



BLOOD OF A Leo

SOLOMON'S PRIDE, BOOK 1

DAWN H. HAWKES

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book to my very good friend Liv.

Thank you for your support and always hearing me out when I'm rambling about my current writings and ideas. Also a great thank you for leading me on the path that got me to this book's title.

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Pepto-Bismal: Proctor & Gamble

CHAPTER 1

Over the past few months Leo had stopped fighting completely. He no longer had the strength to do so. It wasn't like he had been strong enough to prevent the vampires from taking him in the first place, so why even try to fight now?

Even now, a vampire with a face full of scars currently had his fangs deep in Leo's jugular, pulling large amounts of blood from his throat to the beast's mouth. Leo hurt and could hardly breathe like this, but at least the drugs they kept feeding him dulled the pain some...

He remembered the first few times they'd taken his blood; he would scream till the pain caused him to pass out. But now, swirling colors of pink and yellow tried desperately to comfort him as they deprived him of death and rest yet again.

Every time they fed on him, he prayed they would drink just a little too much so he'd finally be able to rest and just fade into the afterlife and not have to live the hell that he did now... But his master always stepped in and pulled them off before anyone went too far... every damn time.

All the vampire donors had a master, a kind of primary feeder who would keep them like pets for whatever needs they might have. Mostly, they were simply kept for their blood, but sometimes, also for the vampire's other... needs.

His first master, Kerrigan, had been a brutal beast, even by vampire standards. One who really got a kick out of violating him as he fed, leaving his body in ruins and Leo begging for it to end. Kerrigan had been a violent and cruel master and Leo had cried tears of relief when someone announced Kerrigan had been killed by an enemy on one of his trips in the field.

As a sought after donor due to a rare sweetness in his blood, he'd been handed over to Mika later that very same day. As Kerrigan's right hand, he now became the new leader of this group of vampires. And the owner of all of Kerrigan's previous possessions.

Mika had a reputation for being just as cruel as Leo's previous master in battle. Whenever Mika fed from him, he felt like his throat was being ripped open, the tendons stretched to the breaking point even *with* the drugs. Hell, Mika usually upped his doses whenever he fed on him, just so Leo wouldn't scream so damn much when trying to get his high through Leo's drug filled blood.

Still, Mika was a far better master than the one before him. At least Mika never touched him, except to hold him still while he fed. That was even worth the humiliation of being kept on a leash.

"Enough, Tack!" Mika snarled as he yanked off the scarred vampire. The fangs tore even more at Leo's flesh as the vampire was forced away from his feeding bag.

Leo was barely conscious, the vampire had taken a lot of blood and Leo was having trouble getting up, not that the drugs helped any. He struggled to get to the glass of water on the table next to him, but he couldn't seem to get a proper hold on the couch and slid to the ground with a soft thump.

He whimpered, but he managed to get himself to the table, holding onto it as he reached for the drink. Leo felt so incredibly parched, he almost cried out when Mika tipped over the glass, spilling the precious liquid.

"You'll drink when I say you drink." Mika laughed at him.

Tears burned Leo's eyes, "Please," he rasped out, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Mika chuckled and filled another glass, Leo eyeing the liquid as it poured slowly into the glass. "Now, blood-bag, how bad do you really want this?" he asked as he mockingly took a sip of the cool water.

Leo wanted to sob, but knew tears would only entice Mika to torture him further. On his knees, he crawled over to the vampire and hesitantly stretched out his arm in front of the man. Tonight, he knew Mika would feed; it didn't matter that Leo had already been drained twice that day.

The vampire smirked as he took out the syringe from his inside pocket and filled it with a new, unfamiliar

blue liquid. Holding Leo's arm tightly, Mika inserted the needle into a well-used vein, leaving behind another small mark that easily disappeared amongst a crowd of dozen identical ones. "Good boy." Mika smirked as he petted Leo's head.

Leo moaned and greedily drank down the water when Mika finally pressed the glass to his chapped lips. The water provided some much needed moisture to his throat. Though swallowing was still painful, the water brought him as close to ambrosia as Leo had ever been.

Apparently in a good mood tonight, Mika even refilled the glass and let Leo drink his fill again; a very unusual gesture.

Finished, Leo felt tired. His body felt strained from the last feeding—a reward to one of Mika's minions for some information he'd gathered—details about a weapons shipment or something. Whatever new drug Mika had given him, he was beginning to feel more than a little dizzy, but at least the water had helped some.

Barely able to move, Leo protested as Mika got up and began tugging him along, but the vampire wouldn't have any of that. A particularly harsh tug had him dragging Leo behind him like some little girl's ragdoll. Leo gasped for air as the collar closed around his neck and choked him. He struggled to get to his feet but Mika moved too fast

for him to get up. Somehow, he did manage to get up in a half crawl which at least let him breathe a little bit easier.

"I'm having company over tonight," Mika informed him. He was still being dragged through a dark and depressingly lit hallway, the floor littered with broken glass that cut into Leo's knees and palms. "You'll feed both of us, and then I'll have Shamus take you over to stay at the den for the rest of the evening."

The 'den' was a smaller part of the compound and a little out of the way compared to the main buildings. Most likely, the den was part of an old asylum. Some of the cramped holding cells were even padded like those in an insane asylum. The people kept there were mostly donors, as well as others who were slaves of some type— either for labor or for power.

Leo really liked it there, despite the armed, despicable guards present every hour of every day. Still, he liked the people because they were prisoners just like him, showing him he wasn't alone in this. Besides, some quality time in the den also meant a break from the excessive bloodletting, but Mika seldom let him stay there for long... not unless...

"What? Who?" Leo managed to squeeze out, when he'd gathered up enough oxygen to do so. He'd already lost too much blood that day; he had major doubts he would

have enough left to sate Mika's hunger, let alone him *and* somebody else.

"She is not your concern; just make sure the drugs are well circulated through your body for later." The vampire sneered, easily annoyed by the blood-bag's whining nature.

Her? Shit! Please, *please*, don't let it be Christa. She always took too much, too fast and tore at his neck like some kind of starved vampire on steroids.

Leo lost his footing again, not because of the dragging this time, but because the new dose of whatever the hell Mika had given him had kicked in big time. Somewhere, something snarled and he found himself lifted off the ground, causing a swirl of colors and a swooping sensation to attack his senses.

Despite being used to the strange swirls and colors, now they seemed to launch themselves at him, cutting at him like knives slicing through the air around him. Leo thought he might have screamed, but as soon as he did, the colors stopped coming and everything went pitch black. That night, Mika would get his high as the drugs continued to rack through Leo's body.

* * * *

Leo's head hurt like all hell had broken loose when he started to come to.

He felt as if someone had smacked him in the back of the head with a two ton anvil. Opening his eyes, he tried to focus, but all the lines were blurred and the colors remained fuzzy, seemingly melting into each other and making him dizzy.

"Oh, goody, it lives," a shrill female voice said somewhere in front of him. Leo cringed. He knew that voice, and at that point he almost wanted his old master back... but only almost. "Thank god. Fresh food is much better, I am *so* not into road kill."

Leo screamed as sharp vicious needles pierced his neck and tore at his flesh. In his mind he pictured himself as the helpless antelope as the hungry predator, Christa, tore out his throat, ripping loose the flesh for food.

He tried desperately to push the female off him, clawing at her and pulling her hair, but his attempts were futile and he could hear Mika's unmistakable chuckles as the world surrounding him faded a second time.

CHAPTER 2

Leo tried to swallow the water trickling down his throat but it ended up going down the wrong pipe. Someone helped him to sit up, supporting him and slapping him on the back when he started coughing.

"That's it Leo, get it out," Casey's voice was as soothing as always. The light tone comforted him as he started coming around properly. Leo was beyond grateful to wake within the confines of the den.

Another donor like him, Casey was a special case. He'd been there a few months longer than Leo, which was unusual for most donors. Even Leo had lasted longer than most donors did. One of the reasons for Casey's long life was that the vampires never touched him except to occasionally draw blood, and only during the full moon when his blood was supposed to be the strongest.

Casey was a warlock. The vampires thought the strength of his magic was due to not only his blood, but also his virginity. There were strict orders to kill anyone who violated him; a death-sentence no vampire wanted to risk.

"You okay, Leo?" a second, much darker voice asked.

Looking up, he recognized the blurry shape as Zane, the sheer size of the blobby shadow confirming it. "I'ma go..." Leo tried to speak, but the words failed him. The

drugs were fading, slowly. They, and the blood loss, had done quite a number on him. He tried clearing his throat, although it seemed like something was stuck, probably a hairball or maybe even a fang.

"Casey, give him some more water. I'll steady him so he doesn't choke again." Zane pulled Leo up against his chest so the water wouldn't go down wrong again, and together, he and Casey helped Leo drink almost a whole bottle before he couldn't force down any more liquid.

Even if Leo thought he was kinda scary, primarily because of his size and his sometimes snarly attitude, Leo knew Zane was a good man who doted on Casey. He'd even heard him refer to Casey as his mate on several occasions.

Zane was an animal—a shapeshifter of some kind—but Leo didn't really know what kind, he'd never asked. Leo knew vampires didn't use him as a donor because they thought his blood to be tainted and undrinkable.

Despite not knowing much about shifters at all, he did know that they were usually driven by instincts. Leo could see how it was killing Zane not to be able to be with Casey in all possible ways, but doing so would be really, really bad. With Casey's virginity lost, he'd be free game for all the vampires on the compound, and Zane would

never do anything to risk his mate's safety. Mika used this knowledge to control the large male.

If Casey were no longer virgin, he would be devoured in an instant... both drained and violated; he was, after all, a very beautiful man.

Casey was lean and of average height with fair hair so bright the golden locks almost seemed to shine white in the sun, not that he got much daylight in the den. His eyes were a beautiful shade of turquoise Leo had never seen before.

His mate, however, was a completely different story. Easily twice the size of Casey, at least in width, his broad shoulders and muscles stretched the grey t-shirt he wore. Zane's dark brown hair matched equally dark eyes, one of which seemed to have some golden flecks in it.

"How... lo-long?" Leo tried again to sit up on his own. He'd needed the water, but swallowing it down had hurt his throat and he started coughing again when he spoke. He was also vaguely aware of the bandage covering his neck, "Christa..."

"Yeah, that's what we figured when Shamus threw you in here two nights ago." Zane sighed. "You should try to rest now, and we'll see if we can get you some food for when you wake again," Zane picked him up easily and put him down on the worn down mattress in the corner of the room, supporting his head on a rolled up shirt.

Casey washed his face with a cloth, "I tried a healing spell, but all I managed was to stop the bleeding." The helplessness was obvious on his face. "Funny isn't it? I can paralyze people for up to an hour at a time with only a few syllables but I can just barely manage to gather enough magic to heal a paper-cut."

"No worries, I'm fine." Leo was glad he was able to speak properly again, even if his throat felt raw. "Besides, if your powers were the other way around, I doubt they'd find you half as useful as they do now. Be happy for your powers Casey. One day, that gift might just be what gets you and Zane out of this joint."

"I don't know about that Leo, not like I can do anything major with this stupid thing on my arm." A silver bracelet was wound tight around Casey's wrist, it seemed so insignificant, but Leo knew the vampires used it to control his powers.

"One day, we'll get out of here. You'll see" He had to believe that.

Casey's smile was almost convincing. "Why don't you rest a little? Now that you've woken up, I'm guessing Mika will be back to get you tomorrow night,"

"Yeah, I could have slept without being reminded of that..."

"Sorry." Casey winced, realizing what he'd said. "Just try to get some rest, okay?"

* * * *

Leo only got about half a day of rest before Mika showed up again, and he wasn't too pleased with Leo's long recovery time when he arrived. Not that it was Leo's damn fault Mika had a thing for that blood-thirsty wench. Leo had barely gotten anything to eat before being yanked off the ground and pushed out the door, a growling Zane only being held back by a guard with their gun aimed at Casey.

"Took you long enough," the vampire growled. "I had to make do with the donor of one of my lieutenants. For some reason the bugger smelled like garlic and I am not fond of Italian food."

Leo fought the urge to laugh; the fact that someone had actually believed in the old myths of how to repel vampires was somewhat hilarious. He just hoped the poor man hadn't been punished for it, but knowing Mika, he probably had.

As far as Leo knew, the vampires had very few, if any, weaknesses at all; hell... they didn't even fry when they walked in the sun. Although, there were rumors of a serum the vampires had to ingest before going out in daylight if they didn't want boils covering their *precious* immortal faces.

"I'm sorry," Leo knew to keep his head low; he did not want to annoy his master and have the stitches from Christa's last meal ripped out as a warning.

"Of *course* you are, my *precious* little blood-bag..." His master sneered. "We're having a little get-together in town tonight and I'm bringing you with me." The smile on Mika's face really wasn't what you'd call uplifting. "You better behave yourself too, there'll be a lot of important people there tonight and if you do anything to make me look bad I will have you replaced and handed off to my dear, sweet Christa. She appears to have developed quite the taste for you these past few feedings, and I do adore her when she's grateful,"

"I promise I'll be good!" Leo pleaded; none of Christa's donors lasted very long, not that any donors did, but the vampire bitch always seemed to take things to a new extreme. Being her donor practically guaranteed you were going to die screaming.

"You'd better." Almost as a side-thought, the vampire added, "It's really too bad you two don't play together well..." Was that a gleam of lust in his eyes? Leo knew the man wasn't gay, but now he just hoped like hell that he wasn't considering experimenting, particularly not with Christa in the equation. *Fuck, the last thing he needed was one more thing to worry about.*

CHAPTER 3

After he'd returned with his master, Leo had been given a new set of clothes. His 'clothes' consisted of nothing more than a pair of dark brown leather pants and a new collar which seemed to be made of black and brown leather strips braided together.

Now, sitting on the floor of Mika's limo, he hoped the outfit was to impress his master's friends and not because he'd be shown off as entertainment for the night. Leo frowned when he saw where they were going, The Leather Strap was a BDSM inspired gay strip-club and Leo knew the stages would be cramped with other performances, so at least he wouldn't be the one putting on a show. But then again, why would Mika be taking him here? He'd been here before with his previous master, but Kerrigan had gotten them kicked out when he pushed down one of the dancers and tried to shove Leo up on the stage.

Like always, Mika dragged Leo behind him, but at least he was upright this time. The new leather around his neck would probably leave quite a bruise. Leather was best worn after being used for a while and made softer, and Leo's new collar was definitely not soft.

The bouncer barely spared Leo a glance as Mika dragged him inside. The club ran on the 'see no evil' concept, and Leo was well aware that he wasn't the only one being *kept* in this place. Although, frankly, most of the

guys there seemed to want to be there... then again, that was the difference between a sub and a slave.

Leo followed his master to a black leather-padded booth at the back of the club and was a little surprised when Mika told him to sit next to him and not on the floor like usual. Mika's guests soon arrived. Shamus was one of them, a weasely little vampire rat who had a taste for doing Mika's dirty work. You wouldn't have believed it by looking at the guy, seeing as he was almost as slim as Leo, a lot taller than him sure, but only a little broader. Then again, even before Leo knew about vampires he could've have easily identified this guy as a leech, with his blond hair slicked back and a permanent dopey grin.

The other guy Leo had never seen before.

He was as tall as Shamus, about six feet two inches, but way broader. Leo also got the distinct feeling that this guy wasn't a vampire at all. He had long, dark blond hair kept neat and tidy in a small ponytail. Even in Leo's current situation he could appreciate the guy's physical appearance. The man threw a black metal case on the table before sitting down, and Mika took the case and opened it. Leo stretched his neck to see inside and when he saw, he gave out a shocked gasp.

Inside were several vials of different colored liquids, one of them suspiciously similar to the blue liquid Mika injected him with the last time. Leo had been kept on

minor hallucinogens after waking so that he wouldn't have to suffer repeated withdrawals, and Leo was okay with that, but if these vials were anything like the blue stuff he'd been given...

"I trust your free sample was to your liking."

"Oh yes, we enjoyed it immensely didn't we blood-bag?" Mika chuckled.

Leo saw the man's left eyebrow rise at the nickname as he looked him up and down. "I thought the drugs were for your kind."

"Oh, they are." Mika smiled. "But the high is so much better after the drug has been absorbed into a few gallons of blood first... really enhances the euphoria,"

The man frowned. "This stuff isn't made for humans, just a drop too much can cause permanent damage to his brain, or worse, it'll end up killing him."

Leo winced at the words, he knew what he'd been given had been a bad high, but he didn't think Mika would give him anything he would OD on.

"Well now, that's *my* concern now isn't it?" Mika snarled and took up one of the other vials... a purple liquid this time... and from the inside of his pocket he took out a needle and filled it with the substance.

Fighting back tears, Leo's entire body had gone tense and he had to fight his instincts not to run from his master.

"Hey," the man protested, but Mika simply snarled at him.

"You've gotten your money already, the party items are no longer your concern. Now..." he shifted his focus to Leo, "be a good little blood-bag and give me your arm."

Leo's arm was visibly shaking as he attempted to lift it from his lap. When Mika decided he took too long, he yanked it forward and jammed the needle straight into a well-used vein.

Usually when Mika shot him up like this, he could feel the cool liquid flow through his veins, but the new purple stuff almost seemed to be burning, like it was trying to *force* its way through the blood-stream.

His heartbeat sped up and he started sweating, panting a little as Mika held a glass of water to his lips which he swallowed down greedily.

Mika petted him on the head and chuckled, "See, that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"You really are something," the dealer told Leo's master.

"Well, in your line of work I suspect you know quite a few who are... something." Mika chuckled, Shamus joining in. "Too bad you had to be so impolite though, I was even considering letting you use my little pet here as a bonus. From what I hear he's about your type."

"Sorry, I prefer my men willing." The dealer sneered and Leo was glad, being used for his blood was one thing, but he had hoped his time as a boy toy ended with his previous master's death.

"Oh, he'll be willing if I tell him too, won't you blood-bag?" Mika teased, holding Leo's face between two of his fingers, the glint in his eyes telling him he would have no choice in the matter if his master commanded it.

The dealer stood to leave. "I think we're done here. I have other business to take care of." His exit, however, was blocked by Shamus.

"Now don't be rash Link, the night is young and well... I do have another business proposal for you."

"Not interested," the man, Link, told him.

"Oh, well, I'm sure I can change your mind." Mika was not someone who dealt well with rejection.

Link leaned his hands on the round table separating them and got up real close to Mika. The man had to be short a few marbles for doing so, but Leo decided he was probably missing a lot more than just a few when the man opened his mouth.

"You don't scare me Mika... you, or your goons. You may be a vampire, but that still makes you a pissant in my book. Our arrangements will go on as planned, but after that you're on your own... But, hey, I'm sure there are a lot

of Colombian drug-lords out there that can score you a fix, it just won't do you any good."

Shamus reached into his jacket and Leo saw the black metal just as all hell broke loose. The front door burst open and several armed men came running in wearing Kevlar and helmets. People were frantically shoving at each other as they tried to get away.

