



Lucius (Were Zoo #21)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Lion shifter Lucius feels like hes been waiting for his soulmate forever. Working security at the Amazing Adventures Safari Park and keeping the secret of his shifting nature from humans means he cant just go out and find his mate—she has to come to him.

When lonely artist Sidney gets an email from the park with a free VIP safari tour coupon, shes excited to escape her boring job at her moms salon and sketch the majestic animals instead. What she doesnt expect is an instant and undeniable connection between her and Lucius that leads to a passionate night together. But when she spends the night in his park apartment, she wakes up in bed with a lion. In a panic, Sidney runs from the apartment and is caught by the parks security and told the truth about the hidden world of shifters and that shes Luciuss soulmate.

Once Sidney understands the need for secrecy and why she felt so compelled to be with Lucius, shes told that not only can she never tell her mom the truth about shifters, Lucius cant live anywhere but the park. If she wants to build a life with Lucius, she has to choose: her mom and the family business, or Lucius and her heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Lion shifter Lucius strode along the winding paths of the Amazing Adventures Safari Park, his senses alert for anything out of the ordinary. Even as a human, his lion's instincts helped him navigate the myriad of sounds and smells that painted a vivid picture of the day-to-day of the park. The blazing July sun was high in the sky, ensuring he needed sunglasses to keep from spending the day squinting at everything. To the hundreds of people who had come through the park already that day, it was a place to come for a safari tour, a bird show in the sanctuary, a ride on the new carousel, or a turn feeding tiny animals in the petting zoo. But to him, it was home.

He'd been a security guard at the park since he was eighteen. He'd come to the park in his early teens with his family: his dad, Caesar, who was the alpha lion of the pride, and his brothers, Jupiter and Amadeus.

The safari park was more than a job for him, it was a sanctuary for the shifters who worked there as well as lived underground in secret, keeping the truth of shifters from humans. Humans had no idea that the staff of the park were almost entirely shifters, from the animals in the paddocks of the safari tour, to the animal handlers, ticket takers, security guards, food staff, and other workers.

As he walked, Lucius nodded to the patrons, a small smile playing on his lips. The park was busy today, families moving from exhibit to exhibit. Despite being surrounded by laughing children, Lucius couldn't help but muse on the emptiness that had been growing inside him lately.

His heart ached for more—someone to share his life with, someone he could tell the truth of his shifting nature to.

His soulmate.

He'd always hoped he'd meet his soulmate once he'd come to the safari park. The alphas of the various shifter groups had decided to encourage unmated males and females to come to the park by sending out coupons for free VIP safari tours so that the shifters in the park might have a chance to find their soulmate through some twist of fate.

It had happened a few times since the tours had started, but not as often as the alphas had hoped. Just recently, they'd begun an email campaign, opting to send out digital coupons versus the paper coupons in the mail that weren't bringing soulmates through the gates.

Lucius had always wanted to find his soulmate, but since one of his best friends—Jasper—had recently reunited with his soulmate, Lucius had even more of a knot of longing inside him. He hoped he'd meet her soon, and he didn't care if she was human or a shifter, just so long as they found each other.

Pushing aside the longing that always seemed to find him whenever he saw couples with small children in the park, he focused on his job and the safety of the park and guests.

Just as he was about to turn the corner near the bird sanctuary, his sharp hearing picked up the sound of a soft, hiccupping sob. He scanned the crowd of people and saw a little girl. Her face was streaked with tears and she held a stuffed macaw to her chest.

He moved swiftly to her and dropped to one knee. "Hey there, kiddo," he said gently. "I'm a security guard here at the park and my name is Lucius. What's the matter?"

She inhaled shakily and clutched the bird tighter. "I...I can't find my mommy."

He smiled reassuringly. “It’s okay, little one. We’ll find her together, okay? What’s your name?”

“Layla.”

He stood and offered her his hand. “Let’s go find your mommy.”

She put her tiny hand in his. He brought his walkie to his mouth and said softly, “I’ve got a lost kid here, female, blond hair, and wearing shorts and a tank top with hearts on it.”

“Head to the security office,” Jupiter said. “I’ll send word to the workers in the park to let them know to send anyone looking for her here. Name?”

“Layla. We’re on the way.”

As they walked to the security office, Lucius said, “Did you see a bird show? They’re so cool.”

“I want to, but Mommy said not today,” she said.

“Aw, well, maybe next time. I love your bird. What’s his name?”

“Feathers.”

“That’s a great name!”

She smiled up at him. “I like the birds the best.”

“They’re awesome. How about the petting zoo?”

She shook her head.

He guided her to the security office. Jupiter opened the door and a woman dashed out, grabbing Layla in a hug. “Baby! Where did you go? I was so scared!”

