the younger man in one slow movement, sheathing himself to the hilt. Stilling inside the submissive, Ellery held himself steady, staring down into the little lion's eyes.

“Move for your master, kitten,” he ordered, his voice rough with his own lust.

Kefir blinked at him. There was little he could really do, but he tried, Ellery had no doubt of that. He tried. He even managed to set the swing swaying in such a way as he started to move around his master’s cock.

As beautiful a picture as he presented, Ellery didn’t leave him struggling for too long. One swift movement, and he took all the control back from him. He saw the joy rush across the submissive’s face as his master claimed him, and he knew it wasn’t just physical pleasure. He loved belonging to his master.

Kefir loved giving up control as much as his master enjoyed taking over control of him. As Ellery pushed into him again and again, he saw the submissive bliss flash across Kefir’s face.

Neither of them lasted long. The moment was too pure, too perfect for that. Kefir was soon spilling over his stomach, dragging Ellery over the edge with him a moment later, into a place where only ecstasy existed.

It took him a long time to blink open his eyes and leave that world as it finally started to fade away and let him return to a reality that was just as gorgeous as the fantasy.

It was a dominant’s duty to take care of his submissive and see that nothing ever truly hurt him, Ellery had known that for an entire lifetime. Just like it had been his duty to throw himself to the lions, so he could be sure that the club’s submissives were being well treated by the shifters. His duty now was to his own submissive.

He checked each patch of Kefir’s skin as he released him from his bindings.

Lifting the little lion out of the sling once he was satisfied, Ellery carried him into the master bedroom. As they collapsed on the mattress together, Ellery found his submissive was already sleepy and snuggly with satisfaction.

It wasn’t just afterglow, it was everything being settled and complete. It was knowing that they were mates, and mates never left. Ellery felt it sing in his own veins, too.

Pulling up the blanket as he spooned behind him, Ellery held the smaller man close. He was as warm and tactile as ever. Sleep started to dance around the edges of the dominant’s mind. But still, part of him remained wide awake. Details played over in his mind as he automatically tried to check that all was well with the world.

It was. For the first time since he was thrown to the lions, it felt as if he really was permitted to rest easy for a little while.

It was a master's duty to ensure any man that he took under his protection was well looked after and content in his submission, that he was loved and knew he was loved. Duty was more important than sleep. Kefir purred and arched against him as the little lion started to drift off.

The dominant tightened his hold on the kitten a little further and let sleep seep into his mind, confident that all was well with the submissive. Ellery smiled into the darkness as slumber finally claimed him. Doing his duty had never been so much fun.

About the Author

Kim Dare is a twenty-seven year old, fulltime writer from Wales (UK). First published in December 2008, Kim has since released over thirty BDSM erotic romances.

While the stories range from male/male, male/female to all kinds of ménage relationships and have included vampires, time travellers, shape-shifters and fairytale retellings, they all have three things in common—kink, love and a happy ending.

Published since 2008, Kim also writes BDSM erotic romances for Total-e-bound.

Kim loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.kimdare.com.

*Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing*

***Ryland's Sacrifice* by Kim Dare**

Principles don't pay tuition fees. When Ryland's math scholarship disappears overnight, he has two choices. He can borrow money from fellow student Jason Burrows, who has very interesting ways of collecting debts. Or, he can volunteer to be thrown to the werelions.

One night spent playing the part of a willing human sacrifice will give him enough money to finish his PhD. It seems like a good deal-right up until the moment he finds himself naked, blindfolded, bound and surrounded by lions.

***Marrick's Promise* by Kim Dare**

Marrick thinks that being thrown to the lions will be the ultimate adrenaline rush, and he's not disappointed. But his plan is to try everything life has to offer once. He has no intention of visiting the lions again.

Blaine and Luther don't expect to give any of the human sacrifices they share another thought once they leave the den. This man's different. They have no intention of letting this one go. The only question is, while they are willing to share Marrick with each other, are they willing to share each other with a human who could become as important to each of them as they are to each other?

***Extinction* by Carol Lynne**

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Mind F*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing
The *Not Quite Wicked* Series

***Wolf in Men's Clothing* by Dakota Rebel**

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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