Grabbing the case with the rainbow vials, Mika shoved past Leo, who ended up on the floor, panting, struggling to breathe. Shamus grabbed a hold of one of his arms and hauled him off towards the back door. It didn't appear to be a secret exit though, as several SWAT's were already on scene.

Mika and Shamus started firing at them, and took several hits themselves before they decided to make a run for it.

"Ditch the kid!" Leo heard Mika shout.

Not really knowing how, Leo found himself flying towards a group of men, knocking them to the ground with a loud thump.

The men cursed and shoved Leo off of them before they took off after Mika and Shamus.

Apparently forgotten, Leo used the brick wall of a building to steady himself as he got up. He didn't really pay attention to where he was going, all he knew was that he had to get away from the brain-numbing sirens and put as

much distance as he could between him and Mika as possible.

He still couldn't breathe right and the continuous walking wasn't making it any better. He stuck to the dark alleys but had no idea of where he was going. He kept on walking anyway, not even noticing as his bare feet made contact with the shards of a broken bottle, cutting deep; he just kept on going.

When he stopped to rest, Leo felt as if his head was going to explode. Everything was fuzzy and he was followed by a coppery scent he realized came from a flesh wound in his shoulder, probably made by a stray bullet... *When had that happened?*

Buzzing reached his ears as Leo neared the corner of an alley. Two men were arguing; correction, two *huge* men were arguing. For a second, Leo wondered if the drugs he'd been given were playing tricks with his mind, making him see double. The two men looked exactly the same. Both were well over six feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds at the least. Despite the bulky leather jackets, Leo doubted they had any fat on their bodies. Their hair looked the same too, shining gold in the light from a street lamp.

Whatever they were arguing about, it couldn't be good, Leo decided he'd had enough of guys like that. Who knew, they might even be some of Mika's goons, they sure dressed alike.

Backing away, Leo bumped into something and two identical gazes locked on him. Hurrying up, Leo tried to run, but his feet didn't seem to be working properly.

He heard a strange buzzing sound coming at him from behind, but he couldn't make out the words. When a strong arm wrapped around his waist from behind and turned him, Leo collapsed. He was too tired to struggle against the man who held him. Leo felt his eyes roll back in to his head as his body started convulsing.

With the little consciousness he had left, Leo felt some meager sense of relief. At least if the drugs killed him, he wouldn't have to return to being a blood-bag.

CHAPTER 4

Maddox held the kid as his body started to shake violently. He could just barely see a pair of brown doe eyes before they rolled to the back of his skull and his body started to seize.

"Shit." He gathered the kid up in his arms and took off for the hummer.

Liam was straight behind him. "We need to get the kid to a hospital!" his brother yelled at him.

Jumping in the car, Liam took the wheel as Maddox held the little guy in his arms, trying to get him to swallow some water he had stashed in the car. "No go, Liam. There was a huge accident a few hours ago on the highway. By the time they get to him, he'll be gone already. We need to take him back to base so Jace and Sol can take a look at him,"

"You know that isn't regulations!" his brother reminded him.

"To hell with it Liam, I may not know the kid, but I sure as hell ain't gonna let him die on us because of regulations and you know Sol will agree with me on this one."

"Just saying that the least Sol needs right now is more crap from the coalition," Liam said as he shifted gears, bypassing several vehicles as they headed for home.

Yeah, Maddox knew the coalition was looking for excuses to withdraw Sol's status, but this was important. The kid in his lap was pale and had stopped shaking, Maddox wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

Who the hell could this guy be anyway? For god's sake, he wasn't wearing anything but a pair of leather pants and a collar. Seeing the redness around the edges of the leather band around his neck, Maddox found the small lock in the back and released it. When the collar fell off, Maddox gasped.

"What?" his brother acquired as he cut in front of a dark blue Mercedes.

"He's a donor," Maddox said as he let one of his fingers trace the scars of bite marks on the kid's neck. "By the looks of it, they've kept him a while,"

"Shit, you're certain?" Liam sounded sick and he had rights to be. Being a donor wasn't exactly an easy living, and while most donors had an expiration date of a few weeks, maybe a month or two at the best, this kid had to have been *kept* for quite some time longer than that.

"Yeah, there are a lot of old scars on his neck, some are rather nasty looking..." The kid's arm fell to the side and it was Maddox's turn to be sick. "Christ... they didn't just feed on him, they used him as a fucking pin-cushion too." Leaning down, Maddox's nose crinkled. "And from the smell of it, he was recently dosed." He leant down again

sniffing nearer to the kid's neck. Behind the dirt and the drugs, a soft spiced vanilla scent wafted off him. Maddox really loved vanilla, he took another deep breathe, almost burying his nose in the kid's neck.

"Bro? What exactly are you doing?" Liam asked, glancing suspiciously at his twin as he focused on getting ahead of traffic on the highway.

Blushing, Maddox sat back up again, "He smells nice..."

"Right... well, you might want to refrain from... sniffing him in front of Solomon. And besides, if he really is a donor, I doubt he'll be too... sympathetic to other supernaturals, especially ones trying to... sniff him."

"Not like anyone has given him a reason to trust us." Thoughts of how he might be the one to turn the kid around made its way into Maddox's mind.

"Stop doing that," Liam hissed at him with a disturbed expression on his face

"What?" Maddox inquired.

"The blushing thing... it's weird."

"Get stuffed."

"Your choice bro, but you know Jace'll never shut up about it." He was probably right about that one though. Jace was a snow-leopard and probably the pride's biggest gossip. Jace might be six feet tall and packed with lean muscles, but at heart, Liam predicted he'd be more suited

amongst a bunch of eighty year old woman in a quilting circle than in a pride.

Maddox didn't answer; he was too busy checking the kid's vitals to respond to his brother's idiot statements.

"You're pathetic." Liam rolled his eyes before he took a right off the highway, the asphalt soon turning into dust.

A few minutes later they passed through the first security gates flanked by tall electrified fences going around the entire property. Several surveillance cameras with thermal vision were posted along the fence. The gate itself was automatic and needed both a password and a retinal scan before it opened.

During the night there would be a few perimeter checks, but it was the inner sanctum that was truly guarded, between the electric fence and the concrete walls surrounding their facility, acres of forest and tall grass decorated the surroundings. There were several deer and other smaller animals roaming the forest for whenever any of the pride needed to *work things out* by hunting.

By the second set of gates, their younger brother Kett met up with them. Kett was smaller than his siblings, but not by much. He still had the same golden locks, if only a little darker, and gold tinted eyes that revealed their blood-relationship.

"Hey Liam, Maddox... *who* is that?" Kett asked when he came over to them and saw the limp body in his brother's lap. "He's pretty cute, not looking too peachy right now though, but I'd do him."

The snarl startled all of them, even Maddox, despite it being him who had made the noise in the first place. Liam looked at him with a speculative glance before looking down at the injured kid.

"Okay..." Kett backed away a few steps from the car. "Something you wanna share with your family there, bro?"

When Maddox failed to answer, Liam was the one to break the silence. "We're gonna need Jace and Solomon down at the medical center, call ahead for us and tell Jace we're gonna need whatever the hell he's got to help a human through drug withdrawal."

"Yikes. You got it." Kett opened the gate and let them through before pulling out his cell and making the call.

It still took a few minutes to get to the medical center, during which time neither Liam nor Maddox spoke. The kid had started seizing again and Maddox was trying to calm him down, stroking his cheek and whispering words of reassurance.

Liam kept glancing over at his brother; it wasn't exactly what you'd call normal for Maddox to be so tender

with anyone, nor was it for Liam. Not that they were particularly ruthless or anything, but they did put the pride before anything else. The friendly socializing was better left for Kett to handle.

Sol and Jace were waiting for them when they arrived. As they had expected, Sol looked disgruntled. Sol had a strict policy of no outsiders, but then again, this was a special case. It wasn't like Maddox was just gonna throw the kid out.

"Never figured you for bringing home strays, Mad." Jace grinned as he opened the car door, letting Maddox carefully extract the kid from the vehicle. This proved to be difficult as the kid kept thrashing about.

Maddox promptly ignored the annoying snow-leopard and gave his attention to Sol, "We found him while patrolling downtown. He was wandering around and pretty much collapsed in my arms." Angling the kid in his arms, holding him tight so he wouldn't fall to the ground from all the shaking, he showed Sol the marks on his neck. "I'm pretty sure an angry puppy didn't leave those marks, nor these," Maddox said referring to the needle marks on the kid's arm.

Inspecting the marks, both on the kid's neck and arm when they put him down on the examination table, Sol sighed. Jace had given the kid something to calm him

down, but he was still breathing a little too heavy for Maddox's liking.

"I'd estimate the marks to go back as far as four, maybe five months. He seems to be somewhat undernourished, but hardly anything as bad as we've seen before. I don't suppose there was an ID with the donor?" Judging by the fact that the kid was only wearing a pair of leather pants it seemed unlikely.

"No, he saw us and tried to run away, but the moment I took hold of him he collapsed. He hasn't said anything," Maddox hadn't realized he was pacing, but the others sure had. Maddox was always the most composed of them all, even more than Liam and Sol when it came to stressful situations, but it just seemed like his cat couldn't quite settle down.

Sol, their *Sorena*, or so-called tribal leader, was just as perceptive to this fact as the others. "Maddox, is there something you'd like to add?" He didn't really expect an answer.

"No." Maddox kept on pacing, visibly tensing whenever the kid whimpered in discomfort.

Maddox wanted to tear Jace's face off when he leered at him. "If you ask me it seems the king of the jungle just found himself a new chew-toy, even if it does happen to be pre-chewed." The snarl was enough for the leopard to

back off though. "Whoa, easy there, kitty, I was just yanking your chain a bit."

"Do you think you can save the remarks for when the kid *isn't* dying?!" Maddox hissed. "Now do your damn job!"

"Maddox, I need to see you in my office," Sol stated before heading out. When Maddox hesitated, he added, "I'm sure your brother won't mind watching over him while you're gone. It won't take long."

The sense of loss didn't sit well with Maddox as he followed his Sorena into his office. The room was bright and spacious; cream walls working well against the dark wood furnishing in the office. Sol gestured for Maddox to take a seat across the large desk from him.

Feeling uncomfortable, Maddox still managed to sit down. While Sol was not a harsh person, he was still his Sorena and his presence alone called for respect.

"You're bonding with the kid," Sol said, it wasn't a question.

"I don't know him," Maddox replied, but he was starting to suspect the very same thing.

"Does it really matter?" his Sorena inquired.

Maddox sighed. "Guess not."

"You know there will be complications, right?"

"Complications?"

"This kid's been through god knows what and there's very little chance he'll have any good will for people like us, or rather, people who aren't exactly people."

He could feel the intensity of Sol's stare and he knew his Sorena was right; there was a very good chance he might be rejected, or worse... feared.

"I won't approach him until he's comfortable being with us, I have no wish to cause him further distress."

"I think that may be best. However, I think it may be crucial he gets to know you, to familiarize with you, so I am assigning you as his *Greer*, his guardian."

"Sol..." Maddox groaned, leaning forward to catch his head in his arms. "I don't know if I'll have the restraint to stay clear of him if you put me in that position. Even now, it's hard enough just to be away from him and I haven't even tasted his blood yet. What if I'm wrong?"

"I know you, Maddox. You wouldn't be acting like this unless destiny has seen fit to kick you in the groin. But for your ease, we'll have Jace extract some blood from him by syringe. I believe another bite might cause too much trauma to his body, not that a syringe might be interpreted any better, but still. His vitals are too elevated for a human considering the concentration Jace gave him earlier to stop the seizures,"

"A syringe might be best," Maddox agreed. If this man was his *Keefe*, his beloved, then he needed to know.

Returning to the medical center, Maddox's protective instinct went hay-wire as a chilling scream pierced the air. Literally pushing his Sorena to the side he rushed to his mate's side to see him screaming and thrashing around, a struggling Jace attempting to pin him down and fill up a needle with more tranquilizers.

Maddox grabbed hold of his little mate's shoulders and held him down. The pain racking through his mate's lithe body was obvious from the screams and the contorted features of his face. Sweat dripped off of his body, soaking the sheets beneath him. It took nearly three minutes before the extra medication quieted the pain marred shrieks.

A stinging sensation filled Maddox's eyes, he just couldn't help but feel completely lost, helpless at being unable to protect his mate from whatever caused him this pain.

CHAPTER 5

The test confirmed what Maddox already knew to be true; the man was his mate. Yet it had been over three days and he still hadn't broken through the haze of poison in his system. Not even Jace could help him, except to give him more painkillers whenever he started screaming again.

Through all this, Maddox didn't even know his mate's name.

The whole time the kid struggled with the demons inside, Maddox never left his side. Not even to eat. He was lucky the room came with a bathroom; a bedpan wasn't exactly desirable, and leaving just to go *potty* wasn't an option.

Liam would bring him meat a couple of times a day to help him keep his strength up since he knew starving himself wouldn't help anybody.

The way his brother looked at him whenever he came to check on him, the way Liam's eyes kept straying from him to his comatose mate told Maddox that he knew exactly what the human meant to him. Not that it was hard to guess. Maybe Sol told him. Kett hadn't really been around much, but that was primarily Maddox's fault; after all, someone had to take over his responsibilities. But whenever the younger brother was there he would smile, happy Maddox had found his mate and positive he would awaken soon enough.

Despite Kett's certainty, Maddox feared the worst; prepared for it, even. Hoping had never done him any good in the past, so why would it now? But the moments when Jace had to change the sheets and Maddox got to hold his precious little bundle, the way the unconscious body would turn into him, they made him want to hope.

* * * *

Leo's mouth felt like sandpaper as he drifted back to consciousness. His entire body burned with unforgiving aches. Just barely able to open his eyelids, he stilled as he saw the giant, golden haired man awkwardly asleep in a not-so-comfortable-looking chair by his side. Taking in a sharp breath as he realized the larger male was holding onto his right hand, Leo just barely kept himself from jerking his hand away from underneath the much larger one.

Studying the man's face, Leo noticed he looked tired; large dark circles showed under his eyes. A big part of Leo relaxed at the rise of the man's chest; vampires did not breathe, or at least they didn't have to, and he doubted vampires would ever be able to get the golden tan of this man's skin. He had no way of guessing where he was. Even if he was surrounded by medical equipment, the place didn't exactly strike him as a hospital. And why did this

man squeeze his hand so gently at every little movement he made?

The stranger's skin was warm; it felt nice. For too long he'd only felt the cold concrete floor Mika made him sleep on. The new man's face stirred Leo's hazy memories... two identical figures arguing...

The door flung open and Leo yelped, the previously sleeping figure snarling as he nearly leapt at his mirror image.

Leo lost control of his breathing and started to hyperventilate. The larger man shifted his focus from his identical self to his patient.

"Relax. Breathe, okay? I won't let anything happen to you, but you've got to calm down."

Falling into the golden eyes in front of him, Leo calmed almost instantly, his hand yet again gripped by golden warmth. He startled when the other man spoke from across the room.

"What's your name?" he asked as he strolled over to his side. Way too close for Leo's comfort.

Leo shrank back, grabbing onto the hand holding his. Even if the new guy looked exactly the same, he knew this was someone else entirely, and his presence did nothing to calm him down like the other one did.

Using his unoccupied hand, his comforter tilted Leo's face back to him. "It's okay; my brother won't hurt

you. Now, can you tell me your name?" The pleading tone of his voice almost startled him, Maddox being far from the kind to plead for anything.

Trying to speak was painful; Leo's throat felt scratchy and dry and a fit of coughing overtook him. The man in front of him held up Leo's head as he poured cold liquid down his throat. Leo was surprised by the taste of honey, but it worked wonders on his unused throat.

Holding on to the glass as the man of gold held it to his lips, Leo pushed it back slightly, "Leo," he whispered, his throat still not used to talking. *How long had he been out of it?*

"Excuse me?" A look of surprised shock flashed across the man's face and was gone just as suddenly.

"My name, Leo," he tried again, able to put a little more force behind his voice this time. Both of the two men in the room with him wore huge, identical grins. *What was so funny?*

"It's nice to meet you Leo, I'm Maddox."

It was a strong name, Leo thought, and fit the large man perfectly. Moving his eyes from Maddox to his brother, Leo still felt cautious around him and eyed him nervously. Why Maddox felt like such a trustworthy presence with the ability to calm him confused him; Leo still felt cautious around his twin.

He should fear both of them, a voice of reason whispered to him from within. But every time he looked into the bright golden eyes of the man called Maddox, he calmed and wanted nothing more than to climb into his lap and curl up into a ball.

A blush crept up Leo's cheeks; he should not be thinking like that. Hadn't he just gotten away from a damn society of vampires who'd torn into his neck on a regular basis for food and the drugs? He really shouldn't trust anyone at all, but Maddox wasn't a vampire, Leo was certain of it, and he didn't think his brother was one either. Even if he did find his presence somewhat unsettling. Another thing he was certain of though, Maddox and his brother were definitely not human either.

Almost tentatively, Maddox stroked his cheek. When Leo leaned into his touch, Maddox smiled and vowed, "I won't let anybody hurt you again Leo. I promise." He sounded like he meant it and somehow Leo felt that if anybody gave him as much as a headache Maddox would personally take them out, maybe even permanently.

"What are you?" Leo asked him. He wanted to know, but he did have an inkling, if that snarl when his brother entered earlier was any indication. "Are you a shifter?"

Maddox's eyes widened slightly. "How did you know that?"

"A guy I know, he's one," Leo whispered, trying to ignore Maddox's twin, who had thankfully stepped back and was now leaning against the wall opposite them.

Leo cringed at the growl that came from Maddox as he asked him harshly, "Who? A friend? What type of friend?" Maddox sighed and the fury appeared to drain from his features when Leo pulled back.

"His name is Zane, he helped me whenever..." Leo went quiet; there were certain things he didn't want the gorgeous man to know, even if rationality told him that Maddox had already seen the scars and the needle marks that marred his body.

Maddox tried to restrain his anger towards this... Zane. "So, this friend of yours, he helped you...?" Maddox trailed off; he didn't really know how to outright ask if this guy had touched him.

"Yes, Zane and Casey, but Casey isn't a shifter, he's human like me."

Casey? There was another one too? Maddox fought the urge to growl, how many had taken advantage of his little fawn? How many had dared to touch what was his?

Leo saw the resentment on Maddox's face, not quite able to explain why that amused him somewhat. Trying to

ease the bigger man's expression, Leo added, "Casey is Zane's mate."

Golden eyes snapped to Leo's own brown ones, and Leo had to keep back a snicker at the relief in Maddox's eyes. Leo should, rationally, be worried by the man's reactions seeing as they didn't even know each other, but he wasn't. Instead... the reactions pleased him. Leo's face heated up again. What in the world was he thinking?

Maddox saw the pink tint to his mate's cheeks and wondered what might be going through his mind.

Liam spoke up from the wall he'd stationed himself by. "When you're ready, you're going to have to answer some questions for us, Leo."