Layla started to cry again as she told her mom that she got lost and couldn’t find her. Her mom stood with Layla in her arms. “Thank you so much for keeping her safe. My husband was watching her while I changed our son in the restroom and he said he turned his back for a minute and she walked off.”

“I found her at the bird sanctuary,” Lucius said.

“Oh, honey,” she said, hugging her tighter. “She loves birds. We didn’t order advanced tickets for the shows today and they’re sold out. She was so disappointed.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I think we can help with that. If you have time, I’m sure we can find space for you and your family in the one p.m. show.”

“Oh, could you? That would be wonderful. Let me call my husband. He’s waiting at the ticket office with our baby to watch for her.”

Jupiter radioed to the season ticket office and let them know they’d found Layla as the woman called her husband to share the news.

The woman looked at Lucius for a long moment with tears shining in her eyes. “Thank you so much. I don’t know what I would do if something happened to her.”

“Just doing my job, I’m glad I could help.”

“Well, thank you. Truly.”

When the father appeared pushing a stroller, Lucius smiled at the reunion, grateful that he'd been able to help bring them back together. Jupiter handed over tickets to the next bird show and told them to let Jess at the entrance know that he'd personally sent them as special guests.

"Thank you, Lucius," Layla said from her mom's arms.

"You're welcome, kiddo. Enjoy the show, and you too, Feathers."

The family walked off toward the bird sanctuary, and Lucius turned to Jupiter with a smile. "I might not have my own family yet, but I do love this job for that reason right there."

"Yeah, it's awesome to be part of that kind of happy ending. Aside from that little hiccup in the day, how's it going?"

"Good. Quiet."

"That's how we like it."

Lucius definitely preferred things quiet in the park too. They'd had some issues over the past months with other shifter groups trying to come in and either take over or harm someone, like his friend August's mate, Ginny, whose murderous grandfather had tried to kill her to keep her from taking over their jackal pack.

He'd take a quiet day in the park over that sort of problem any day.

After saying goodbye, he turned his attention back to his patrol route, his heart a little lighter than before. He had no idea when he'd meet his soulmate. He hoped that she was out there waiting for him, just like he was waiting for her.

For now, all he could do was focus on his job and keep the park safe for the shifters who called it home and the patrons who came to enjoy the amenities offered. Maybe someday, his soulmate would walk through the gates and into his arms. Until then, he'd just hope that someday would be soon.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Thursday afternoon, Sidney Hartwell twisted lazily back and forth in the chair at the front desk of her mom's salon and promptly winced as a ray of sunshine streamed through the front windows and tried to burn her retinas.

"Geez," she said, putting her hand up to shield herself and rising to her feet. She moved to the windows and lowered the shades until the sunshine was covered and the desk was no longer in the hot July sun.

"Got to ya, honey?" her mom called loudly from the other side of the salon, her voice barely audible over the hum of the hair dryers and chatter of the two other stylists and their clients.

"Yeah," she said.

The front door swung open and Sidney quickly moved back to the desk and plastered a smile on her face to greet them.

"Hi, welcome to The Style Loft, how can I help you?"

"Hello, I'm Mildred and I've got a three p.m. appointment with Linda."

Sidney looked at the calendar and saw the appointment. "Have a seat, let me check with my mom and see where she'd like you to get settled."

She hurried back to where her mom was washing a current client's hair.

"Get Mildred set up on four and I'll be over as soon as I finish washing Daisy's hair."

Sidney nodded, called Mildred over, and got her set up including a bottle of water, then returned to the reception desk. She moved the appointment book to the side to reveal her sketchbook, where she'd been drawing an elephant. On her phone she had pictures of an elephant, but what she really wanted to do was see one in real life and sketch it right there.

Not that there were any elephants in Riverbrook, though it had plenty of trees to sketch thanks to being near the Pine Barrens, which were a famous part of New Jersey. But the area was otherwise fairly devoid of any sort of exotic wildlife outside of the usual seen in the woods.

Art was Sidney's passion and her escape. Since she was a kid and given her first drawing set by her parents for Christmas, she'd dreamed of becoming a professional artist. She'd filled sketchbooks with drawings of animals that she'd never had a chance to see in real life. In her bedroom upstairs, above the salon, she had a shelf full of filled sketchbooks of wild animals, from lounging leopards with soft spots and sleek muscles to soaring eagles amidst fluffy clouds.

Life, however, had other plans.

When her father passed away when she was a teenager, her hopes of going to art school had gone up in smoke. Her part-time job at the salon for art supply money had become a full-time job that her mom insisted was more important than anything. More important than art school or finding a job in the art field that would help Sidney explore her craft.