The rosy tint in his mate's cheeks drained instantly, and Maddox growled at his brother before turning back to his mate. "Liam won't hurt you, none of us will. I am your *Greer*, your guardian, and I will lay down my life before I let anything happen to you."

The words hit Leo as completely honest ones. "I just don't... I don't want to remember those... things."

"I know, baby, but don't you want to help your friends? Any little thing you can remember might help."

Of course Leo wanted to help his friends, but right now his mind was caught on that one word: *baby*. He was pretty sure Maddox hadn't realized he'd said it, but the moment the word was out there Leo's heart fluttered a little.

It was something he hadn't felt for a long, long time. But it did feel nice.

A thought struck him out of the blue; Zane used to call Casey baby. And honey, and... mate. Leo gulped and looked back up at Maddox. The devotion, the protectiveness... the love Leo had always associated with Zane whenever he looked at Casey, it was staring straight back at him.

"You..." Leo started, but couldn't quite finish. Even *if* Maddox... No. This wasn't the time; he wasn't ready for this yet.

"What?" The wide-eyed look on Leo's face, a look he couldn't quite decipher, caused Maddox to worry. Especially since deciphering facial cues was something he was usually good at.

"They kept us at a compound," Leo told him, shifting the focus of the conversation and keeping his eyes away from Maddox's.

"Do know what security systems they're using?" Liam asked from the back.

"No, I'm not really into the whole tech thing, but there were cameras everywhere and the fences were electrified... I saw a couple of guys try to get through it once, but they were human and they..." Leo swallowed in revulsion, "...didn't make it. I think it's powered up enough

to be able to stop shifters trying to get out; they're more valuable as workers. They can always get more donors."

Maddox felt horrified at the thought his mate had been stuck in a hell hole like that and thanked whatever gods had sought to keep his mate safe. "Are there many shifters there?" Maddox needed to know this; there were rumors going around of kidnappings amongst several prides and packs. If Mika and his crew were the reason for these disappearances, then it would make it a whole lot easier to get the others to fight against the slavers, together.

"Yeah, quite a few, at least a dozen, maybe more, but not as many as there are humans. Oh, and some they're using for security too. Like my friend Casey, he knows stuff, you know, like magic. He has these force field lightning things going for him."

"He's working with them?" Liam snapped, outraged by such a thing.

The statement angered Leo and he practically snarled back at him. "Fuck you!" he screamed. "You don't know what it's like in there! It's do or *die* and you have no idea what they would have done to him if he refused to use his powers or if his powers were to go away!" Leo was crying now, tears falling down his face.

Casey was lucky he had his gifts, but Leo knew how much it killed him inside whenever he had to subdue innocent people and bring them into hell with him. If it had

been just him, Casey would have refused, told the vampires to piss off, but like Zane, he wouldn't do anything to endanger his mate. Even if it meant having to do those things. He did refuse to kill, something he'd been whipped for on more than a few occasions, both him and Zane, but he couldn't breach that line and that stance took a great deal of courage in Leo's mind.

The sobs racking his body seemed to intensify. Leo started to go into seizures. Strong arms wrapped around him and pulled him close; Leo turned his face into Maddox's massive chest as he shook, letting the man's warm, earthy scent soak his entire being, letting it calm him and bring him back down to earth.

The panic attack Maddox felt coming faded as soon as Leo stopped the violent shakes. Leo was still shivering, though, as he burrowed into his chest for warmth and comfort. "Shh, baby. It's all right. You're gonna be fine and I promise we're gonna do all we can to find a way to help your friends." Even knowing he might not be able to keep his promise, he sure as hell was gonna try.

CHAPTER 6

Maddox held his precious bundle as Leo all but curled around his body. Leo clung to Maddox for hours after falling asleep. He'd smiled as his little mate rubbed his body against his, unknowingly marking himself with Maddox's scent and vice versa.

The feel of the hardness pressing against his thigh, however, was absolutely murder. His own cock felt like it could burst at any moment, and his mate unconsciously thrusting his own ache against him did nothing to help the situation.

Later that evening Jace had showed up, a little too aware of Maddox's scent of arousal and the very evident bulge in the sheets covering them. Jace smirked as he took note of Leo's vital stats.

"Don't say a word," Maddox warned before he could spout out any profanities about their situation.

"I wasn't gonna say anything, but you do look a little uncomfortable there big guy." Jace chuckled as he eyed the evidence.

"I will hurt you, Jace," Maddox growled.

"Really? So you'll disturb your little man's sleep just to get back at me, huh?" Jace snickered, knowing very well he'd never do anything to disturb his precious Leo's rest.

"I'm not sleeping," Leo mumbled as he let out a tired yawn, stilling instantly as he realized he was pressing

a certain hard something against Maddox. He tried to discreetly remove his leg from Maddox's but the hiss that met him when he brushed a rather similar hardness made him stop. His eyes widened at the sight of the dent in the sheet, looking up he could see the heat of embarrassment that filled Maddox's cheeks. The blush looked somewhat awkward on a guy his size.

When little tried to sit up, the sheet fell down to his waist, showing his own bulge through his pajama bottoms. "Looks like Maddox isn't the only one who's feeling the strain," Jace teased.

Despite hearing his voice when he woke, Leo startled when it really dawned on him that he and Maddox weren't alone. With the other man eying him like that, Maddox let out a growl from behind him as he tucked Leo's body back under the covers.

Sensing Leo's distress at the new presence in the room Maddox ensured him there was nothing to worry about "That's just Jace. Ignore him."

"Yeah, yeah, you just drop dead you big bastard." Jace grunted. Holding out his hand to Leo, he smiled. "Doc Jace at your service, don't hesitate to ask me anything. You know, like your mate's favorite position or—"

Maddox struck out at him, and if hadn't he been so cautious about not throwing Leo to the ground he would

have gotten a nice chunk of flesh from Jace's face in the swipe.

Howling with laughter, Jace nearly choked on his chuckles as he left Maddox and Leo to report back to Sol.

Leo drew back from Maddox; Jace's statement had really upset him. He'd suspected that Maddox was his mate, and it wasn't like he didn't think a man like him wouldn't have a past, he'd just hoped they wouldn't be surrounded with guys he'd had sex with. Leo wasn't even sure if he'd be able to go anywhere with Maddox, if Maddox wanted to, that is...

"Would you like to get up? You should probably eat something and you'll have to meet with Solomon later." Maddox ran his hand up and down Leo's shoulder, but stopped when Leo shivered.

"Don't..." Leo started to protest and blushed when he realized it.

Maddox's lips quirked. His mate enjoyed his touch, which was a good sign even if he would have to wait, possibly forever, to be with him.

"Who's Solomon?" Leo asked, suddenly very curious. He hoped the man wasn't another lover.

Maddox noticed that Leo seemed to change the subject a lot whenever he was embarrassed, but he would give his mate time to adjust to them. "Solomon is our

Sorena, our leader of the pride. He's a good man. Granted, he is a bit strange, but you'll get used to it."

"You're a cat?" Leo interrupted. "A pride means you're feline, right?"

Smiling, Maddox let his eyes turn feline and Leo's mouth fell open rather dramatically, drawing Maddox's attention to that full lower lip. "Yeah, I'm a feline shifter. A lion actually. I can't wait to show you some time," Maddox promised. "But first, do you have any family you want to call, to let them know you are all right?"

Leo had almost been hypnotized by how Maddox's pupils had turned to slits, but he was still surprised at Maddox's question. He knew Maddox and his friends weren't vampires, but he didn't think he'd be allowed to call anyone. "I can do that?" Leo asked.

"Of course you can. We won't hold you here without your permission, but I hope you'll stay. I don't like the thought of those vampires finding you again and I'll be better able to protect you here." Maddox didn't like to lie; he would let Leo leave if he really wanted to, but not without Maddox coming along. There was no way he would be able to leave his mate.

"I don't really have anyone to call; my father and brother don't really speak to me. I doubt they even know I've been missing, and I'd just moved here when they... when the vampires..."

Drawing Leo into his arms again when a sob threatened to break free, Maddox did his best to reassure his mate. "They won't get hold of you again, ever. You have me to protect you now."

"Because you're my mate?" Leo asked into the large chest he was held against; he wondered if he'd said something wrong when he felt Maddox tense.

Maddox was completely floored at Leo's words. He *knew*, how could he possibly know?

"You are my mate right? I mean..." Leo pushed away from him. "I thought..." He started to panic, if he wasn't, then...

Maddox drew him back again, this time planting a small kiss on Leo's head. "No, you're right. I just didn't think you knew; I'd planned to let you get to know me a bit better before I said anything."

Leo took a deep breath of relief. He couldn't help but feel a bit touched by Maddox's resolve to not push it on him. Tilting his head up towards Maddox, he let his lips brush up softly against Maddox's, just barely letting the tip of his tongue out to taste the skin of Maddox's skin.

Groaning, Maddox couldn't stop himself from deepening the kiss. The sight of that pink tongue darting out to taste him had been too damn irresistible.

The heat of the strong, muscular tongue that swept inside Leo's mouth was positively scorching and made him

melt into the arms holding him. One of Maddox's hands cradled the nape of Leo's neck as he kept their mouths fused together.

When the other hand started to slide down and under the waistband of the pajama bottoms he wore, Leo froze. The heat drained away as flashes of Kerrigan swept through his head.

Maddox noticed the very second Leo stopped responding and eased away from his frozen mate. Leo's breathing was shallow and he was shivering slightly.

"I'm sorry," Maddox apologized.

That snapped Leo out of it. "No, it's not you."

"Yeah, I kinda got that. I forgot for a second what you've been through. We'll go slowly, okay?"

"I'm sorry, it's just..."

Maddox kissed him again, briefly this time, and he was glad Leo followed him when he broke it. "Don't be."

"Can I interrupt now?" A platinum blond man had entered the room.

Leo tensed again and moved closer to Maddox. The man, despite his white hair, seemed to be no more than thirty and had a child-like smile on his face. What unsettled Leo about him, though, was that he was even bigger than Maddox, not by much, but definitely by enough to make him *that* much more intimidating.

"Sol..." Maddox started, but was interrupted again.

"I believe I was asking Leo, not you, Maddox."

If Sol hadn't been his Sorena, Maddox would have answered back at the insult, but Leo's clinging held him back.

When Solomon looked expectantly at Leo, Leo did his best not to shrink back, but he knew he was grasping on tightly to Maddox's hand. "I'm okay, but I want Maddox with me."

"Of course, your mate has an advantage since you already share a soul, but I hope you won't hesitate to get to know the rest of our pride. We are his family too, you know, just like you." Sol's gentle smile calmed Leo a great deal. It was nothing like the effect Maddox had on him, but Sol had a certain sense of sunshine to him that Leo found both comforting and compelling.

"Now, let's not let the others wait any longer. There are people who wish to see the man who's wrapped Maddox around his little finger. Besides, Damien's made pancakes and bacon and I'm absolutely famished." Sol turned on his feet and headed out the door again, leaving it open for their departure.

Leo started to get up but Maddox held him back. "There's something you need to know about Damian."

CHAPTER 7

When Damian served up the pancakes to Leo's plate, he tightened his grip on Maddox's hand as hard as he could. He needed the reassurance that his mate was still there, even sitting as close as he could to him without actually climbing onto his lap. The vampire appeared cautious of him as well, so it seemed obvious to Leo that he'd already been informed about Leo's situation.

Leo was able to breathe again when the vampire passed him, heading over to Liam and Kett. Leo had learned that Kett was the twins' younger brother and, unlike them, didn't shift into a normal lion. Instead he shifted into a mountain lion. Even though Leo felt a bit more relaxed, he still didn't let go of Maddox's hand, even though he had to fork down the food using his left hand.

Leo didn't stop eating until his stomach started cramping. Being deprived of real food for so long, he didn't want to let the food go to waste. He had to admit, for a vampire Damian was a hell of a cook. Finally putting down the fork, he looked up to see Maddox staring at him with one of his brows raised in a rather quizzical expression.

Embarrassment filled him; how much had he actually eaten? He lowered his eyes to the plate to hide his blush. Maddox wouldn't let him feel down for too long, pulling their entwined hands to his mouth and brushing a kiss against Leo's knuckles. The caring look in his eyes as

he looked back at Leo from under his lashes took him off guard. He'd never had that before, someone who cared like that. It felt strange, but he craved it. Every time Maddox did something like that, Leo could feel his body soak it up like a dried up sponge.

Leaning in to kiss Leo's cheek he stopped to whisper in his ear. "No worries Keefe, I'll have Jace get you some Pepto-Bismol for later."

There it was again, that caring thing. Leo's eyes focused on Maddox's lips as he sat back in his chair. He wanted desperately to kiss him, to feel that heat he'd felt earlier, but would it be welcome?

Maddox saw the stirring lust in Leo's eyes and couldn't stop his inner lion from rumbling his pleasure. Yet his little mate didn't seem to notice, even if his breaths seemed to come a bit quicker.

Then again, his *mate* may not have notice his possessive rumblings, but there were more than a few felines around who heard the warning of his cat. *Mine!*

Not having lost awareness of where the vampire had been standing, Leo startled as Damian backed off rapidly. Only then did he become aware of Maddox's growly sounds. Looking up he saw the narrowed slits of his eyes as Maddox's cat eyes stared back at him. Something in Leo shifted and, without thinking, he pounced into Maddox's lap, attacking his lips and locking his arms around his

mate's neck. In response, Maddox shoved his tongue in Leo's mouth, desperately taking in every nuance of flavor, from the meal they'd just had to what was all Leo.

A crash sounded as Maddox swept the plates off of the table and he had Leo pressed down on top of it a second later.

Maddox's fierce show of dominance had Leo moaning, desperate for everything his mate would give him. He didn't even consider the idea that they weren't alone in the room. In *his* mind, there was only Maddox, whose hard, jean-clad groin was pressing into his, making the table creak with his gyrating motions as his hands slipped up under Leo's shirt.

"Maddox!" A strong authoritative voice roared out from somewhere in the distance.

To Leo's dismay, Maddox stopped his motions and broke their kiss. But the low, aggressive roaring sound emanating from him told of his displeasure of his leader's interruption in marking and claiming his mate.

"This is neither the time nor place for that! You will back down!" Solomon started growled back.

Slowly getting up, Maddox kept Leo tucked close to his body, unwilling to let go. Leo didn't relinquish his grip around Maddox's neck and kept his face buried in Maddox's broad chest, hiding from their audience.

Maddox's lion was pissed; he wanted his mate, but his Sorena's word was law. Not even his beast could stand against the force of that, not for any length of time anyway.

Sitting back down with Leo still in his lap, Maddox let his hand drift up and down along Leo's back. It worked to soothe not only Leo, but himself as well. His lion slowly backed off, but he wasn't quite ready to lose his closeness with his mate. He turned to look at Solomon. "I'm sorry," Maddox ground out, surprised by the rough edge of his voice.

"It's all right, Maddox, but you need to show more control. I realize you've just found him and that you're probably going to go into heat in a few days time, but you can't lose control like that. Not if you're going to be able to keep him safe. Now, Leo? Are you all right?"

Leo didn't answer, he was too embarrassed to do so. Instead, he just nodded into Maddox's chest. He didn't really want to see the look of the faces of Maddox's family, not after the display they'd just made on the dining room table. He was glad, though, that his closeness with Maddox hadn't been tainted by memories of his past. And he still wanted more. Even now, after they'd calmed down, his erection still refused to go down and pressed against Maddox's stomach.

"Maybe you should take Leo back to your room so you can both wind down some; we can leave the questions

for later. We've got a map of the vampires' compound, and I'm sure any piece of information you can give us will help. Now go rest, both of you."

The two were still holding hands as they left with Maddox leading the way. But they didn't return to Leo's hospital room. Instead, Maddox brought him into a room with dark chocolate colored walls and wood flooring. A large four-poster bed stood in the middle of the room, covered by a deep royal blue colored bed-spread.

Leo started to get nervous. He wanted Maddox, he really did, and the sight of that unbelievably large bed definitely stirred some intriguing thoughts in his mind, but...

Sitting down on the end of the bed, Maddox pulled Leo into the space between his legs. He gently brushed away a stray hair from Leo's eyes. "You need to relax," Maddox stated in a gentle voice.

Leo tensed as Maddox took hold of Leo's shirt and slowly slipped it over his head. Maddox caressed Leo's chest with satin-soft hands before letting them drift down to the waistband of the pajama bottoms he still wore. He started to push them down, and Leo made no move to stop him; he sat waiting to see what would happen.

Maddox wasn't stupid, he knew Leo wasn't ready for anything too intense, but they both needed this. He let out a soft purr as Leo's solid erection sprang free from its

flannel prison. He could practically hear the wheels turning in Leo's mind; hear how his mind argued with itself and how his breath quickened. Gently reaching behind Leo's back, Maddox rubbed the two perfectly shaped orbs of Leo's backside. Leo gasped at the contact and briefly pushed up against the warm hands before realizing what he was doing and pulling back, a rosy tint coloring Leo's face.

Leaning back, Maddox brought Leo with him, pulling the human up against him and moving him up to straddle his face, with Leo's leaking erection positioned only inches from his lips.

Leo whimpered when Maddox blew hot air across his heated skin; with his hands clenched in the bedspread, gripping so tightly his knuckles started to turn white.

Unable to take it anymore, Leo held his breath as he lowered his hips slightly. Once he prodded at Maddox's lips, Maddox grabbed hold of his hips and pulled him down, devouring the entire length.

Groaning, Leo's knees almost gave out as Maddox sucked him deep, the suction intensifying as soon as he had all of Leo; only pure will power kept Leo from thrusting into the hot, wet cavern surrounding his cock. When Maddox started moving his hips for him, he felt ready to burst as the muscles of his mate's throat closed around him rhythmically, teasing him to the point of insanity.

"Maddox, stop. I... I can't... I'll come, I'll—" Leo tried to pull out, but Maddox kept his grip firm and continued to swallow him down, adding a vibrating purr around his cock. The added vibrations pushing Leo over the edge, and with a hoarse cry he came down Maddox's hungry throat, which greedily took everything Leo's body offered him.

This time, Leo's legs really *did* give out. If Maddox hadn't turned him over onto his back as he fell, he would have collapsed right then and there on top of his mate.

Laying him down, Maddox used his tongue to clean the remains of Leo's release from his sated organ.

Leo could hardly breathe and it felt like it took forever for his breathing to even out. Maddox didn't make it easy for him; his lapping at Leo's cock sent several torturous aftershocks of pleasure, each one threatening to make him hard all over again.

But as soon as the moment passed, Leo started to tense again.

Maddox discarded his own shirt before crawling up to lay down beside Leo. He pulled him close and let his hand run soothing circular motions across his Keefe's bare stomach. "Sleep, baby," he whispered as he kissed Leo's temple.

"But... you..." Leo blushed and Maddox knew what he was referring to.

Maddox let the tip of his nose run along Leo's neck, feeling the resulted shiver from the exhausted body beside him. Taking Leo's hand, he led it down to his own groin. Leo's breath caught, then came out as a gasp as he felt the wetness of Maddox's sweats.

"You? When did you?"

"About the same time you did," Maddox confessed, a little embarrassed. Leo's moans and restless motions as he'd sucked him off had kept him on the edge; the salty taste of his release had given him that last little nudge. Granted, his soiled pants weren't exactly comfortable, but he couldn't find it in his heart to separate himself from Leo long enough to remove them and put on new ones.

Leo couldn't fathom how Maddox could have come so easily. He hadn't even touched him, except for with his... Leo couldn't help a small smile that spread across his face. He'd done that to Maddox, made him come undone. It made him feel proud that he could do that to him, to *his* mate.

It really dawned on him that they were together now, not just by chance, but by fate. This wasn't some fling to Maddox, this was real. Turning into his mate's body, Maddox snuggled as close as he could get without them being uncomfortable. Their positions made it so that Maddox lay with his head against Leo's throat, with a possessive arm thrown across his waist. Leo cradled his

head, letting his fingers run through Maddox's silky hair as he took in the sweet scent of his lavender scented shampoo.

CHAPTER 8

Leo and Maddox resurfaced from their room around night time. Maddox had gotten Jace to bring over anything Leo might need, including a few sets of clothes they'd gotten him from storage.

Sol had waited for them patiently, knowing they needed their time; both of them. Liam, however, was more than ready to get going and Maddox had to let out a warning growl whenever Liam spoke too harshly to Leo.

They learned the vampire compound was actually quite a bit larger than first expected. Sure, the main compound was as they had originally thought, but the news of *the den* came as a bit of a wakeup call. The asylum was nearly a mile away, connected to the main compound by underground tunnels. This was where the vampires kept most of the workers and donors. Leo also thought there might be even more tunnels leading to other buildings outside the city limits as well, but he couldn't be sure of where they might be or exactly where they might lead.

Maddox had a hard time staying calm when Sol and Liam started asking his mate about his life within the compound. He'd always been considered unusually strong, both he and Liam, but to live through something like what Leo had... By all sense of reason, Leo should have died from exhaustion over a month ago.

Leo spoke very briefly about his first *Master*, the word itself made Maddox growl. But the master's name caused more than a little attention as it registered.

"Kerrigan?" Maddox asked, shocked.

"Kerrigan Trent?" Sol asked.

"I never knew his last name, but I think so. He... he wasn't a good guy, even Mika was better than that guy. Hell, even Christa would be preferable to that... *thing*." As much as he'd feared Kerrigan, he'd never been too afraid to hate him. Leo noticed the others had gone quiet. He noticed Liam looking back at Maddox, who'd been holding Leo from behind, needing to stay in close contact. "What?"

Sol let out a small smile. "Leo, Maddox killed Kerrigan."

Leo's head snapped back to look at Maddox, whose eyes seemed blank. "Maddox?"

Maddox rubbed his nose against Leo's throat. "We were following a lead; new donors being brought in. There was an altercation with Kerrigan and some of his lackeys..."

"Yeah, got a real nice chunk of my guts taken out by him too," Kett spoke out, stepping forward and pulling up his shirt to show off the marred skin. Marks that looked to have been made by claws marred the skin, deep grooves shoving where strips of flesh had healed with bits still missing.

Leo had seen those kinds of injuries before on donors who were nearing their expiration date. And on shifters who'd attempted to stand against the vampires, even with the shock-collars, and been punished for their disloyalty.

Looking back at Maddox, Leo brushed his lips across his cheek. "Thank you," he whispered. He'd cried the day he found out Kerrigan was gone; the relief of never having to deal with him had been overwhelming. Now he knew it had been Maddox who'd killed him; it had been Maddox who'd saved him that day at the club. It had always been Maddox.

Maddox's grip around his waist tightened a fraction. "You're welcome, baby."

Despite having rested more the past few days than he had the past few months combined, Leo felt tired. The day had been a long one. His thoughts raced through his mind and one struck him. "When you found me, Mika was meeting with a guy, he was the one who'd made those drugs..."

"What they drugged you with, that was a new concoction?" Sol enquired, knowing full well from Jace's tests that the potency and destructiveness of the drug could easily kill a human being with the right dosage. It would probably do a number on any supernatural who got their

hands on it, too. The burn rate of the withdrawal was more than twice as long as that of any other known drugs.

"Yeah, there were several of them, different colors," Leo clarified. "I don't remember his name, but he kept his hair in a ponytail. He wasn't too happy with Mika when he injected me with the product, said it was for vampires only, not that Mika cared about that. I thought the guy was nuts the way he scolded Mika."

"Can you think of anything else baby?" Maddox asked from behind him.

Leo tried to remember, but most of that night blurred all together, "No. I... Mika mentioned something about him owning a club or a bar or something. I'm not sure; he never mentioned the place by name."

"You've done well Leo," Sol granted him.

Leo shook his head. "No I didn't, I can barely remember anything useful. I'm useless."

"No," Liam interjected. "You've given us a lot. We have people watching Mika's interactions, and I think we might know enough to find this night-crawler."

"He's not one of them, a night-crawler I mean." Leo turned to look at Liam. "I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure he was human. I can usually tell."

Liam snorted. "He's gotta be one dumb bastard dealing with their kind."

"That, or really smart and very well connected," Maddox added. "If Mika has people with those kinds of connections working for him, who knows what else he has up his sleeve."

Leo shivered, the thought of Mika getting his hands on anything more destructive than the drugs they'd used on him... the thought didn't sit well with him.

"Don't worry, baby, we'll find him and we *will* stop him."

"You won't hurt him, will you?" Leo asked, making Maddox frown.

"Baby, he must be stopped, we can't let him roam free; you know that."

"I know, but he wasn't like them. The way he acted, I mean. He seemed to despise Mika and he wouldn't..." Leo let the sentence break, squirming uncomfortably before ending with a small voice, "Not even when Mika offered it to him."

Maddox felt rage surge through his body, his lion breaking forth. That Mika would dare to trade off his Keefe like some sort of object...

"Shh," Leo whispered as Maddox growled, and soothingly rubbed back against him, reminding him that he was here now, with him, and not going anywhere.

"We won't act rashly," Sol promised. "But I can't promise you that he won't be hurt. What you saw may have

been a glimpse of humanity, but anybody who willingly deals with vampires are deemed to have certain moral flaws."

Leo could live with that. The man might have seemed somewhat humane to *him*, but he had been the one who gave Mika the new drugs, and Leo definitely wasn't a fan of those. "Yeah I guess you're right, but at least *try* to make sure he's evil before you... hurt him, too badly. I'd hate for anybody to be hurt because of me, particularly if they're innocent, or reasonably innocent."

Thoughts of his friends back at the compound worried him. He wasn't completely sure if Mika knew that Casey and Zane were his friends, but he hoped he wouldn't take Leo's disappearance out on them. They'd been the only solace he'd had for so long, even Zane's brother Zeke had watched out for him whenever he could. It would kill him if something happened to either one of them. Most likely, Mika wouldn't care. After all, he was the one who'd thrown Leo away so he could escape the cops, and Casey and Zane would live on thinking he was dead. After all, he'd been way overdue.

Maddox could sense the flurry of thoughts going through Leo's mind, but they were far too blurry for him to make any sense of them. When they mated properly he'd be able to sift through all his mate's worries and Leo would be able to do the same to him. Or at least he thought he would.

Leo was human, so there was the possibility of him not being able to enter Maddox's mind like Maddox could his. Feeling Leo shudder, he shifted his little mate in his arms, so that he straddled his lap.

Instantly Leo's hands went around Maddox's neck and he buried his face in his neck. He breathed in Maddox's powerful scent, earthy and heady, giving Leo the feeling of being high without the unpleasant side-effects. To think that something as simple as Maddox's scent could bring him that close to pure bliss was baffling, but he guessed that was a part of being mated. Thinking back, he did seem to recall Zane repeatedly breathing in Casey's scent whenever he was within range.

Leaning back to give Leo better access to his neck, Maddox soon realized what he was doing and chuckled. He was submitting to his mate, his five foot nine mate of a hundred and thirty pounds.

"Dude," Kett chuckled and Leo startled again, straightening up and lifting his quizzical eyes to Maddox's brother.

Several others chuckled at the look on Maddox's face too; he groaned as he buried his own face in Leo's chest.

"What?" Leo wanted to know. They were laughing at him and he had no idea why.

"Never mind," Maddox grumbled, despite having to suppress a chuckle of his own. After all, his little man did have him wrapped around his little finger. Yet he was completely oblivious to it. Taking Leo with him as he stood up from his seat, he carried his mate with him as he headed for the door. "We're going to bed."

"What?" Leo repeated; his brows furrowed in irritated curiosity but Maddox never said another word and brought them back to his bedroom for some much needed rest. They'd only been up a few hours, but Leo was still healing and Maddox wouldn't leave his mate for even a second. Hell, if he could figure a way to bring him along whenever he had to use the toilet without it being weird, he'd probably do that too, but that would be stretching it. Bringing along his precious mate for a shower, however, now that had potential.

CHAPTER 9

Leo spent the first couple days after awakening from his coma to get to know his mate's pride. Kett was the easiest one to get along with, and Jace wasn't half bad either, not after Leo learned that he'd never actually had sex with Maddox.

Most of his time was spent with Maddox. While they hadn't moved on to the next stage, they still spent each night wrapped in each other's arms. Leo had to admit that he was growing to love the feel of Maddox pressing up against him in the mornings. Despite the sweats, Maddox's morning urge was more than a little obvious, but he never forced the issue, even if Maddox did tend to rub against Leo in his sleep.

Things were going great and Leo was feeling more and more comfortable in his new surroundings. But, now that he was standing in a very familiar street, he felt increasingly nervous even if he had no reason to be. It was in the middle of the day and he had not only his very large, very protective mate with him, but Liam as well.

They had headed into town to see if any of Leo's possessions were still being kept at the apartment he'd first rented when he'd gotten into town. When he first rented the place he'd paid a whole of six months in advance, using up most of his savings to ensure he had a roof over his head while he searched for a job. Still, Leo had only lived there

for a few weeks before being taken, and it wouldn't surprise him if his landlord had seen him as a runaway and dumped his possessions so he could rent out the place to someone else.

Liam had to kick the lock open, seeing as Leo lost his keys a long time ago, but surprisingly his landlord must have been a better man than he'd first thought. His things were still there, exactly where he'd left them. Except for the new coat of dust covering them.

His clothes were his first priority. Finding his jeans was a big deal; he really missed his jeans. He always wore jeans, and having to wear those leather pieces Mika called clothes had only reinforced his love of denim. While his sleeping pants were nice and comfy, they weren't exactly made for daily wear. Among his stuff, Leo found a couple of chokers he'd once liked to wear. But after being dragged around like a dog for what seemed like an eternity they were the first things he threw in the trash along with a pair of old, black leather pants that an ex-boyfriend had gotten him for his eighteenth birthday.

As for his other possessions, he didn't really have much. A few books and a family album were the only things he really cared about. The rest, he didn't need.

Maddox helped him pack his things while Liam kept watch. Some vampires would occasionally show up in the day, courtesy of a drug that strengthened their

resistance to the sun, and there was no way any of them were going to let their guard down.

Throwing the bags in the trunk of the large SUV, Maddox went with Leo as he headed for the landlord's apartment to officially take his leave.

Mr Reyes was a stern looking man with a bushy mustache that Leo had always found intimidating. He never expected the smile that spread on the older man's face when he recognized Leo.

"Adams!" The man grinned excitedly as he stood up to take his hand. "I thought you were a goner for sure."

Leo could feel the tension in Maddox as Mr Reyes took his hand in his. He had to hide a smile when his mate tugged him away from the man and into his side, keeping a possessive hand around his waist while glaring at the overly friendly landlord.

Mr Reyes took a good look at Maddox and frowned before looking back at Leo. "You sure you're alright kiddo?" he asked, indicating the towering beast behind him. It was understandable that he'd be suspicious, with not having seen Leo in months, and when he finally returned it was with a man the size of a mountain who had a tendency to snarl at anyone who got too close to Leo.

Leo grinned. "Yes, Mr Reyes, everything is all right now." He twined his left hand with Maddox's right one as he said so. Maddox looked down at him with such a gentle

stare that apparently was enough to settle any of Mr Reyes's concerns.

"We've picked up most of Leo's belongings," he told Mr Reyes, pulling out a bunch of twenties, Maddox handed it to the man. "For the door," he added at the man's confused stare.

"I lost my key," Leo added sheepishly.

"Ah, right, not like I have a spare or anything," Mr Reyes muttered. "Ah, before I forget, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, he seemed adamant I not do so, but your brother was here looking for you, asked me to give him a call if I saw you. I've never made it a habit to meddle with family affairs, so if you want to call him, you call. If not, then that's your decision." Mr Reyes reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of crumpled paper with a number on it and handed it to Leo.

Leo's jaw had dropped. He hadn't heard from Joey in over a year and his brother had made it perfectly clear about what he thought about his *chosen lifestyle* the last time he saw him. Why would he suddenly try to contact him now? Had something happened to their father?

"Strange thing though," Mr Reyes continued. "He didn't look a thing like you,"

"What?" Leo asked confused, Joey had the exact same coloring as he had, maybe his eyes were a bit darker and he most definitely was bigger. But other than that they

were spitting images of their father, even if Leo had his mother's more delicate figure.

"Exactly what did this guy look like?" Maddox asked, picking up on the confusion of his mate.

"Blond guy, had this weird little scar right by the corner of his mouth." That was about all Mr Reyes could recall and he shrugged before turning away and heading back to his desk.

Leo barely was able to withhold his gasp as he'd recognized Shamus's description. When they headed back to the SUV, Leo stopped and turned, looking back at Maddox with panic in his eyes. "They're looking for me." He started to shake and his mate instantly pulled him into his arms, holding on tightly.

Maddox realized the second Leo's quakes started to intensify that the side-effects of the drugs seemed to make themselves known whenever his little mate was under extreme amounts of stress. "Don't worry, they can't have you. You're mine, and if they try anything I will do to them what I did to Kerrigan."

"You promise?" Leo asked with a shaky voice as he clung to the one safe, secure thing he had left in the world.

"No," Maddox stated as he lifted Leo to the point where they were staring eye to eye. "It's a guarantee." Maddox's threatening growl seemed to soothe Leo's body. Leo took a deep breath as he let Maddox put him in the car.

Maddox never let go of his mate as they settled into the car with Leo on Maddox' lap. During the ride, Maddox kept stroking Leo's back and murmuring strange words in his ear that he'd never heard before. Except for one, Keefe: beloved.

* * * *

It took a lot of soothing, but eventually Leo fell asleep in Maddox's arms. Maddox kept his arms wrapped around his lover, and Leo's were still wrapped as far around Maddox as he could reach. Nuzzling into the side of Maddox's neck, Leo whimpered in his sleep as he clung tighter to his mate. Turning to look at his brother, Maddox and Liam shared a worried look. They both knew Mika wouldn't bother to search for anybody insignificant. And it wouldn't surprise Maddox if the filthy leech had attached himself to his precious mate; Leo had even told him how Mika had started looking at him differently the last couple of weeks before he got away.

Rage surged through Maddox's body. He wanted nothing more than to shred that filthy piece of shit to pieces. Mika had already hurt his mate to the point of destruction, yet still he didn't have the decency to let go of Leo. The man's continued seizures worried Maddox; he still hadn't gotten around to talking to Jace about them. For now

it didn't seem like the seizures were getting worse, at least, and it seemed like they eased up when Maddox was there to hold him. Hopefully, the side-effects would fade over time, but Maddox knew they would both need to be positive. Whatever Mika had forced on Leo, it was clear that it hadn't been intended for creatures as frail and prone to diseases as humans. He could only hope Jace had given him the detox inducing drugs soon enough after exposure.

Momentarily distracted by the soft, warm breath tickling the side of his neck, Maddox could feel his body respond. His member began growing hard. Leo whimpered, but didn't pull away. If anything, he pressed closer, lightly squirming in Maddox's lap. He rubbed against Maddox's aching shaft as he squirmed, making a fine layer of sweat appear on Maddox's skin.

"You haven't claimed him yet," Liam commented next to him, and it wasn't a question.

"Not yet." Maddox's breath hitched as his mate pressed their groins together again.

"You should, it'll only get worse." Liam looked over at his brother; the fever was already starting to affect him. The possessive pheromones seeping from Maddox's skin had his lion restless. This was not proper for a pair of unmated mates.

"I know, but he needs time." Maddox's breathing became labored as his senses were overrun by the

overwhelming scent of his mate. Leo smelled of an earthy cinnamon mixed with that amazing vanilla. He could feel just how sensitive his body was getting and he knew he was starting to go into heat. The only way to rid himself of the fever would be to consummate the bond between him and his mate. But he wouldn't push that on his mate, not until Leo was ready.

"You don't have time," Liam argued, struggling to keep his beast from making him pull over so that he could run off to a safer distance. He knew Maddox wouldn't do anything to him with Leo in his lap, but a lion going into heat and not mating made for a very unstable being.

Maddox ignored the warning; Leo was far from ready to face him and his lion in a claiming. Whether he was in heat or not, it didn't matter, he would hold out for Leo for as long as he could.

CHAPTER 10

Maddox had kept himself busy since they'd returned from picking up Leo's stuff. The first thing he did was give Sol a full report. He informed him that the vampires were still looking for Leo.

Solomon had been less than pleased by the information, and they were now considering announcing Maddox's claim on Leo to the vampires. It would be risky to do so though, either the vampires would back off on their search, or they'd launch an attack to get Leo back. Maddox had also confided in Sol that he thought that Mika might have attached himself to Leo somehow and would most likely go to great lengths to have him returned to feed his obsession.

While Maddox and Solomon debated any actions to be made, Leo was left in the living room being entertained by Kett. His mate's younger brother had promptly pulled out an album filled with baby pictures of Maddox and Liam. Leo couldn't help but smile at the toothless grins of the little babies as they batted around a large stuffed animal in shape of a mouse. He also discovered the twins weren't completely identical after all; Liam had a heart shaped birthmark on his upper thigh.

When Maddox finally appeared from Sol's office, a small smile appeared on Leo's face. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Maddox had

hurriedly taken off again, seemingly heading for the medical center.

Looking back at Kett, the younger brother had a strange look on his face one that disappeared the second he realized Leo was watching him. That definitely piqued Leo's interest.

"He's probably just going to see Jace about those shivers you keep getting. Now, if I remember correctly, there's a pretty decent photo of Maddox peeing on our father when he tried to change his diaper once..." Kett trailed off, flipping through the album.

Leo didn't like the secrecy. He knew he wasn't entitled to know everything and he didn't want to bother his mate, but he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that they were purposely hiding something from him that he really needed to know about.

* * * *

Maddox was sweating by the time he got to Jace's office. The leopard was deeply engrossed in reading what looked like a copy of Darwin's *On the Origins of Species*. Already his lion was clawing at his insides, desperate to claim their unmarked mate. He was out of breath and his eyes kept shifting sporadically to those of his cat.