Instead of spending her days with her pencil and sketchbook, she was mostly trapped at the front desk, checking in clients and managing appointments, ordering supplies, and helping as her mother and the other stylists needed.

Trapped was definitely a good word for how she felt: a prisoner to the obligations of

a family-owned business. Her parents had run the salon together and Sidney had been simply a part-timer, but when her dad died, Sidney had felt pressured to fill in the gaps. Her mom had promised to hire help so Sidney could focus on her art, but that day had never come. Now, six years later, Sidney felt like her life was passing her by. She'd taken free drawing courses from the library and some online art classes from the local community college, and she knew she was talented enough to make a career of it if she could only work on it more.

If only she wasn't proverbially chained to the front desk.

"Oh, what's that?" Delia, one of the stylists, asked as she peered over Sidney's shoulder. Sidney gave Delia an arched brow, and Delia grinned. "I know it's an elephant."

"Good, for a second there I was wondering if my drawing sucked."

"Heck no, you're amazing."

"Aw, thanks."

"It's cute," she said with an approving smile. "Hey, if I gave you a picture of Clyde, could you draw him for me? Something I can hang up? I'd pay you for it."

Sidney smiled. "I'd love to do that. I have an online store on a craft site, and for an eight-by-ten pencil drawing, I charge thirty dollars. For you, it'll be twenty."

"Perfect. I'll text you some pics of him."

Clyde was Delia's great dane who had no idea he was a very large dog and still considered himself a puppy who could sit on anyone's lap.

She checked out Delia's client and made an appointment for her next visit, then greeted the next client and took her to Delia's station.

She sat back heavily in the desk chair and stared out the window for a few moments. Her phone buzzed, drawing her from her thoughts of freedom and fresh air that wasn't tainted with hair spray. She saw that Delia had sent her pictures of Clyde by text.

Opening her phone to look at the pictures, she noticed she had a new email.

Opening the app, her eyes widened as she saw the subject line of the message: Enjoy a complimentary VIP Safari Tour at Amazing Adventures Safari Park .

It had to be a joke or spam.

Right?

She opened the email, wondering if she was about to get her account hacked, and realized it was legit. As part of a summer promotion, the safari park was sending out coupons for free VIP tours as well as a free parking pass and a voucher for a burger of the day combo.

She'd never been to the safari park. Because they owned their own business, her family hadn't done much in the way of vacations over the years, just the occasional beach day when the salon was closed or visiting family over the holidays.

Sidney's heart raced.

This could be her chance to see exotic animals up close and sketch them in person!

She opened the web browser and looked up the park. Not only did they have the

safari tour with elephants, bears, lions, wolves, and a whole paddock of non-predator animals like deer and a grumpy moose named Tank, but there was also a petting zoo and a bird sanctuary with daily shows.

This had to be fate or some kind of sign from the universe that her art was going to go somewhere someday.

She leaned back in her chair and watched her mom talk animatedly to Mildred while she cut her hair. Her mom would not be thrilled that Sidney would want to take time off for a safari tour, but wasn't it about time that Sidney put herself first for a change?

Returning to the website, she saw there was a place to enter in a code to redeem an email coupon or voucher to claim a spot during the tour times.

After entering the code, she looked through the available times and saw the VIP tours were only on Fridays and Saturdays, when the salon was the busiest.

With tomorrow being Friday, she knew it was too much to ask to be gone for half the day, but Saturday? That was doable. And she deserved some time away from the desk and a chance to see wild animals up close.

Selecting the tour at noon, Sidney entered in her information and hovered the mouse over the reserve now button.

What was the old saying? It was easier to ask forgiveness than permission?

Wasn't she also a whole adult who could do things like take a day off?

Taking a deep breath, she clicked the button to reserve her spot for Saturday.

Now she just had to find the right time to tell her mom.

“What? I need you! Saturday is our busiest day!” her mom said after dinner as Sidney was clearing the dishes.

“I’ll help set up in the morning and deal with the clients as they come in, but I’m leaving at eleven. On the dot.”

“Why do you have to do this? Why not Sunday?”

“Because.” She had a whole lot to say, actually, about how it was reasonable to want to take time off and not always be at the salon. Hair styling was her mom’s passion, not Sidney’s. No matter the suggestions and encouragement she’d gotten to go into it, Sidney had always only wanted to do art.

“Because?” her mom prompted with an annoyed tone.

Her heart sank a bit at her mom’s harsh tone, but she’d been hyping herself up all afternoon to have this confrontation. “This is important to me, Mom. I want to go, but more than that, I never ask for time off. I’ve been working at the salon since Dad died and you’ve never hired anyone to help out at the front desk so I could do my own thing.”

“The salon is our thing.”

“It’s yours, not mine. Art is my thing. I know you don’t get it.”