Not even looking up from his book, Jace chuckled uncomfortably. "You're giving off some pretty heavy pheromones there, big guy..."

A low roar broke free before Maddox could stop it, his lion not liking Jace one bit. It saw him as a viable threat to his claim on Leo. Barely restraining his lion from attacking, Maddox hissed out. "I need... something to calm him."

"Maddox, dude, under regular circumstances it might have been possible for me to subdue your little kitty. But you're in heat right now and that amount of testosterone will burn off *anything* I might give you ages before it even reaches your bloodstream." Jace very carefully kept his head down and avoided eye contact. A feline shifter in heat was a very unpredictable creature, and while he might not be a pushover, Maddox's lion would make a meal out of him if he thought Jace might try something, like humping Leo.

Hissing, Maddox started to pace. Even though Leo was on the other side of the mansion, his lion had his senses locked on target on Leo and Kett. If at any moment he sensed something that might be considered foul play, not even his kinship with the mountain lion would be able to save him. "He's not ready," Maddox ground out between clenched teeth.

Learning that the vampires were still after Leo had instantly triggered Maddox's protective instincts. The thought of his mate not being properly claimed and basically a free agent for all who smelled him had him thrown head first into the mating heat. Just because Maddox would stand idly by, biding his time until Leo was ready, didn't mean his lion would risk anybody else claiming their mate first. The fact that he was already marked by the blood drinkers didn't ease his possessiveness; that someone had marred their pretty mate like that was unforgivable.

"Maybe you should *make* him ready, Mad. You can't hide from this forever. You're ready to gut someone and I don't particularly want to be the one who has to shovel his organs back where they belong. My suggestion, have Solomon talk to him, have him explain things so that he can prepare himself."

"He's not ready," Maddox insisted.

"He *is* your mate; he has a say in this just as much as you do. Don't you go around making decisions on his behalf; let him tell you what he wants,"

Maddox stared at the leopard, surprised by the wisdom in his eyes.

"What? I'm not just a pretty face you know; I do have an MD."

Snorting, Maddox headed back out the door. He shifted his focus on walking slowly over to his mate so not to startle him by leaping at him and licking him all over like his lion wanted. Instead he ended up stalking him like a predator.

Leo could feel the intensity of Maddox's stare on him long before he heard Maddox moving up behind him. He felt a slight shiver of delight pass through him at being this man's prey. Blood started surging both to his face and lower. He barely noticed Kett's slow retreat as Maddox started hissing. The noise added to the shivers racking his body. These ones weren't caused by distress but by pure, undiluted desire. It was a feeling he'd thought to have been forever damaged. But as his large mate bent down behind the couch and nuzzled his neck, a low purr caressing his left ear, he knew he'd always be in heat for Maddox's gentle touch.

The increasing scent of arousal drove Maddox wild; he was torn between the need to soak in his lover's enticing fragrance, and simply taking what he wanted to slake his needs. His restraint broke to pieces as he wrapped his arms around Leo's waist. Lifting the smaller man off the couch and causing Leo to yelp in surprise, Maddox clumsily turned him in his arms. He latched on to Leo's throat, sucking up a mark of possession before moving to nip at his jaw.

Leo started breathing hard and clutched Maddox's powerful upper arms. He wrapped his legs around his mate and arched into his body. Despite everything he'd been through, this primal side of Maddox never failed to drive him out of his mind. When his mouth was devoured by the hungry lion, a strong moist tongue made way to mate with his. Maddox's purrs continued, seemingly vibrating through his entire body and from his body to Leo's.

Leo swore he felt Maddox's rumbles along the inseam of his groin. Leo couldn't help himself; he started rubbing against the straining, denim-clad monster pressing up against his rump as Maddox settled him on his knee.

Maddox felt like he was going to burst. Inwardly, his lion roared his victory. He barely had the time to think about it before he broke their kiss and struck. His fangs sunk deep into the flesh of Leo's throat, right where he'd a moment ago had sucked up a mark. He heard Leo scream before his body went limp in his arms.

CHAPTER 11

Solomon should have kicked his ass; how could he have been so reckless? He'd attacked his mate with no real consent and marked his claim on him in the most brutal way, with no regard of his precious mate's previous history. All in all, he felt no better than all those damned leeches that'd bitten and taken from him a thousand times before.

When Leo fainted, Maddox had panicked and rushed him into Jace's office, only to snarl at him when he tried to check on Leo's condition. In the end, Jace had to call in Solomon to do the checkup on Leo, directed by a slightly annoyed snow leopard from across the room; the Sorena being the only feline Maddox's lion hesitated to go up against.

Leo was fine physically, which allowed Maddox to breathe again, but Solomon had properly chewed him out for his caveman behavior. It was highly frowned upon to mark someone unaware of the situation. And while Leo did know they were life mates, and had responded to it well enough, there was still much he needed to know about life in the shifter community.

Maddox could only hope that Leo wouldn't resent him for it.

* * * *

Leo stretched out on the bed when he awoke. He reached for Maddox, only to find the place next to him empty. Craning his neck, he winced as he felt the burning sensation radiating from the new bite in his neck. He gasped, remembering what had happened, how Maddox had been more animal than human, but had still excited him. Then he'd broken their kiss and...

Trying not to hyperventilate, he massaged his neck as he got out of bed and headed off into the bathroom with lightening speed. He didn't expect what he saw in the bathroom mirror. Understandably, Maddox's bite was red and irritated, but behind it, his skin was flawless. He had to blink a few times before believing it, staring in wonder at the reflection. The scars were completely gone; all that marred his skin was Maddox's mark. Looking down, he saw that even the needle marks on his arms had vanished completely, leaving behind no trace at all.

Leo needed to find Maddox right away. He ran out the door, promptly tripping into his oversized mate's lap.

Maddox barely caught Leo in time as he ran him over, saving his mate from a new headache. He hadn't dared to stay in the room after what had happened, afraid of Leo's reaction and his own reaction as well. His fever was still going strong and, despite the guilt, his lion wanted nothing more than to rub all over his unconscious mate. It wasn't like he needed to invade Leo's space any further than

he already had. When Leo turned in his lap and attached his lips to Maddox's, Maddox was immobilized by confusion, even *with* the fiery burst of joy from his cat.

Leo was confused by Maddox not responding. He pulled back and looked up at his lover with a confused look on his face.

"You're not mad?" Maddox asked incredulously. He was trying to fight his growing erection at Leo's close proximity.

"You should have asked. And if you ever do anything like that again without my say so I'm gonna kick your ass to the moon."

Maddox chuckled briefly. The way Leo looked at him threatened to make him shudder. His mate might be little in size but he meant business. "Okay," he answered, not really knowing what else to say to his glaring mate. "But you forgive me?"

Leo sighed. "I guess. You did score some brownie points on the scar thing."

Maddox was confused, he could see the radiating burn of the bite; he should probably have Jace look at it for him. "It marks you as taken, as mine. If it ever fades I'll have to bite you again. It's more for my cat than for me," he admitted as his cheeks reddened.

"You like it?" Leo guessed.

The color of Maddox's cheeks darkened. He'd never admit it, but the moment he bit into Leo's neck and the taste of ambrosia hit his tongue, he'd... erupted. It was embarrassing as hell, twice now he'd shot his load without Leo doing anything. It was just the way Leo responded and the way he tasted and smelled; all of it drove both him and his lion frantic with lust.

Chuckling, Leo placed a small kiss on his mate's cheek. "I guess you do." Leo squirmed in Maddox's lap to get a better position. When he noticed the hardening cock beneath his ass, it was Leo's turn to blush. "The next time just, give me a heads up first."

"Yeah, I think I can do that." Maddox wrapped his hands around Leo's waist pressing him closer. He not so subtly rubbed against Leo to mark him with his scent and to relieve some of his ache.

Even with the heat of Maddox's body distracting him, Leo scrunched his brows together. "You *think*? What kind of an answer is that?"

"My lion has a will of its own; I can't always keep him under control. He wants you, and because I do too, that makes me weak to him." Maddox breathed across the bite mark, cooling the burn at the same time as he breathed in Leo's enticing scent.

Leo couldn't suppress the delighted shiver that ran through him. The thought of the two sides of his mate both

wanting him so much that they'd even fight each other for him was almost too much. A strange thought crossed his mind though and his face heated up to the extreme.

"What?" Maddox asked, tilting Leo's face to his.

With a light stutter Leo asked about what had flustered him, "Do you... I mean, shifters... do you ever, you know... when you're in your other shape, when you're not human... human-shaped?"

Maddox had to think a bit before he realized what Leo was addressing. "Oh." That wasn't what he'd had expected to come from his mate and he didn't really know how to respond to that, even despite his lion's yowling. "Well..."

"Of course we do," Jace interrupted as he appeared around the corner of the hallway. "And it's real good too; all animalistic and primal. Well, at least if you're both in shifted forms, but I bet if you ask nicely your man might just do you in his *Triferus* shape."

Maddox hissed at Jace when he leaned far too close to his mate as far as he and his lion was concerned, but Jace simply smirked.

Leo's face felt like it was on fire. Jace's words weren't exactly subtle and seemed very much primal indeed. "What's a Triferus?" he managed to breathe out when he felt calm enough to ask.

Looking back at his mate, Maddox assessed how well Leo would take to all of these things. To Maddox, just the thought of being allowed to take possession of his beautiful mate in his third form was enough to make his whole body throb. It was one of the more primal ways of love making among shifters, something only shared by mated couples. If Leo had been a shifter himself, Maddox would also have taken him in his animal form, a joy often following couples after a hunt. But that would be impossible seeing as Leo was human. But taking him as a Triferus was a different story.

"Maddox?" Leo asked again, making him snap back to attention.

"Being in a Triferus form is a shifter in its third form. It's not as bad as those old werewolf movies, but it's sort of similar. If I were to turn into my third shape I'd still stand on two legs. For the most part, my face would change slightly, turning more feline-like, but still closer to human."

"So you're not going to turn into some man sized cat, right?"

"Not exactly. I'll be walking on two, looking almost the same as I always do, only bigger."

"And a lot hairier," Jace added.

Leo's eyes widened; his mate was already the size of a small mountain. "How much bigger are we talking

exactly?" he asked nervously; then Jace's comment sank in. "You'll have fur?"

Maddox could feel the tension in his lover's body, but was again interrupted from answering the question himself.

"Don't worry about that kid; the fur is all soft and cuddly. And as for his size, he'll only be a few inches taller and a few inches wider. Of course, his dick might double in size, but hey, there haven't been any complaints about that, not yet anyway. You might, however, want to consider stacking up on lube though; you can never have too much lube." Jace snickered before handing a jar of cooling liquid over to the skittish little man. "And this, while it may be used for lubrication, it is much better used for that big ol' nasty mating mark of yours." The snow leopard snickered again before sauntering off somewhere else.

With his jaw dropped, Leo tried to take it all in. But he wasn't even sure if he'd be able to take Maddox the size he was now. If what Jace said was right...

"Jace is right," Maddox stated.

Startled, Leo slipped out an unintended, "He is?"

"Yes, but also about there not having been any complaints. It's a sacred thing reserved for mates. There are many shifters with human mates who've all benefitted from this, but I'll never do anything that you don't want me to," Maddox swore even as his lion sulked in the back of his

mind. Neither of them would ever do anything to hurt their mate, even if they really, really wanted to take him as a Triferus.

"So the... a Triferus, it's for sex?" Leo asked still nervous, but also still craving to know more. There was something both terrifying and thrilling about the concept, but he knew he was far from being ready for something like that. After all, he needed more time right? He was supposed to need more time.

Maddox chuckled. "No, primarily you change into your Triferus to fight. Our beasts may be strong, but sometimes we need a little extra boost to get the job done. When we're in our third form we're practically bulletproof. Of course, claws that can cut through steel aren't bad either."

"Claws?" Leo stuttered. Maddox was supposed to ease his worries not add to them. Claws might be good in a battle, but if he thought that they would be intimate, when he could be shredded at a moment's notice, he was crazy.

"Leo, breathe, okay?" Maddox rubbed Leo's cheek with his hand while using the other to bring him closer, soothing the panic that had started to show. "Here, look at this." Holding up his hand in front of Leo, he let his nails elongate and sharpen. Leo gasped when the nails stopped lengthening at two inches, vicious hooks looking deadly and graceful all at once. "Complete control," Maddox said

as he brought them back in. "Retractable claws are a feline thing."

"Oh," Leo didn't know if he should be reassured or freaked about it.

When Leo took too long thinking, Maddox stole a kiss, bringing the attention back to him. "Are you okay with this?" he asked, carefully trying not to breach any boundaries better left alone between them.

Thinking about it, Leo replied truthfully, "I don't really know." He was somewhat freaked and somewhat turned on by it. But he just didn't know exactly how he felt about it.

Maddox's shoulders slumped. He had hoped Leo would have accepted it right away or at least that he'd be okay with it. Even if he knew Leo had reasons to turn him away, he still hoped.

"I'm not rejecting you," Leo added at Maddox's defeated look. The hopeful look that looked up at him made him feel like a jerk for having put such a dent in his mate's ego in the first place. "I'll need some time is all, and if you, er, we're going to... with your Triferus..." Leo stuttered, his face as red as a fire-engine. "I'll need to get used to *you* first."

Groaning, Maddox pulled Leo's face to his, delving deep with his tongue, tasting his lovely mate. He wasn't rejected; Leo was just nervous about being able to take him

and he wanted to be with him, the real him, first. His lion roared with satisfaction and made his presence known. Leo's hips were grasped in a bruising grip as Maddox ground his erection against Leo's ass.

Whimpering, Leo barely even had enough brain power left to form a single thought as his mate claimed his mouth. Maddox cleverly drew Leo's own tongue into his mouth as he sucked on it. Leo's hips rocked against his overheated mate.

With one hand hooked around Maddox's neck, he let his other drift across his lover's face. After a moment, he broke the kiss, much to Maddox's grumbled objection.

"You're really hot," Leo stated.

Maddox purred. "So are you, love, more than you'll ever know." He pouted when Leo pulled back from him when Maddox tried to kiss him again.

"Maddox I'm serious, you're burning up." Leo was worried his mate might be coming down with something. "I'm going to get Jace," he started to get up, but Maddox pulled him back down again, making Leo's struggles to get up to get the doctor futile.

"It's not catching," Maddox mumbled as he tried to bring Leo's mouth back to his, frustrated when Leo pulled back again.

"You shouldn't be messing about like this with a fever, you need to lie down." Leo was persistent; there was

no way he'd let Maddox overexert himself, it would only make his fever worse. Getting up he reached for his mate's large arm, urging him up. "Come on, you lie down in bed and I'll go make you some chicken soup. That should fix you right up." Leo tugged on Maddox's arm, but he didn't move. An embarrassed look marred his mate's face.

"What?"

Maddox had to try hard not to look away as he caught Leo's concerned look. "I'm not sick."

"Of course you're sick. If your fever gets any higher than it already is—" Leo tried to explain to his stubborn mate, but was interrupted by the last thing he'd ever thought would come out his mate's mouth.

"I'm in heat."

CHAPTER 12

Leo was literally struck dumb by Maddox's statement. Maddox was in heat? Was that even possible? Maddox was a feline shifter, but still... "Isn't that a *female* feline thing?" he asked dumbfounded.

"Not amongst shifters," Maddox muttered, suddenly very fascinated with his shoelaces.

"So, you're in heat? Like with the whole... needs thing?" Leo's brows were raised, making his curiosity evident.

To answer Leo's question, Maddox sat up straight and displayed the bulge inside his jeans. Leo's face turned pink.

"So, does this happen often?" What Leo really wanted to know was it like a seasonal thing or was it the shifter version of PMS, coming once every month like clockwork?

"The first time it happens is a few days after you've found your mate. It happens about three or four times a year after that."

"This is your first time, in heat, then? So, what is the, ah, procedure for this being in heat thing?" Even though he asked, he already suspected the answer.

Maddox let out an exasperated laugh. His little minx of a mate was really going to make him say it out

loud. Locking eyes with Leo, he answered his question with one of his own. "We fuck like rabbits?"

Leo felt like the air had been knocked out of his lungs. With all of Maddox's qualities, subtlety definitely wasn't one of them. Blushing furiously, Leo struggled for something to say. Coming up short, he bit his lip as he tugged at Maddox's arm again, gesturing with his head to the bedroom.

Maddox's eyes went wide and he couldn't get off the ground fast enough. With what seemed like a blur, he swept Leo into his arm and was already lowering his body to the bed. He covered the lithe body of his mate with his own much larger one before Leo even realized what was happening. Backing off, Maddox needed to make sure Leo consented to what was about to happen. If they got started, he doubted he'd be able to stop.

He didn't need to ask; Leo had fastened his mouth to his neck, making a claim of his own as he sucked up a mark. At the same time, he let his hands work to unfasten Maddox's belt. Groaning, Maddox threw his shirt over his head. Almost instantly, Leo's eager hands travelled across the planes of muscles exposed and his mouth latched onto a dusky pink nipple.

Maddox couldn't have stopped the roar even if he wanted to. Leo had taken him by surprise and even his lion had trouble keeping up. When Leo bit down, Maddox

growled. The denim and flannel of Leo's pajama bottoms proved far too much of a barrier between their bodies. Leo's pajama bottoms were turned to shreds in the matter of seconds, Maddox's claws making quick work of them. With only his zipper open Maddox grasped their needing limbs together in a strong grip, jerking them off together.

Maddox seized Leo's mouth again as his erection burned against his mate's touch at the devastating pace he'd set. With his mouth being plundered by Maddox's strong tongue, it only took a few more strokes before he let out a scream, muffled only by Maddox's mouth. It didn't take much more than that before Maddox quickly followed, their mixed juices spread across their stomachs.

With both of them breathing hard from their release, Maddox fell off to the side of his mate. "Needed to take the edge off," he panted. Despite the mind-shattering orgasm, his erection still hadn't gone down, and the heat inside of him hadn't decreased a bit. If anything, it only flared stronger.

"Mmm hmm." Leo drifted in a haze of pleasure; it always seemed that Leo's systems went haywire whenever his mate touched him. Looking over to his panting mate, Leo realized Maddox's erection was still going strong, and hell if that didn't make his deflated cock refill, or at least attempt to do so. He saw the strained look on his mate's

face and knew he was holding back. Feeling a little shy, he turned against Maddox and reached for his hand.

Maddox turned to look at him with a puzzled gaze before Leo sucked two of his fingers into his mouth. Maddox's eyes immediately turned into thin feline slits, his lion close to the surface. Turning so they faced each other completely, Leo was too flustered to keep eye contact for very long. With the fingers slick with saliva Leo drew the fingers out of his mouth and pulled Maddox's hand down between his legs and back towards his puckered opening.

Leo's face felt heated to the point of catching fire. The last time anybody had come this close to him it had put the fear of god in him. But with Maddox, his shivers were all lust and desire. He loved the fact that Maddox let him have some sense of control, let him take initiative. Right now he wanted nothing more than to have his mate possess every part of him, to claim him fully and properly. Leo gasped when Maddox's fingers brushed across his entrance.

With his lion roaring for Maddox to take what Leo offered, Maddox gently probed at his mate's opening, first slipping in one finger to the knuckle. He would have to stretch his mate properly before even considering entering him, particularly after what Leo had been through in the past.

Leo whimpered. Maddox's probing finger was so devastatingly hot as it entered him and felt so right filling

him. The burn he felt soon gave way as Maddox's finger pushed in another inch or so and brushed against his prostate, making him fight another eruption with all his might. But when his mate bumped up against his prostate a second time his efforts fell short and he cried out, small bursts of liquid coating both his and Maddox's stomach.

Rumbles emanated from Maddox's chest when he felt Leo's tight channel rhythmically constrict and relax around his finger. When Leo's climax seemed to dull down, Maddox shoved in a second finger, pulling him straight into an aftershock of euphoria as he clawed at Maddox's back. He pressed his depleted organ against his lover's groin as it jerked helplessly, trying to resurrect itself.

Maddox was sure Leo had no idea what he was doing to him. With Leo's teeth deep in his neck, he knew he had to keep going, both he and his cat demanded it. Moving his fingers, Maddox made sure to rub against Leo's prostate on each push, driving his little mate insane.

"Please!" Leo moaned desperately, pressing his miraculously resurrected organ up against his man, desperate to come again. "More! Please!"

Scissoring his fingers, Maddox worked hard to stretch his mate, but he couldn't hold back anymore. His cock was so strained he feared he'd bruise if he didn't bury himself to the hilt inside of his Keefe soon.

Rolling on top of Leo, whose face was flushed and his hair sexily disheveled due to their ministrations in bed, he gently kissed Leo's soft lips. All the while he kept pushing in and out with his fingers. "You ready?"

"Please!" Leo yelled. His voice had become hoarse as he moved his hips with his mate's fingers. He was desperate to be filled. Slipping one of his legs onto Maddox's hips, he tried to draw him closer to where he needed him to be.

Rolling them over, Maddox seated himself between Leo's thighs and leaned down to kiss his Keefe's lips. Maddox swept his tongue inside of Leo's mouth and soaked up the flavor. When Leo's needy whimpers reached him and he was restlessly grabbed onto by the hips, Maddox grabbed onto his willing lover's thighs. Lifting him up and pulling him closer, he aligned his throbbing cock to Leo's opening. Maddox carefully watched his mate's expression as he started pushing in. Whenever Leo winced or bit his lip, Maddox stilled so Leo could adjust. His lion was oddly complacent as they took their time.

Leo let out a content sigh as Maddox bottomed out inside of him. It had been painful at first, but Maddox had been so gentle and given him time to get used to the feeling. Now, all he felt was full, full and content. He'd doubted his ability to take all of Maddox, but now, having

him seated completely inside, he was in heaven. Soft lips met his and he instantly let the kiss grow deeper.

Leo fought the urge to laugh, but he didn't hide it well as he smiled into Maddox's kiss. His big, masculine lion-man was purring, the rumbles shaking through both of their bodies as he was pressed down into the mattress.

"What?" Maddox asked when Leo's shaking laugh became too much for his curiosity. He was seated deep into his mate's core and his mate was laughing at him?

"You're purring," Leo smirked up at his lion-man.

Maddox groaned and buried his face in Leo's neck.

"I don't suppose you can forget you ever heard that?"

"No way. Besides, it feels really, really nice," Leo giggled with a blush.

"Fine," Maddox answered with a sly grin as he looked down at his far too amused mate. "I'll just have to make you forget then."

"Oh, how are you going to— *ah!*" Leo cried out as Maddox thrust into him, nailing his prostate perfectly.

"Like that," Maddox practically roared as he let his lion set the pace. Pulling out, with nothing but the head of his cock remaining inside, he slammed his entire length straight back in. Leo's nails deep in his back only spurred him on and he continued to fuse their mouths together, swallowing down his mate's pleased moans.

Leo could barely keep up; he couldn't remember ever feeling this great or this desperate before. His mate brushed up against his prostate on every thrust, and with his straining cock pressed between their bodies, the intense friction didn't take Leo long to come. His cock jerked helplessly again as he cried out his release, but drained from his earlier climaxes only a single drop of the viscous liquid escaped him.

With a roar Maddox came, pumping great loads into his mate, marking him completely from the inside out. Unable to help it, his lion struck for his mate's neck, biting deep into the mating mark. Leo cried out, but when Maddox tried to pull back, his mate's hand gripping his hair kept him down.

"Oh, God!" Leo breathed out. He'd never been able to take pleasure in a bite before. But with the lingering aftershocks of his release, Maddox's teeth in his neck only seemed to heighten his pleasure.

Maddox's slowly withdrew his teeth from Leo's neck, making him whimper. Carefully, Maddox let his tongue brush over the bite, soothing the sting. "You okay?"

"Mmm hmm," Leo got out in a sleepy voice, snuggling in under Maddox's throat.

Extracting himself from Leo's tired body, he lay down next to his mate. He drew Leo into his embrace, letting him snuggle into his neck as the smaller man drifted

off into sleep. His lion had no objections to baring his throat to his mate; Leo was the one person he would never hesitate in submitting to, for as long as he got to share the man's bed and heart.

CHAPTER 13

Leo woke with a start as a large, rough tongue licked him under his chin. He almost screamed when he saw the large beast lying next to him. A soft rumble made him realize his mate had shifted in his sleep. The lion was large and majestic, but the coloring seemed off. Instead of the bright tan fur Leo had expected, his fur had a slightly browner hue, darkening the majestic cat somewhat. But the eyes, they were the same, with their golden shade and the narrowed pupils he'd seen before when he knew Maddox's lion had been close.

"Hey kitty," Leo breathed out. He stretched out a shaking hand for the cat to smell.

The lion leaned into his hand and purred, causing Leo let out a small laugh. Hearing the familiar purr settled his nerves. He was amazed at how soft his mate was in this shape. He'd had a cat once, when he was growing up, an orange tabby, but she hadn't been anywhere near as soft as Maddox. Burying his hands in his mate's thick mane, the big cat leaned in again and drew his tongue across Leo's face. "Eh, don't slobber," Leo complained. The tongue felt like a three-day stubble, feeling rough against his skin.

The cat only purred at him louder and licked him again, this time on the other side of his face. "You're enjoying this way too much. Leo pretended to pout as he wiped his cheek dry. Sitting up, Leo winced. His stomach

was coated in a layer of dried come that had begun to chip off; he needed to get cleaned up. He got up, despite the cat's obvious dismay; the feline letting out a displeased rumble as Leo headed into the bathroom.

"Relax, kitty. I'm just going to go clean up." He petted his mate as if he were a real pet. Sitting there, he noticed how big Maddox was in this form — the normally large man now took up over half of the king sized bed. Were real lions this big too? he wondered.

Leo had to admit he was a little wobbly as he walked into the shower; Maddox had definitely given him a run for his money. He moaned as the warm water hit his skin, soothing his aches. A longing yowl sounded and he looked to see the giant lion looking at him with what could only be described as puppy-dog eyes. "Sorry kitten, but you won't fit in the shower."

Another pleading yowl sounded and Leo had to stifle a laugh. "If you want to join me I'm afraid you'll have to change back."

The large cat huffed and lay down on the floor in the doorway, barely able to fit his large shoulders through it. It wasn't long after Leo started scrubbing his skin that Maddox's large arms wrapped around him from behind and a hard shaft settled against his lower back.

"You changed." Leo moaned as Maddox took hold of his hardening shaft.

"You made me." Maddox stroked his mate's growing erection until it reached its full length. "Is it like this every time? When you're in heat?" Leo somehow managed to ask, which was remarkable seeing as all of his blood had surged in the opposite direction of his head.

"No," Maddox simply stated. "It's like this always; I'll just have more control of myself when I'm not in heat." He leaned in and started nibbling on Leo's earlobe.

Leo didn't protest when Maddox's fingers slipped into his crack and started teasing his puckered hole. Leo pressed back to meet them, just barely making the tip of one of Maddox's fingers push past the tight ring.

Purring into Leo's neck, Maddox was pleased to feel that his mate was still a bit stretched from their night together. After he'd fallen asleep, his lion had wanted a proper introduction to his mate. Too tired to resist, Maddox shifted in bed right next to his mate. Thankfully, Leo hadn't crumbled in fear and had even petted the big cat. But the whole *Kitty* thing, now *that* was mildly disturbing.

He grabbed hold of the mildly scented shower gel and lubed his fingers with it, making it a lot easier to stretch his mate. Leo was breathing heavily, each breath a low moan that literally made his knees weak. Not able to hold it anymore, Maddox lubed up his straining shaft and gently pushed inside of his mate.

Leo winced at bit at the sting, but quickly realized he'd never tire of feeling his mate slip inside of him. He felt whole when he was connected with Maddox like this, like he'd found what he'd been missing for a very long time — something lost to him at the hands of the vampires.

As Maddox started gently thrusting into him, he let his hand fall back to hold onto the powerful arms holding him. Leo cried out when Maddox hit his sweet spot.

Their lovemaking was slow and sensual, intensified by the hot rain of water hitting their bodies from the shower. When they finally came, they came at the same time, both of them letting out a groan. Maddox held him close for several minutes before his softened cock slipped out. With a sigh, Leo turned in his arms and for several moments they just stood there kissing and touching each other at a leisurely pace.

After they'd both dried off, Maddox swiftly carried Leo off to bed again and started rubbing his body all over Leo. "You can't be ready to go again? We just... two seconds ago."

"I'm marking you." Maddox purred as he continued to cover every inch of his Keefe's body with his own. His lion hadn't been too keen on Leo washing off their scent and had reluctantly shifted so that he could at least join him and strengthen their bond. But now, after their shower, Maddox wanted to transfer his scent over to his precious

mate. Particularly considering they lived in a place filled with unmated males.

Then again, marking his mate like that in his current situation was a sensual affair and his lion was definitely purring. He started nipping at Leo's jaw, kissing his throat and moving down, letting his tongue flick across one of his Keefe's plump, pink nipples. Leo shivered and moaned until a rumble made him stop.

Leo blushed; he'd been well on his way for another round with Maddox when his stomach had suddenly growled out loud.

Maddox groaned, failing miserably at hiding his disappointment. He had to admit, though, he wouldn't exactly turn down a steak right about now, preferably rare. "We're having meat," he stated, pulling Leo up with him as he got up off the bed. Dressing his mate, Maddox made sure to cover as much skin as he could. He wished Leo wasn't so fond of those tight t-shirts of his, they revealed far too much, but Leo's sweaters weren't covered with his scent yet so they were a no go. "Stay close, okay?"

"Why?" Leo asked, a little short of breath. Maddox dressing him was followed by quite a bit of fondling and it was tempting to delay their meal, for just a little bit, or maybe longer. Another rumble disrupted the silence again though, and his face flared red.

"I... we... My lion and I are very territorial, particularly now." He brought Leo close to his body, Maddox's hard shaft proving his point. "I would hate to end up hurting my brothers because they came too close to you."

The possessiveness in his mate's eyes told Leo that he was completely serious. It was a primal thing. Alpha males would fight for their mates and if they sensed someone was a threat to their claim... It just occurred to Leo how much he understood about his mate's other half; the disturbing thing though, was that he'd learnt it all from the nature channel.

* * * *

Their feast had been an interesting affair; Maddox had insisted on having Leo sit on his lap while they ate at one end of the table. Damien and Kett were huddled together at the other end. When Kett reached out for the pepper, which was at the middle of the table, Maddox had put a possessive hand around Leo's waist and snarled viciously at his younger brother. Kett instantly pulled back, looking longingly at forgotten seasoning.

Glaring at his brother, Maddox picked up a slice of turkey and fed it to Leo, who had given up trying to feed himself after Maddox kept pouting at him. It was amazing

how thrilled the lion-man was just to be allowed to feed him. Then again, sharing one's kill was a mate thing wasn't it? Maddox's lion wanting to provide for his mate? In a way, it was kinda sweet, but he didn't think he would be telling Maddox that.

As they were starting to finish up their meal, Maddox had started subtly grinding up against him. Having Maddox's erection grind up against Leo was more than a little distracting, and Leo still hadn't gotten to taste the peach cobbler Damien had made. The vampire didn't scare him as much anymore as long as he didn't make any sudden moves towards him. Of course, having a nearly rabid lion shifter at his back also provided him a sense of security.

A whimper escaped Leo as Maddox started kissing him on the back of his neck, letting out his tongue to soothe the bite and keep it clean as it healed. Kett and Damien had scattered off somewhere, leaving the two of them alone. The memories of Maddox almost conquering him on that very table a few days ago stirred in Leo's mind as his lover's hands became increasingly exploratory. Maddox's hand slipped down to press against Leo's erection.

Pulling down the zipper of Leo's jeans he let his hand slip inside. He nearly struck out in attack when Kett burst back in through the door, only hesitating as Leo was still on his lap.

"We've had an incident!" Kett stated hurriedly, "Sol wants us in his office now."

Maddox did not like the sound of that. Leo zipped up his pants and they headed for the office. Maddox was still apprehensive with other males near his mate, but what really piqued his interest was who wasn't there. "Where's Liam? Shouldn't he be here?" Liam was second in command and was always present for a debriefing.

Sol had a worried expression. "He's in the other room... He passed out a few minutes ago."

"What the fuck happened?" Maddox demanded to know. His twin was strong and far from faint hearted, whatever had happened wasn't something small. "Is Jace with him?"

"He was," Sol stated. "We received a tip from one of the local packs, about a bar owner named Link. He's said to have been dealing with vampires. I sent Liam and Jace to check it out, with Jace posing as a client." Sol had a tortured look on his face.

"They have Jace, don't they?" Leo asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, they do," Sol admitted, but there was still something he wasn't telling them.

"It's Mika isn't it," Leo got out, his eyes weary and becoming moist. "He wants me back..."

Sol avoided his eyes and Leo knew he was right;
they'd taken Jace and it was all because of him.

CHAPTER 14

"Why the hell didn't any of you tell me this?"

Maddox was fuming. Not only had they put his twin in danger, but they hadn't even told him about it and now Liam was out cold, probably with internal bleedings, and their only doctor was in enemy hands.

Leo sat huddled in a chair, with his legs pulled up to his chest, hiding his face. Mika had Jace... and he wanted Leo back. It didn't take a genius to know he wanted to make a trade. He couldn't have stopped the silent tears sliding down his cheek even if he'd tried.

Maddox felt bad for his mate; he knew Leo wasn't at fault for this. Sitting down, he pulled his Keefe into his lap, gently rocking him back and forth.

"It's my fault." Leo sobbed into Maddox's shoulder.

"Look at me," Maddox ordered to make his mate look at him; it killed him to see the tears in his eyes. "This was never your fault, Keefe, but in this case, I'm glad that Mika has attached himself to you."

Shocked, Leo almost smacked his mate across the face; Maddox easily caught his hand a few inches from his face and kissed it gently. "How can you say that?" Leo hissed outraged.

"Leo, baby, if hadn't been for you, Liam and Jace would both be in body bags right now. Instead, we have Liam here, my twin brother; here, safe and healing,"

Maddox told his mate as he wiped the tears from Leo's face with his thumb. "And you've given us the time to get Jace back. We would never have had that, hadn't it been for you, Keefe." He kissed the top of Leo's head. His lover continued to sob, but the shaking seeming to have stilled somewhat.

Leo knew that what Maddox said was true, but he still felt guilty about Jace being in Mika's hands. "Are you going to trade him back?" Leo asked in a low, frightened voice. Mika wanted *him*, and Jace had been their family for years. They'd only known Leo for barely more than a week. He knew it was well within their rights to trade him to get Jace back, but he doubted he'd be able to survive another day in Mika's care.

When Maddox growled, Leo jumped. "I will *never* let Mika have you!" His mate roared as he tightened his grip around his Keefe. Nobody would ever be allowed to put their hands on Leo again. Not without being thoroughly shredded.

Leo tightened his own grip around Maddox's neck. He didn't want to leave his new life. To be ripped from this, from his little piece of heaven, and be thrown back to the hell he'd escaped from would have been beyond cruel. And he never wanted Maddox to let go of him, not ever.

* * * *

Jace had a massive headache when he woke up. Of course, the bullet in his leg didn't exactly make him feel any better. "Christ, those vamps don't pack light, do they?"

"Not usually, no," a voice reached him from his right.

A beautiful blond handed him a bottle of water, which he gratefully accepted. "Thanks? Wanna tell me your name is, beautiful?" He smirked, definitely aware of the slender male's appeal.

"His name," a harsh voice growled, "Is Casey and he is not *your* beautiful!" The large, intimidating male snapped at him, definitely wolf from what he could deduce from the growls.

"You're Leo's friends," Jace realized as he said the words.

"You know Leo," the guy named Casey asked him ecstatically. "Is he okay? I thought he was dead."

"Leo is fine," Jace ensured the suddenly hyped up little guy. "And mated," he added, to Casey's puzzlement.

"Leo's mated? To who? A wolf?" Casey asked him.

"Lion actually," Jace told him as he checked on his poorly bandaged wound.

"There are lion shifters?" the blond asked confused, then frowned as he looked up at the wolf. "You never told me there were cat shifters?"

"You never asked?" The wolf shrugged.

Jace unwrapped his injured leg and inspected the wound; the bullet was still in there. He let his claws take form and dug them in the wound.

Casey gasped next to him and looked back at the wolf again. "Can you do that too? You never showed me."

Jace snorted. "He wishes he could do that." Then he winced when he nicked a nerve.

The wolf growled at him again before turning to Casey. "Wolves don't have retractable claws," he simply stated, glaring at Jace. Apparently not his biggest fan.

"Yes!" Jace grinned as the bullet popped out of the wound, and then huffed. "Silver? Hey dog boy, I think they might have mistaken me for you."

Casey had to hold the wolf back when he advanced, but they were all interrupted when Mika, accompanied by a high street skank, walked in with three armed guards. Mika's eyes were red rimmed and his pupils dilated, symptoms of, say, high as a bloody kite.

Jace hadn't forgotten the bitch either, she was the one who capped him in the leg. She didn't appear to be under the influence of whatever the hell Mika was on, but man, did she have the crazy eyes or what?

Mika took out his cell and dialed a number. "Hello, why yes, this is Mika." The vampire smiled. "Solomon Jorgens I presume? Well, we all know why I am calling

don't we? Kitten," he gestured to Jace and held out the cell for him to speak to, "Say hi."

"He's doped up Sol!" He got out before the vampire snapped the phone back hissing at him.

"Let's cut the small talk; I have something of yours and you have something that belongs to *me*! Bring Leo to the warehouse behind Link's bar tomorrow night at eight. If you don't, I'll have a fancy new rug for my office!"