Her mom waved a dismissive hand. “No, I don’t get it at all. You’re talking about doodling when I’m talking about our business. It keeps the roof over our heads and the lights on, dang it. Besides, I don’t have anyone to cover on such short notice.”

Ever since she’d clicked the button for the reservation, Sidney had felt like she needed to go to the safari park. More than her desire to sketch animals up close, she

could feel like this was a decision that was going to change things for her in some way. She just had an inkling , as her grandma used to say, that something cool was just around the corner.

Straightening her shoulders, Sidney ignored the guilt that surged inside her. She knew her mom depended on her, but this was something she not only wanted to do, but felt deep in her bones that she needed to do it. “I’ve made up my mind,” she said with as firm a voice as she could muster. “I’ll be leaving at eleven and I’ll be gone for the rest of the day.”

“Oh fine, you win. We’ll manage.”

Relief flooded through her. “Thanks, Mom.”

She felt a mix of emotions as she finished carrying the dishes to the sink and turned on the hot water. She’d had a small victory, but she still felt guilty. She didn’t like disappointing her mom even though she was one hundred percent certain that the salon would be perfectly fine without someone sitting at the front desk for one afternoon.

She just simply didn’t want to keep putting herself on hold like she’d been doing for so many years. It was well past the time when Sidney needed to put herself first for a change, and going to the safari park to sketch animals was a very small step toward a life that she wanted very badly for herself. One that wasn’t stuck behind the front desk and wishing things were different, but making things different.

Hope flickered in her chest for a moment.

Was this what it felt like to finally have a chance to do something for herself? To follow her heart and chase her dreams?

It was pretty damn awesome.

As the suds filled the sink and the steam from the hot water made her nose itch, Sidney smiled to herself. She was going to take a day off and go to the safari park and see some wild animals up close. She'd take her new sketchbook and her leather roll of freshly sharpened pencils, and she'd make the most of her time there.

She couldn't wait.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Saturday couldn't come fast enough for Sidney. She was so excited for the safari tour and a chance to see the animals up close that she'd studied the park map until she felt like she had it memorized. Her mom had been annoyed with her all Friday, but Sidney had chosen to ignore the behavior. Her mom was used to Sidney caving whenever she tried to guilt her into doing what she wanted, but this time, Sidney felt so sure that she was supposed to go to the park that she wasn't fazed by the guilt one bit.

When it was time for her to leave on Saturday for the park, her mom studiously busied herself in the back and she just chalked it up to her being annoyed that she didn't get her way. But Sidney was finally putting herself first.

When had she ever done that?

It was strange that she was in her twenties and had never really been able to do what she wanted without being pressured by her mom to always focus on the family business. Times like these, with her mom acting like a petulant child, made her miss her dad even more. He'd always been a buffer for her mom's harsher edges, and had supported her art even though he'd hoped she would go into the styling business.

The park was busy when she pulled into the line for the parking lot. She eagerly awaited her turn to greet the man who was directing people into the parking lot.

"Hi there," he said with a broad grin. He was boyishly handsome with windswept blond hair and a tan from standing outside in the sun. His nametag read Alfie. "Do you have a ticket or are you going to buy at the gate?"

“I have free parking and admission with this coupon I got by email,” she said, showing him her reservation with a QR code.

“Oh, the VIP tour! They’re awesome, you’ll have a blast. So you get to park in our special lot, which is closer to the gate. Hang a left here at the fork and find a spot in the lot, then show this to the people at the front gate. Have fun!”

“Thanks, Alfie, I will!”

She put her phone on the seat next to her and pulled forward, taking a left and parking in the VIP lot. When she found a spot, she parked and grabbed her crossbody bag, which held her sketchbook and leather roll filled with pencils, and her phone, and got out.

Her phone buzzed and she saw it was Delia.

Have fun, kid. Don’t worry about your mom. She’s just worried you’re going to walk away from the salon and she’ll have to pay someone a living wage to answer the phone.

Sidney snorted. That’s what I figured. I plan to have a blast, don’t worry! Thanks for being so sweet.

Anytime, hon. Maybe you’ll meet Mr. Right and get your happily ever after.

Really? It’s a park.

Yeah, but you never know where love will strike. I thought your generation liked that sort of thing. Fate and all that.

Sidney chuckled. I do, but I’m mostly just interested in sketching the animals.

After texting goodbye, she turned off her notifications so she could focus on just being in the park and not worry about anything else. As she made her way to the front gates, which were tall and made of iron with animal silhouettes in the design, she thought about finding her Mr. Right.

She hadn't been on a date in months. It was hard as heck to meet single guys at the salon and that's where she spent most of her time. If she happened to see a good-looking guy, he was usually accompanying his wife or girlfriend for her hair appointment.