CHAPTER 15

"I will *not* risk him!" Maddox snarled at Solomon for the umpteenth time. Sorena or not, he would not allow Leo to be brought into the line of fire.

"We won't let them hurt him, but we need something that will get us close enough to Jace to extract him." Solomon remained calm, at least on the surface. Jace was a dear friend to Sol, the only one who came with him from his original pride. They had known each other since they were cubs.

"Maddox?" Leo asked as he took his mate's hand between the two of his, gently tugging to make his lover look at him, "Maybe..."

"No!" he snapped and pulled Leo close, securing him within his arms. "It's too dangerous, I would never forgive myself if anything were to happen to you. I love you, Leo and I just can't risk you, I just... can't." When Leo remained silent he looked down to see his Keefe look at him with his jaw slightly dropped and a perplexed look on his face.

"You love me?" Leo asked, completely being caught off guard by Maddox's words.

"Of course I do." He'd never hidden from Leo what he felt for him... or had he? Sitting down he pulled Leo into his lap and leaning his forehead to Leo's. "I love you,

Leo, so much. That's why I can never risk you; you are my mate and I don't think I could survive losing you,"

"Can we get back on track?" Sol argued, but Maddox displeased rumbles stopped him.

For a second there Leo had forgotten they weren't alone and startled when Sol had spoke. Maddox loved him; he knew they were mates, but it never struck him that Maddox might actually love him.

"Why are you crying?" The moment he saw the first tear slide down his precious mate's face, Maddox worried he might have said something wrong.

Leo brushed his tears away, he was just being stupid. "I just didn't realize," he got out, wincing at the rough tone of his voice.

"Realize what, baby? That I love you?" Maddox was definitely confused now.

"Yeah, I just didn't realize... I know you have this connection with me because I'm your mate, I never thought you might actually..." the rest of his words were muffled as Maddox's lips crushed into his.

Maddox tried to pour every feeling into the kiss, the lust, the passion, and the love. When they finally broke apart, Maddox cursed his own moisture-filled eyes and hugged his lover close.

"I love you too," Leo muttered into Maddox's large chest. "I know I haven't known you long, but I do, I just..."

"I know, baby." Maddox's heart swelled at his mate's confession. He was pretty sure he knew it already, but hearing it, with everything Leo had been through....

"You have to let me go," Leo whispered to him and he froze.

"No," he answered, his tone void of emotions, but his grip instinctively tightened around his Keefe.

"He's family, Maddox, part of the pride. I don't know much about packs or prides, but it's like when they say you never leave a man behind."

"We'll find another way," Maddox insisted.

"You'll be there to protect me, you and Solomon and Kett, even Damian."

"Leo..." Maddox hissed; he knew his lover was right, but...

Leo nibbled at his mate's neck, having realized his mate was weak towards that kind of attack. "We need to bring him home, and I want to help. Besides if I don't show, I don't think Mika was joking about making Jace into a rug."

Maddox sighed; letting Leo continue snuggling into his neck. He had no power against that and Maddox could already sense through their mating bond that his mate had no intention of letting this go.

"Well," Sol spoke, startling them both. "I guess a Sorena is no match for the wisdom of one's mate." Leo had

been able to do what Sol wasn't capable of, despite his position in the pride.

"We'll all keep him safe, brother." A worn looking Liam had appeared and was leaning against the door frame.

Leo had to keep from gasping; his mate's twin looked far from as immaculate as he usually did. A scar that looked like it might have been made from a stray bullet marred his face and the way he favored his left, Leo was pretty certain he still had some bruised ribs.

Maddox growled. Not only had his mate wormed himself into the equation, now his brother, his injured brother, wanted in too. What was wrong with them? Did everybody have a death wish? At least Leo could walk without the risk of tipping over.

"Is everybody against me?" Maddox muttered.

Leo nipped at his jaw. "No, we're all with you, whether you like it or not."

"So I have no say in anything at all?"

"No." Both Leo and Liam answered at the same time.

"Neither do I, apparently," a somewhat annoyed Sol announced. "I'm the Sorena and my pride seems to have no interest in my orders."

"Easy, tiger," Liam admonished his leader. "In the end you got what was ordered, even if it took a five foot wonder to do so."

"Hey," Leo scowled. "I'm five foot nine, thank you very much." His slight pout seemed to amuse Liam, but he could also hear and feel a small rumble from Maddox's chest as he focused on the plump lip. Maddox was definitely reacting and Leo couldn't help but respond, his body seeming to be in tune with his mate.

The pheromones in the air grew thick and heavy, the spicy scent enthralling Leo like a moth to a flame. Solomon and Liam were standing frozen and stiff, visibly trying to keep their cats from backing away.

Liam caved first, retreating back to his hospital bed. There was still a couple of hours before they had to get ready and if Maddox wanted to use this time to strengthen his claim on his mate, Liam had no intentions of getting in his way. Liam's strength was frail enough as it was after the attack. He was healing, but not as fast as he'd wanted to.

Leo yelped as he was lifted up and thrown across Maddox's shoulder before being carried out of the room. Where they were going was obvious, and it didn't take long before he was being pushed down into the mattress by his mate's overheated, excited body.

Too hungry for his mate's flesh, Maddox used his claws to tear Leo's shirt from his body.

Leo gasped when Maddox closed his lips over his left nipple and tugged gently with his teeth. Blood surged up, making his nipple hard. His mate pushed down Leo's

jeans to reveal the rest of his body to his hungry gaze. Leo shivered as claws ran down his ribs, lightly marking him as Maddox's. Moving downwards from Leo's nipple, Maddox nipped at the skin every few inches or so until he reached Leo's straining erection. Licking around and under Leo's sack had Leo squirming and panting. Maddox seemed to touch him everywhere but that one place he really wanted him to.

Grasping the golden locks of his lover's hair, he tried to pull his mate's mouth to where he wanted it. But Maddox didn't budge, almost making Leo scream in frustration. Instead, his lover dove even lower; strong hands pressing Leo's thighs upwards and apart. When Maddox tongue connected with Leo's opening, it took Leo all of his strength to stop himself from coming.

The strong taste that was his mate had Maddox instantly addicted. The fact that when he pushed his agile tongue inside that heavenly ring of muscle he could also taste himself had him growling. His mate was truly his, he was marked, by him. The tugging on his hair had him snap back from the lusty haze he'd been in. Leo was in need, whimpering when Maddox didn't move.

Not quite capable of hiding his smirk, even with his tongue stuck up Leo's rear, Maddox let his tongue shift to that of his lion. Leo bucked and screamed as the new,

larger and definitely rougher tongue brushed across his prostate.

He'd never felt anything like it, and a light coat of sweat covered his entire body as he struggled to get enough oxygen. Every move of his lover's tongue had him wanting more, driving him insane every time that rough tongue rasped across his sweet spot. Another little bump and Leo would have come, if it hadn't been for his mate's grasping hold of the base of his cock, keeping him from his devastating climax.

"Maddox," Leo almost sobbed, desperate to come. He tried to loosen his mate's grip as his cock throbbed viciously, but Maddox held tight as he continued his assault inside his most private place.

Finally needing relief himself, Maddox rose to line his own throbbing member against his mate's now slick channel. Pushing in was heaven and his lover gasped, gripping at every part he could reach, but still desperately trying to shake off Maddox's restraining hold on his ready to blow erection. Knowing he'd never be able to last, Maddox took pity on his beautiful mate, his precious fawn, and released him from his grip.

Leo dug his own nails into Maddox's shoulder-blades, holding him close as he erupted, coating both their bodies with his release.

The spasms around his cock and the sting from Leo's nails in his back were far more than either Maddox or his lion were able to take. A few more thrusts were all it took before he let out his lion roar as he filled his mate with his essence, his scent.

Careful not to crush his now comatose mate, Maddox got out of bed and headed into the bathroom. He wetted a towel, first cleaning himself and then moving over to clean his Keefe.

Leo let out a soft, satisfied sigh as he slept on and when Maddox was done cleaning them both, he threw the towel away and got back under the covers with his mate. Leo instinctively curled into Maddox's body and subconsciously called for Maddox's submission as he nosed at his neck, making Maddox expose his skin to his life mate. Maddox had no problem submitting to him, but he still couldn't find rest. Another six hours and he would be risking the most important thing in his life. If anything went wrong... if Mika... he'd never be able to forgive himself.

CHAPTER 16

Leo was trying to hide the shaking but didn't quite seem to pull it off. It had started up almost as soon as they got into the SUV and he was fighting hard not to have another seizure. He wanted to help his mate and his new family, yet somehow ending up on the floor shaking like a drug addict in rehab, which technically he was, didn't strike him as helping anyone.

He also knew Maddox could sense his distress as he tried to soothe him. Maddox let his hands rub across Leo's stomach while Leo was seated on his lap. The SUV was packed full, with Solomon and Damian sitting in the front and Kett and Liam squeezed in with them in the back. Any available space seemed to be filled with weapons. Leo had initially laughed when he saw bottles of clear liquid, thinking they were filled with holy water. However, learning that they were actually filled with an acid that could easily burn through a vampires flesh seemed to make it less amusing.

While he hadn't thought originally that holy water could be used to harm vampires, the fact that crosses, if made in silver would actually burn them, was something he'd never known. In fact, according to Damian, many vampires thought that by branding themselves with a cross they were brought closer to God, he even had the brand himself on the back of his neck. Leo didn't think that any of

Mika's gang would ever see the need to be closer to God though, 'cause those bastards were all going straight to hell as far as he could tell.

They parked a few blocks up ahead from where they were supposed to meet and Leo struggled to keep his breathing even.

"You don't have to do this," Maddox tried one last time.

"Yes, I do," Leo insisted. He could do this, he just needed to stay calm, that's all. He needed to stay in control. Still, he kept as close to his mate as possible, the heat and the spicy scent rolling of his mate's body being the only thing keeping him from falling apart all together.

Liam led the way, seeming much sturdier now than he had a few hours ago. Leo was amazed by their recovery rate, but he hoped they wouldn't have to rely on it for this. If any of them got hurt in there because of him...

Nearing the warehouse, they were soon met by Mika's goons, with Shamus leading the way. "Hey there, blood-bag." He smirked at Leo who instinctively hid behind his mate's larger body. "I heard you'd been slumming it, but I just couldn't quite believe it. But look at you now, cowering behind your filthy little kitty cat."

Leo and Liam were quick to restrain Maddox as the lion roared and attempted to advance on the vampire. Only

his unwillingness to unintentionally harm his mate kept him from shaking them off and shifting right then and there.

The vicious snarls had Shamus backing off and the three vampires he'd brought with him step forward with their own weapons raised. Only Solomon's overwhelming presence kept the situation from getting out of hand.

"We are here to see Mika; I think you'll find him displeased at restraining his company."

Shamus glared at the tiger. "Only the blood-bag, we don't exactly trust you furies.

"Don't be an idiot," Kett hissed. "You honestly think we're leaving you with both Leo and Jace? What are you? High on blood dust or something?"

"He's right, if we leave you with Leo, we have no guarantee that you'll deliver us Jace," Sol reasoned.

Shamus sneered, but brought up his cell-phone. A few minutes after hissing into the phone in what Leo thought might be Russian, or possibly pig-latin, he sneered again. "Only the Sorena!"

"No way!" Maddox snarled, there was no way he'd let his mate go in there without him, but Solomon had other ideas.

"Agreed, but know that you'll have the entire forces of the Dramadium royal court after you, should anything happen to me."

Shamus sized up the authoritative tiger with a scowl, "The Dramadium royal court? Aren't you a little far from Russia to have any influence with the European pride?"

"Not when I'm the only male heir to the throne," Sol informed him with an icy stare.

Shamus barely even flinched, but Leo thought he could see a sense of unease fill Shamus eyes, who simply nodded, indicating for them to follow him.

Reaching for Leo, Sol gave him his hand. "Leo, come," he ordered.

Leo knew that the harsh tone in Sol's voice was necessary to keep the vampires from knowing they had ties together, but it still made Leo wince. Reluctantly moving from Maddox's side, he looked back to see both Kett and Damian restraining the clearly fuming cat, while Liam never lowered his gun with the acid-filled darts.

Somehow Leo managed to move forward without crumbling in fear; he had to do this. And somehow knowing Maddox wouldn't be in there with him gave him some peace. Leo knew his mate was less likely to be injured if he stayed away from the exchange. He knew they wouldn't let him go without a fight, but he couldn't help but feel it would be better if they just let him go. It would be safer for everyone, everyone except him that is. Still, if it meant Maddox remained safe...

"Don't even think about it," Solomon admonished him in a stern voice. The look he gave him telling him he knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

Lowering his eyes, Leo felt ashamed. Even if Maddox was safe, it didn't mean he wouldn't be hurt. It was something that he was starting to realize; if he went away, Maddox wouldn't automatically be okay. Some parts of him even thought that if something happened to him, Maddox might even hurt himself.

"Leo, my Leo." A sick, disturbing voice reached him amongst towers of stacked crates.

Starting to panic, it was good that Solomon had a tight grip on his arm, because that was the only thing that kept him moving. When a space cleared up, they saw Mika standing there with a gun in his hand that was tapping impatiently against his own thigh. In the background, another couple of armed vampires stood at a ready, including Christa who had her gun aimed at a beaten down Jace's head.

"You've been a very bad boy," Mika growled as he advanced at him, only stopped by Solomon's threatening grumble.

"Jace first." He snarled at the insolent vampire.

Leo's heartbeat was so frantic that he had problems following the conversation; being this close to Mika brought back a lot of bad memories about what he'd left

behind. And having Christa this close wasn't making him feel any better either. She had a feral smile that froze Leo's body, and the look she gave him told him that the second Mika turned his back on them she would drain him in dry.

Mika sneered, but gestured for Christa to bring forth Jace, who was visibly limping as he was dragged across the floor. When Christa threw Jace into Sol, he momentarily let go of Leo's arm and he was instantly yanked into Mika's arms, who aimed the gun at his jugular.

Solomon roared, but Mika pulled Leo up against him and pushed the gun hard against his throat, making Leo cry out as his throat was bruised. "You think I wouldn't smell him on you, pet?" Mika growled in his ear at the same time as he dared Sol to make a move. "You should have worn a turtleneck love."

Leo gasped as he realized he'd left Maddox's mating bite visible. He hadn't even thought to hide it; covering it up had seemed unnatural too him, so it hadn't even fazed him when he'd gotten dressed.

"Now, dear Solomon, I am taking Leo, and if I as much as smell the scent of a kitten following me, I'll leave behind bits and pieces of the little blood-bag for every minute I'm followed." He growled at the Sorena. "And if the flee covered cat that thinks he owns my pet wants him to remain in one piece... well, you get my drift."

Leo was having problems getting enough oxygen and was starting to feel more than a little light headed. An idea struck him, and soon enough he started seizing and collapsed against Mika as his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

"What the fuck!" Mika yelled as he had to struggle to keep Leo upright, leaving Christa to keep the cats at bay.

"Just leave the little fucker!" Christa hissed. "The little brat is sick and I don't eat diseased meat!"

"Shut up bitch!" Mika snarled back at her. "I need him!"

Christa sneered, not happy with coming second to a blood-bag. "Fine, if you want him so much, why don't you both fuck off!" She turned swiftly as she aimed her gun at Leo and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 17

Mika snarled as he spun them around, taking the bullet in the shoulder. Solomon took this opportunity to shift; a large, snow-white tiger appeared out of nowhere and with a roar rammed into Christa, sending her straight into Mika and Leo who fell to the ground in a heap.

Soon enough, the warehouse was crawling with life. The vampires attacked; Shamus, of course, took off like the little rat he was when a familiar roar sounded. The roar told Leo Maddox had arrived, but it wasn't the dark beige lion he'd expected that tore through the air. Gasping at the unfamiliar shape of his mate, he saw the savage look in his eyes as he launched himself at Mika. He was easily seven feet tall and his shirt had torn to make room for the massive muscles that were now exposed, even his pants had ripped in places. His face was very much the same, with only slightly more feline features. And almost all of his exposed skin was covered with what looked like downy gold fur.

Large, outstretched claws tore at Mika's flesh who cried out in pain. An angry shriek sounded before Christa threw herself at the attacking shifter.

Solomon and Liam were fending off vampires; Liam in human form, still not fit to shift yet. Sol easily pinned down a vampire and ripped off its head while Liam struck another with a poisonous dart, the vampire going down screaming. If Leo hadn't recognized the vampire as

one of those Mika had fed him to as a reward, Leo might have felt sick. But seeing the withering body felt like victory to Leo.

Before he knew it, Mika grabbed hold of him from behind, covering his mouth with his hand. No matter how hard he struggled, Leo couldn't move an inch. Maddox was overcome by Christa and two other vampires and couldn't do anything to help his mate when he sensed Leo's distress, letting out a desperate roar.

It was Jace who finally interjected. His cat, a beautiful sleek snow leopard awkwardly threw himself through the air at Mika. Jace crashed into them, but two vampires easily gained hold of Jace. A syringe was jabbed deep into his neck, and he seemed to be immediately drained of his strength until he lay still in their arms.

When Mika tried to grab Leo again, Maddox had finally managed to shake off Christa and threw Leo behind him before he tried to launch himself at Mika again. All the while he was growling and snarling at those daring to harm his mate. Mid-air, another vampire pushed Mika to the side and battled with the large half-man, half-cat creature. Leo recognized the vampire as Brass, one of the vampires of Mika's inner circle. He rarely came with them during situations like these, but Leo also knew that Brass was well trained and dangerous.

"Mika, quit fooling around and run!" the vampire shouted at the crazy looking Mika. Mika was still trying to maneuver himself behind them to get at Leo, but Damian had spotted them through the chaos and fired off several rounds in their direction, grazing Mika's thigh and hip, just narrowly missing Leo in the process as he dove past a crate. Snarling in defeat, Mika took off with a curse, a bloodied looking Christa got up from the remains and took off after him.

Maddox yowled as Brass managed to stab him in the chest and Leo screamed. Not even thinking, he grabbed the first thing he could find and whacked the vampire over the head with a crowbar. All it got him was a severely pissed off vampire and the back of a hand smashed across his face, slamming him to the ground.

When Brass picked the crowbar up off the ground, Leo tried hard to scramble back, but his back met a crate blocking his escape. Moments before the crowbar made contact with his face, a still conscious Maddox threw himself in front of him, taking the impact of the crowbar in the back.

"Maddox!" Leo screamed as his mate passed out on top of him. "Wake up baby, come on!" Leo slapped his mate as hard as he could, he could hear the cat rumbled, but he still didn't wake and Brass was already coming at them

again. Leo tried to get away, but his mate was too heavy and had him pinned to the ground.

Leo had never been happier to see Solomon than when he jumped on Brass's back and slammed him hard to the floor, the vampire's face hitting the ground with a loud crack, knocking the vampire out cold. Just before the large cat bit into the back of his neck Leo stopped him.

"Sol, don't!" he yelled.