But she wasn't at the park to meet her Mr. Right, she was there to see real live wild animals on the safari tour and sketch to her heart's content. She would try to draw all that she could during the tour, but she also knew it wasn't a long time, so she was going to take pictures with her phone that she could sketch from later.

At the front gate, a man and woman greeted her. She showed the woman her phone screen with the QR code.

"Hi, Sidney, and welcome to the Amazing Adventures Safari Park. Do you need a map or directions to the safari tour?"

"I know where I'm going, but I'll take a map anyway. It'll be a nice souvenir." She took the map and folded it carefully, tucking it into her bag. The man asked to check her bag, and she handed it over. He gave a quick look inside and handed it back.

"You can go ahead and check in at the tour kiosk," the woman said. "It looks like a tiki hut and is right at the entrance to the line for the VIP tours. Have fun."

"Thanks, I will!"

Sidney smiled at them and headed through the gates and into the park. She hung a left

and passed by the security office and made her way toward the safari. At the tiki hut, which was staffed by three men wearing dark blue golf shirts, she smiled and showed them her phone screen.

One of the men, who looked to be about her age, scanned it and smiled as he handed her phone back. “Hi, Sidney, welcome. Have you been on a tour with us before?”

“No.”

“I’ll walk you over and tell you all about it,” he said. “My name is Felix, and I’m one of the tour guides.”

She walked with him to a set of ropes that made up the lines for the tour and told her what to expect. “Once it’s time for your tour, you’ll be taken to a Jeep where a driver and the guide will take you on the tour. Each visitor gets enough time to see the animals in the paddocks without feeling rushed, and we’ll take your picture at each paddock as well. Do you have a favorite animal? I always like to ask just out of personal curiosity.”

They stopped when they reached two other women in line, who Felix said were waiting for their noon tours as well.

“I pretty much like all the animals, but I’ve been working on drawing elephants, so I’m pretty excited to see one up close.”

“You draw? That’s awesome.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Getting the coupon by email was so neat and really timely since I’ve been wondering how I’d get to see exotic animals up close.”

“This will be perfect for that,” he said with a nod. “And we also have the petting zoo

and bird sanctuary.”

“They’re on my list to see today too,” she said.

She also wanted to get one of the park’s specialty burgers and ice cream flavor of the day, and see the carousel that she’d read on social media had been recently refurbished after years in storage.

And somewhere was a kiosk selling cotton candy, one of her favorites.

“Have a great time, Sidney,” he said.

“Thanks, Felix.”

As he walked back toward the tiki hut, Sidney pulled out her sketchbook and a pencil from her pouch before rolling the leather back up and tying it closed. She loved a fresh sketchbook and had saved this one—handmade with a beautiful green leather cover hand-stamped with flowers and leaves—from a craft fair.

Opening it, she looked around and twirled the pencil in her fingers, deciding to draw a nearby plant with broad, dark green leaves. It would be good to warm up with it so she could hit the ground running.

Or drawing, as it were.

Her mind spun as she heard the distant trumpet of an elephant.

How freaking exciting!

Lucius had the strangest feeling as he patrolled on Saturday. His lion was alert, but then again he always was because being a security guard meant he needed to be

paying attention to anything that might be an issue. But more than that, for the last half hour or so, Lucius's lion was pacing in his mind and anxious.

Over what? He had no clue.

But his lion was pestering him to go .

If only his beast could actually talk, then he might know what the issue was. But all he could go on was general feelings, and right now, his lion wanted him to move.

He passed by the security office and paused as he caught a hint of something on the air. Lifting his head, he inhaled silently and turned in a slow circle until his lion let out a curious chuff in his mind as the scent hit him again.

Like peaches and sweet cream.

Holy crap it smelled good.

His lion let out a deep purr and Lucius followed the scent, which grew stronger as he neared the VIP tour.

“What's up, man?” Felix called to him from the tiki hut where they greeted patrons.

He waved but didn't say anything, too intent on following the scent.

Stopping as he reached the line for the VIP tours, he saw three women in line. The one at the front was about to be taken on the first tour of the day.

Someone touched his shoulder, and he let out a low growl that was barely audible and wouldn't have been heard by any of the nearby humans.

“Whoa, you okay?” Felix asked.

Lucius looked at him and the male’s brows winged up. With a low voice, Felix said, “Your eyes are amber. What’s up?”

Shaking his head and trying to push his lion back, he whispered, “I don’t know. Something smells really good to me.”

Felix inhaled. “I don’t smell anything but the burger of the day. I’m starving.”

It was then that he realized the reason Felix didn’t smell what Lucius did, was because he wasn’t smelling something he was smelling someone.

Happiness filled him. He was following the scent of his soulmate. One of the females in line was his mate, he was sure of it.

“Are my eyes amber?” he asked.

“Nope, back to normal.”

“Good. My soulmate is here.”

“Shit, really? Freaking cool! Who?”

He watched as the first tour Jeep pulled away and a second Jeep pulled up, but wouldn’t leave for several minutes. “I don’t know, but not the first one.”

“Okay, so the next female is Brenda, and the third is Sidney. We don’t have any other VIP tours until three. It’s a pretty slow day for tours for some reason.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Go get her,” Felix whispered.

Lucius moved forward, walking past the females in line to speak to Ezra who was in the driver’s seat of the Jeep. He picked up the peaches and cream scent from the second female in line—Sidney.

After speaking quietly to Ezra about finding his soulmate, he waited until the first tour Jeep was gone and the second had pulled up so Brenda could be escorted to it. Once Sidney was alone, Lucius walked toward her.

Holy crap.

She was gorgeous and his lion wanted to come out to see her himself. It was a study in determination to keep himself human, but he was damn sure not going to scare the hell out of his mate the first time they met.

“Hi,” he said, inhaling silently and picking up that amazing scent.

His heart was going to beat out of his chest if he didn’t calm down.

He just couldn’t believe that his soulmate had come on the tour.

What were the odds of that?

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A shadow appeared on the sketchbook paper as Sidney was moving the pencil around the page and she paused and lifted her head.

Holy crap.

The sexiest guy she'd ever seen in her life stood in front of her on the other side of the thick rope that made up the lines for the tour.

“Hi.”

His voice was deep and made something inside her flare to life.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with muscles that strained against the golf shirt he wore, an insignia patch on the chest indicating he was part of the park's security team.

Her pencil flipped out of her fingers and onto the stone pathway.

Before she could bend to pick it up, he held it out to her, smiling in a way that made her skin prickle with sensation.

Oh yeah, he said hi to her. She should...say hi back.

“Hi.”

His smile widened and a dimple appeared in one cheek.

Be still her freaking beating heart.

“I’m Lucius, part of the security team.”

“I’m Sidney.”

He glanced to the side as the woman in line ahead of Sidney was escorted to the waiting blue camo-colored Jeep. “Is this your first time on the VIP tour?”

“Yes. I got a coupon by email.”

He leaned forward and she picked up the scent of his cologne, which reminded her of sunshine and sandalwood. Her stomach flipped and she barely controlled the urge to run her fingers through his dark hair and find out if it was as soft as it looked.

“You’re drawing the plant? It’s so detailed.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re really talented. Are you an artist for a living?”

“Ha, I wish. I work at the front desk of my mom’s hair salon. I’ve always wanted to see exotic animals up close so I could draw them, so when I got the coupon I thought it was fate giving me a chance to see them.”

He hummed. “The tours don’t stop that long in front of the paddocks, just a few minutes at most. Is that long enough for you to sketch the animals?”

“I thought I could use my phone to take pictures too.”

She’d figured the tour stops weren’t very long, but she’d hoped she might be able to

wrangle a few extra minutes from whoever was her tour guide.

He pursed his lips and then said, “Are you busy today?”

“In what sense?”

“I mean, if I moved your reservation to the last one of the day so you could have more time to see the animals, are you free?”

“Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Sure. I’ve never seen someone come to the VIP tour and want to sketch the animals, it’s cool. Are you interested?”

“I’d love that.”

“Give me two minutes. I’ll be right back.”

She hummed as he strode off.

Dang he even had a nice butt.

Her heart was pounding. Honestly pounding!

She couldn’t remember being so quickly attracted to a guy before. And he wanted to help get her more time to sketch. How cool was that?

The day had started out crappy, but things were definitely looking up.

Okay, his soulmate was even more beautiful up close. Long, dark hair tied back in a loose braid with tendrils that framed her heart-shaped face perfectly. She had the

most full, kissable lips of any female he'd ever seen, and her eyes were the prettiest deep jade color.

He didn't want to leave her, but he had an idea to spend time with her.

Like any male who'd met his soulmate in the park, the most important thing to Lucius was getting to know her and hopefully getting her phone number, and maybe even a date.

When he filled his friends at the tiki hut in on what happened, they all stared at him in surprise and then cheered quietly for him so they didn't draw any attention to themselves.

"Freaking awesome, man, congrats," Greg said. "You want to take her on the tour? We can arrange that."

"Yeah, I do, but I was wondering if I could move her to the last tour of the day?" He explained that she was an artist and wanted to sketch the animals, and if he could give her more time to see them, then he could spend time with her too.

"Actually," Brent said, "we've got a whole hour open from two to three. Do you want to take her then? You could spend as much time as you wanted at each paddock. You just have to keep her entertained until two."