The cat looked at him like he was insane; he had his prey laid out ready for the kill and Leo wanted him to stop. The vampire was the enemy, one that had hurt his pride. Why would Leo want to save such a thing?

"They still have Jace," Leo wheezed out as he tried to push his oversized mate off of him. "Brass knows stuff."

The tiger reluctantly stepped off the unconscious vampire and shifted back to his human shape. "I hope you're right about this, Leo," Sol said, clearly distressed at having failed to rescue his friend.

"I am, now help me get Maddox off of me! He weighs a ton and he's injured!"

Solomon helped Leo get loose from under his mate's large body and when he was turned over they saw the large gash across his chest. Leo was crying and desperately making sure that Maddox was still alive, finding his pulse saved Leo from having a total breakdown. The large chest heaved as his precious mate struggled to

breath and if Leo hadn't already been crying, tears of joy would have been pouring down his face. Leo didn't think he would have survived it if Maddox had died because of him.

Damian was keeping Liam steady, who was applying pressure to a nasty looking wound at his side. It appeared to be a shallow wound, but it was bleeding a little too much for Leo's peace of mind. He'd had enough of blood for quite some time now; now he just needed his mate to heal and tell him everything would be alright.

Kett and Solomon struggled quite a bit with dragging out the still shifted Maddox. When Leo asked why he hadn't changed back Solomon had told him that changing into a Triferus was a choice made by a shifter's conscious mind, while the lion might pop out whenever he deemed it necessary, only the man could draw on the Triferus.

Having to squeeze Maddox's large body into the SUV proved problematic and eventually they had to open the back and pull down the seats. But in the end they'd all managed to fit, even if it was a little cramped.

Leo had taken the remains of his lover's shirt and made sure to apply pressure to the chest-wound. A shaky breath of relief escaped him as he saw the healing redness along the edges of the wound as it had started to slowly knit itself back together.

Letting his hands run through the incredibly soft fur, he couldn't help wondering how the downy softness would feel brushing across his body. He vowed to himself that as long as Maddox healed, they would both find out how that felt.

A soft purr alerted Leo to his mate's semi-awake state. Leo blushed; somehow he just knew that his mate had some insight into what he'd just thought. A hand reached his and Maddox twined their hands together and squeezed; the familiar warmth making Leo shed tears again.

Even after Maddox closed his eyes again, he continued to purr the entire way back to the mansion. Eventually it lured even Leo into a peaceful rest against his mate as he took in the soothing sounds that ensured him that everything would be okay.

CHAPTER 18

Maddox had been asleep for over a day, only to wake for brief moments to eat what little he could keep down. Leo never left his lover's side. During that time Leo formed an unlikely friendship with Damian, who, for the time being, had taken over for Jace.

He was intrigued to learn that Damian had once been a paramedic before being turned. He had been shot while trying to save a man's life and was turned by his best friend, who'd turned out to be a vampire.

Learning all of this, it was the first time Leo had ever seen a vampire as an actual person. All the vampires Leo had met had been horrible monsters who wouldn't hesitate to kill their own mothers if they thought it would get them somewhere.

Damien's sire had unfortunately been one of those, and despite having been Damian's friend in the human world, he'd hunted and killed innocents through the streets for nourishment.

Damian's mission in life had always been to save people. He'd never been able to take to his sire's lifestyle and eventually left the man behind to live his own life. He later gained access to the pride after saving Kett's life. Kett had been a rookie and had taken off to prove himself, only to end up in the hands of a group of rogue vampires.

His mate's lion was strong and healed mostly on its own; Damian's job was mainly to prevent any inflammations. Leo had been fascinated watching his mate's wound heal; hour by hour it healed more and more until the entire wound had closed, leaving behind nothing but a strip of hairless, healed flesh where Brass had cut into him.

Leo was even more fascinated with the larger more feral shape of his mate. Maddox even had whiskers. It was so strange and... kinda cute. All in all, Maddox looked like Maddox; his face was a little different, but definitely that of his mate, and his body was the same, only, as Jace had explained it, a little longer and a little wider. Oh, and then there was the fur that covered most of his chest, arms and thighs. Not too many moments went by without Leo letting his fingers brush through it, caressing his mate and feeling the sculpted chest it covered. Almost every time his mate would start to purr, and Leo never thought he'd heard anything quite as adorable.

At some point Leo fell asleep next to his mate, using his soft, furry chest for a pillow. It wasn't until someone nudged him that he slowly started to wake again. Sighing, he lifted his head, giving the reawakened Triferus full access to his now exposed throat as he shimmied down to draw in the scent of his mate's neck. It was when a

pleased rumble shook through him from his mate's body that he realized that Maddox was awake.

"Hey you." Leo yawned and chuckled as his lover's whiskers tickled him behind the ear.

Maddox made a happy little rumble as he pulled Leo closer to his body and rubbed his face against Leo's. Leo chuckled as his mate seemed to try to cover his entire body with his scent and Leo couldn't help but reach out and run his own hands over his mate's downy fur. The hair on his chest was thick and soft; petting his lover was an odd sensation, especially as Maddox was rubbing against him like an attention starved little kitten... or rather, like a *big* attention starved kitten.

Maddox's seemed to be constantly inhaling his scent, taking in the scent of Leo's hair and skin, placing small kisses against his skin, with the occasional lick of Maddox's raspy tongue.

"You're gonna be okay, right?" Leo muttered softly, making Maddox stop in his tracks.

A slightly clawed finger moved to lift Leo's chin up to face Maddox's face, "I'm already okay, Leo. As long as you're with me, safe and sound." Maddox spoke softly as he awkwardly pressed his lips to Leo's, mindful of the sharp canine teeth decorating Maddox's mouth.

Leo gasped as Maddox's tongue rasped at his lips and Maddox seized the opportunity to sneak in a taste of the inside of Leo's mouth.

Purring, Maddox kissed him harder, thrusting his tongue in deeper and making Leo moan. Kissing till they had to break for air, Leo heard the sexy rumble coming from his mate as he rolled on top of him. Maddox let his hand travel beneath the sheets towards his mate's hardening erection. Maddox's claws brushed against the insides of Leo's parted thighs, before the clawed hand gently wrapped around Leo's hardness.

"Want you," the big cat-man rumbled in a gruff voice.

The need in his mate's voice made Leo shiver. Maddox's hand palming his cock made him moan as he started stroking him.

Maddox claimed his lips again, teasing with his tongue to get Leo to open up to him. When, as expected, Leo moaned, he deepened the kiss, his beast rumbling at the exotic vanilla taste. Wrapping his arm under his precious mate, Maddox pulled him up along his chest.

Leo yelped into his lover's mouth as they got up from the bed; Maddox had lifted him up before, but suddenly Leo was two feet higher up in the air than usual. Leo let his lover remove his pants, shredding them with his claws, before sitting them both down on a small couch that

creaked under their combined weight. Leo was pretty certain his own weight had very little to do with it though.

When Maddox's now enlarged shaft settled behind his ass, Leo started to panic. Maddox was easily twice the size he usually was, and even before Leo had doubted he'd be able to take him.

"Slow," Maddox purred as he soothed his mate by rubbing his soft fur against his tense body. He was growing restless, wanting little more than to just bury himself deep inside of his mate, but he wouldn't be able to do that yet, not without hurting him. Still, as he nibbled at his Keefe's throat he let his dripping shaft slide between the cheeks of his mate's perfect rear.

Leo felt like he was vibrating. Having his mate's cock slide against him was torturous by itself, but adding the feel of his mate's down-covered body rubbing along his body and his own hardened dick was positively maddening.

When one of Maddox's probing fingers reached behind him and started to push in, Leo couldn't help but push back to get that finger in deeper. His mate purred his approval. When Maddox entered a second finger, the burn made Leo bite into his neck, under his jaw line, one of the few non-furred areas of Maddox's body, leaving behind a deep red mark.

Having his mate put his own claim on him had Maddox practically roaring his victory and he started

thrusting his fingers in deeper. Inserting a third finger made Leo hiss and Maddox stopped abruptly, stretching his mate to his fullest couldn't be done without proper lubrication. Unwilling to leave, Maddox grabbed hold of his mate's erection and started pumping, squeezing the hard shaft as his mate continued to bite down even harder on his neck.

Leo was panting fiercely, and just like when his mate had been in heat, his body was as fiery hot, making Leo unable to think of any think other than his own approaching climax. It didn't take long before he was frantically thrusting into his mate's hand and fiercely pushing himself down on the two fingers still inside of him. When one of the fingers pushed right up against his prostate Leo was no longer able to hold it in and came with a grunt, spilling into his lover's hand.

Gathering up the viscous fluid, Maddox just barely managed to not give into the urge to taste the precious essence of his mate, knowing he'd devour it all if he did. Removing his fingers, he slathered them up with Leo's release before using it to lubricate his mate's tight tunnel.

The lubrication allowed Maddox to thrust in his fingers that much quicker and easily let him push in a third digit.

Being pretty much exhausted, Leo took all that Maddox could give him. He wanted his mate inside of him,

to be claimed by him in this form, but it was still quite a stretch when Maddox inserted a fourth finger.

"Just how big are you?" Leo found himself asking in a breathless tone. He knew his mate was big, but if he was stretched much further...

Leo moaned when the blunt head of his mate's cock pushed up against his opening and the fingers vanished. He had to bite his lip to keep from crying out as his mate carefully started pushing in. After a few inches, the worst of the burning sensation seemed to have passed, Leo was stretching and he was starting to moan again. His mate's perfect monster of a cock pushed directly at his prostate, making his own erection jerk as it tried to stand strong yet again as it began to fill. He knew he was young, but being able to come so many times definitely had to be because of his mate. He'd never reacted like this with anybody else and he loved every minute of it.

As Maddox continued to claim Leo's hole, he let his soft hands soothe Leo's back, rubbing him and making sure he was all right, slowing down whenever Leo seemed to need the time to adjust.

It took another couple of moments before Maddox was completely seated inside of his mate. His lion let out a triumphant roar as he started thrusting, slow at first, but rapidly gaining speed, as not only his lion started to break free, but his Triferus as well.

Leo felt as if his mate had reached him to the gut, possessing him in a way completely unknown to Leo until that moment. There were no doubts about him being sore for at least a week after this, but right now, he couldn't care less. His mate was rubbing his sweet spot with every single move he made.

The couch was creaking like mad, threatening to break. Before it happened, Maddox had Leo pressed against the wall as his thrusts became exceedingly wild. He kept a tight hold on his lover's hips as he thrust at full speed, needing desperately to come inside of his mate. Maddox could feel every throb of the veins in his shaft as he pushed inside the heaven that was Leo; he was nearly there, so close to the edge that it made him snarl his need.

Leo fed on the sounds of his mate; they were so *feral* and wild. Every time his mate bottomed out inside of him, pushing him higher up the wall, Leo swore he could see stars. His own erection was burning again, demanding release as Maddox continued his lustful torture. His mate was on the very tip of a cliff; he could see the desperate need in his mate's eyes that had long since turned into cat like slits. He knew what his mate needed, what they both needed. Tightening his fist in Maddox's mane, he tilted his face so that his neck was exposed to the hungry lion. Like a snake, Maddox struck. His teeth sunk deep into Leo's flesh;

the rich, bold taste of Leo's blood had Maddox snarling and roaring as he pumped his load into his precious Keefe.

Feeling as if his stomach were being filled with Maddox's creamy release, along with the seductive suction on his neck, drove Leo over the edge again. His own erection struggled to release as much liquid as he was able.

They stood there, panting hard, still pushed up against the wall as Leo felt his lover return to his normal self. It was good see his mate back to normal, able to shift his shapes, but the slight decrease of the organ still seated inside of Leo made him feel empty, especially when his mate's sated organ slipped completely out of his body.

Kissing Leo's already swollen lips gently, Maddox led them into the shower for a much needed cleaning, the both of them being a complete mess. All the while they kept a leisurely pace, just touching and kissing and washing.

Back in bed, they cuddled close, taking in each other's scent, making sure their mate was okay.

"Thank you," Maddox whispered as he kissed Leo on his temple.

Leo chuckled. "Aren't I the one supposed to say that?"

Maddox's lips twitched. "So you liked it? It was okay, I didn't hurt you?" he asked as he let his hand brush across his lover's ass, stopping briefly when Leo winced.

"Not saying I'm not sore." Leo blushed as he grabbed his lover's hand and brought it back to his rear. "But that was... insane," he admitted as his face turned an even darker shade of red.

"So," Maddox hesitated, "you wouldn't mind if we did that again? Sometime?"

Leo smirked. "No, I wouldn't mind, but I don't think I'll be able to more than once or twice a month though. As I said, I am pretty sore." Blushing, Leo hid his face in his lover's neck, loving the feel of his mate rubbing his backside, trying to calm the aches.

Grabbing onto the back of Leo's neck, Maddox tilted his head up and mashed their mouths together. Leo had to be the most perfect mate ever, and he'd even allowed him to claim him as a Triferus, not once seeming repulsed by his third shape.

"I love you." Maddox growled into Leo's mouth as he started rubbing against him again, pushing his groin against Leo's.

"You're kidding?" Leo couldn't believe his mate was already ready for another round. "Maddox, I'm still sore and you were recently injured, you should rest, not..."

"I know," Maddox purred as he kept rubbing along his mate's body. "But this right now, this isn't about sex."

Leo gasped; Maddox was marking him, actually rubbing off on him to ensure that his scent was on him. Leo

had a sneaking suspicion that this would become a routine whenever they had a shower, knowing how Maddox's lion hated the idea of either one of them being unscented by the other.

Feeling the temperature rise, Leo protested,
"Maddox, I can't..."

Rumbling, Maddox let off, but gathered Leo close and rubbed his hands along the sides of Leo's body.

Snuggling close, Leo felt his eyelids grow heavy, but before sleep could claim him he managed to mumble against his mate's chest. "Love you..."

Squeezing him tight, Maddox kissed him on the cheek and whispered to him, "I love you too, Keefe."

Leo just barely had the energy left to give a small smile before falling asleep, in the arms of his forever love.

EPILOGUE

Leo watched fascinated from under the tree he sat in as the large, feline beasts, skulked through the tall grass; stalking a large deer. He felt bad for the critter but knew it was part of his mate's nature. And Maddox had assured him that the deer was a buck and not Bambi's mother or anything tragic like that.

There was something strong and powerful about watching the large, dark, tan lion as he hunted. He was almost twice the size of a normal lion, from what he could tell from what he'd seen on the nature channel lately. And still only the top of his strong shoulders were visible above the straws of grass.

He chuckled as Kett inadvertently managed to step on a twig, making the buck aware of his hunters and take off with the speed similar to that of a freight train. Two annoyed lions grunted their disapproval at the smaller mountain lion; Kett merely let out a meow before bouncing off after a rabbit somewhere in the distance, while Liam grudgingly trotted after him.

Maddox on the other hand started stalking his mate as he approached the easy prey.

Leo had been part of this before; his mate's lion had somewhat of a playful streak. The lion would stalk him before promptly leaping out in front of him and pushing him to the ground.

When Leo's back hit the ground the big cat purred as he rubbed his nose along the neck of his mate. When he started brushing his hands through the feline's mane, Maddox purred and soon enough the cat shifted into his very human, very naked form and started nibbling at Leo's neck; grazing his teeth across the mating mark.

Rumbling, Maddox closed his arms around his Keefe and held him tight, letting his mate's scent waft over him and soothe him.

"What's wrong?" Leo asked, sensing the distress in his mate's otherwise calm exterior.

"Just wondering what Jace must be going through right now." Maddox sighed. He hated to admit it, but he missed the annoying cat, and as for him being in the hands of the vampires, well, that wasn't something he'd wish even upon his enemies.

Leo petted his mate's chest with soothing motions. "He's going to be all right," he vowed to his mate.

"You seem awfully sure about that, Keefe."

"I'm not saying Jace won't look like a walking battle frontier when we get him back, but they won't hurt him." Leo hesitated. "Not like they did me."

Maddox growled as he remembered all that his mate had been through. "Why wouldn't they?" He snorted, not thinking the vampires were anywhere above doing such a thing.

"Because he's a shifter," Leo explained. "You're unclean to them; they won't drink from you, let alone lay hands on you, other than to beat the daylights out of you."

Knowing his mate was right, there was one thing his mate hadn't encountered for though. "And the drugs."

Completely having forgotten about those, Leo unconsciously rubbed his arm that had previously been filled with the marks of endless amounts of syringes. "I don't think Mika would be that stupid. He knows we would hurt Brass if he did and Mika isn't worth shit without Brass." Leo practically sneered, angry over the fact that he knew perfectly well that Mika might dose Jace just for the heck of it if they hadn't had his precious pencil pusher in their care.

"Who is Brass?" Maddox asked, he had extensive knowledge of most of Mika's force, but this other vampire, Brass, had never showed up in his files.

"Well, being the leader of, well, anything I suppose will require a lot of paperwork, just ask Solomon. But Mika isn't exactly the *paperwork* doing kind of guy, so he has Brass. Without him, there's chaos. About a month before I got away, Brass had to leave to attend to some kind of family thing or something, I don't know exactly, but Mika went out of his mind trying to sort through everything in his absence. He nearly even killed Shamus, and Mika actually likes that guy." He frowned realizing that.

"It's been almost a week and we haven't heard anything," Maddox reminded him.

"We will," Leo stated matter-of-factly. There truly was no doubt in his mind that Mika was starting to be quite desperate for Brass's return.

"I hope you're right." Maddox purred as he started to push his hand up under his mate's shirt, distracting himself from the depressing thoughts of their wayward friend.

Leo was starting to get used to his mate's never-reseeding libido and brought his lover's face to his, gently nipping at his larger mate's jaw line, nipping in the direction of Maddox's neck.

Maddox's purrs changed into rumbles as he exposed his throat to his mate, retaliating by tweaking his mate's rosy nipple making him yelp. Rolling on top of him, Maddox teased at his mate's lips, biting gently into the soft flesh of Leo's plump lower lip. Just when he started to reach into his mate's pants, his cell rang from Leo's backpack.

Growling, he shook the phone from the bag and answered it. Sol's voice cut him off before he could even say anything. "Mika's called, return to base immediately!" his Sorena ordered.

Cursing, Maddox pulled on a pair of sweats before swooping Leo up into his arms and taking off at full speed towards the mansion.

Leo stole a kiss from his mate as they ran. "He's going to be just fine," Leo found himself promising his mate. And he believed it. Even he had been saved, and if there was hope for him, then there was hope for Jace. He just needed to find his own Maddox to take care of him

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dawn H. Hawkes was born in the beautiful country of Norway. Having been buried in fairy-tales from the moment she knew what one was, it has always had a special place in her heart. With a strong belief that there is someone out there for everyone and it's just a matter of finding that special someone, she's incorporated this into her stories.

She's a fan of almost anything mythological and thinks there's nothing sexier than a man going against the stereotype of his kind, vampires and shapeshifters alike, particularly if he growls or has a mighty roar.

She really hopes to inspire people around her, to have them take part in her own little world inside of her own busy little mind.

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