"I could totally do that," he said.

"Lemme call Joss. I think he's running around here somewhere," Brent said.

Joss, alpha of the park's wolf pack, was in charge of the safari tours.

Brent put the walkie back on the desk. "Joss said you've got the tour from two to

three with your soulmate. Until then, he suggests showing her around the park and getting lunch.”

“That’s exactly what I had in mind. Thanks, guys.”

“Hey, you give us hope,” Felix said. “I can’t believe she came here with an email coupon and she’s your soulmate. It’s amazing.”

Lucius nodded. It was more than amazing, it was perfect.

Rapping his knuckles on the desktop, he smiled at the males and hurried back to his soulmate.

Her head was down and her pencil was scratching along the surface of the sketchbook. She seemed to sense he was near because her pencil stopped moving and she lifted her head to look at him. A smile lit her face and made him momentarily stunned.

“I’ve got some great news,” he said. He told her about the plans for a truly private tour for a full hour. “I don’t know how long it takes you to sketch things, but you can spend more time at each paddock.”

“That’s so cool.” She looked at her smartwatch. “I think I’ll go get a burger of the day and find something else to sketch. Maybe the carousel since I don’t think it’s too far from the burger stall.”

“Would you like some company?”

Please say yes .

Her brows lifted. “I’d love some. Don’t you have to work, though?”

“I’m off for the afternoon, actually.” Which was true now, thankfully. Once a male found his soulmate, everyone knew he’d want to spend time with her if possible. Lucius had filled in for his friends and other shifters when they’d needed to vacate their jobs for their soulmate.

He was thankful he was surrounded by such helpful people.

She closed her sketchbook and put it and the pencil away.

“Do you know what the burger of the day is?” she asked as they walked down the line to leave the tour area.

“Mushroom swiss,” he said. “I was going to get one for lunch myself because it sounded really good.”

“That might be my favorite kind of burger,” she said.

“So tell me about being an artist,” he said as they made their way to the burger stall, where Lucy and Tarquin were serving up the burger of the day along with fries and drinks. “Did you go to school to learn how to draw like that?”

She blushed, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of pink that he adored.

“No. I’ve taken some classes online and at the library, but my mom couldn’t afford to send me to school and I don’t make enough money at my job to send myself. So I’m self-taught. Lots of online videos and following people on social media who share tips for drawing.”

“I’d love to see what else you’ve drawn, but your sketchbook looks pretty new.”

“I wanted to start a new sketchbook today. I have pictures in my phone, I’d be happy

to show you some things I've done."

They reached the burger kiosk, which had a line of about ten people. He waved at Tarquin as they walked by and got in line.

While they waited, she showed him a dozen pictures on her phone of drawings she'd done of animals, the detailed drawings looking like something worthy of being framed and hung on a wall.

"I noticed you don't have any lion pictures," he said.

"Well, I've never seen a lion in person," she said. "But I will today at the safari. Is that your favorite animal?"

"Yep."

She smiled up at him. "I'll draw a picture of one just for you."

Maybe someday he could shift for her and she could draw him. Now that would be incredible.

"I'd love that."

She told him about working at her mom's salon and making a little extra money with an online craft site where she booked the occasional custom picture.

After they'd gotten their burgers, fries, and drinks, they sat at a picnic table under a shade tree to get some relief from the bright sunshine.

"So you'd like to do art for a living?" he asked.

“Definitely. I don’t know that it will ever happen, though.”

She told him about her mom’s guilt trips whenever she tried to do something that took her away from the salon, which was compounded by her father’s death and her mom’s insistence that the salon was the family business and Sidney needed to be part of it to the exclusion of all else.

“That’s not very fair,” he said.

“No, it’s not. Coming here today was the first thing that I’ve done for myself in ages. I just ignored her behavior and guilt trips and decided it was high time I did something that was fun. I should be able to do things that make me happy.”

“Family guilt is rough.”

“Your family?” she asked.

“I came here with my Dad and brothers, but I’m not close to my mom,” he said.

“Do you ever talk to her?”

“Not since long before we left and came here.” Coming to New Jersey was the best thing he’d ever done, and the reason for that change was sitting right in front of him. If he’d never left his home pride, he’d never have met Sidney.

That was a future he didn’t want to think about.

Not only was she gorgeous, but she was funny and sweet.

“Doing what’s best for ourselves is tough when family doesn’t support us. I’m sorry your mom gave you a hard time about today, but I’m so glad that you’re here.”

She took a bite of the burger and hummed. As she finished her bite, she said, “You know what? I’m feeling like coming here was very much fate. Like I was destined to get that email coupon and come here today. Do you believe in fate?”

“Absolutely.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Good. I wouldn’t want to be the only one who thinks it was destiny that I came here today.”

“I definitely think you were supposed to be here today, and so was I.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither saying anything, and then she smiled. “Lucius, this is the best burger I’ve ever had in my life. And you’re the best company for a meal. Thanks for arranging things for me today. You’re pretty amazing.”

“You’re pretty amazing too, Sidney, and definitely the best company as well.”

She smiled like she wasn’t used to being complimented, and he decided to make sure he complimented her tons so she realized how special she was. He hadn’t known her long and already knew that was true.

His soulmate was one incredible female.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

After lunch, Lucius accompanied Sidney to the bird sanctuary for the one o'clock show. She'd wanted to check it out, but the reservation system said it was full so she'd hoped to be able to at least see some birds to sketch or take pictures of without having to see a show. He'd simply winked at her and told him he had an "in" with the people who ran the sanctuary.

Angel's Sanctuary for Birds was a combination bird hospital and refuge that many birds called home if they weren't able to be released into the wild after treatment and rehabilitation. Among the huge cages were a macaw and an eagle, as well as a vulture, a condor, and several owls. The show featured live presentations with the larger birds and short talks about conservation and the birds' habitats.

They approached the big red barn that contained the bird hospital and he knocked before opening the door.

"Hey, Jess," he said, smiling at a woman standing at a desk and looking at a computer.

"Hi, Lucius, who's your friend?"

"This is Sidney. Sidney, this is Jess. She and her husband Evan run the hospital, along with Cael, who is the resident vet for all the animals in the park."

"We also have a new assistant," Jess said, coming over and shaking Sidney's hand. "Her name is Maggie. She's learning the ropes and is going to help with the one o'clock show today. Are you going to sit in for the show?"

“We’d love to if there’s space,” he said.

A look passed between Jess and Lucius, and Sidney wasn’t sure what it meant, but Jess smiled and nodded, then said, “You bet. Would you like to see behind the scenes before you find a seat?”

“That would be awesome,” Sidney said. “Can I take pictures? I’d love to sketch the birds, but there’s probably not enough time.”

“You draw? That’s awesome. Take whatever pictures you’d like!”

Jess took them to the bird cages and talked about each of the birds. Sidney snapped pictures of each one, loving the bright colors of the scarlet macaw and the unique condor, who looked very suspicious thanks to his bald head and dark eyes.

Lucius was quiet next to her, watching as she took pictures and asked questions of Jess, who was very sweet and knowledgeable.

Sidney couldn’t help but sneak peeks at Lucius.

He was so freaking sexy. She didn’t think she’d ever seen a sexier guy in her life. And that he also seemed interested in her? Well, that was downright amazing.

When she’d seen all the birds and taken tons of pictures, they sat in on the thirty-minute show and she got a great picture of the macaw flying over the audience.

“This is the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen,” she whispered to Lucius.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

She sketched quietly for a few minutes as Jess and Maggie talked about the macaw

that was named Zephyr, and was a permanent resident of the sanctuary after being injured and brought to them for treatment.

When the show was over, they headed out of the sanctuary. As she tucked her sketchbook into her bag, she said, “Have you watched the show often?”

“Just when it first opened,” he said. “I never paid much attention to the birds, but seeing them through your eyes while you took pictures and sketched Zephyr gave me a new appreciation for them.”

She smiled at him. They stopped at the carousel where she took a few pictures of the horses when they’d stopped turning, and then they journeyed to the petting zoo.

“Don’t want to take pictures here?” he asked as he leaned on the top rail of the fence that enclosed the small animals.

“I think I’d like to live in the moment for now and not be on my phone taking pictures,” she said. “Maybe I can come back another time and sketch the babies. That little goat is super cute.”

His knuckles turned white as he gripped the rail, and then he relaxed and flashed her another sweet smile.

She was not melting into a puddle every time he smiled at her.

“Would you like company? When you come back?”

“I’d love it.”

He glanced at his watch and said, “We should hustle back so you can go on the tour.”

“I can’t believe how fast the time’s gone,” she said. “I’m really excited to see the animals. Thank you so much for arranging this for me.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “It’s my pleasure.”

She liked that word. Pleasure .

It made her think about dark rooms and beds.

And could Lucius smell any better?

He smelled like he wore an expensive cologne, the kind that was sandalwood and spices.

She shivered as she caught another whiff of his cologne.

It should be illegal for a guy to smell so good.

When they reached the tour waiting area, he introduced her to the guys behind the kiosk.

“The keys are in the Jeep, you’ve got the full hour,” Benjamin said. “We’ll radio when the three p.m. tour starts.”

“Thanks, guys,” Lucius said.

He escorted Sidney to a blue camo-colored Jeep and helped her into the passenger seat.

He got behind the wheel and started the engine. “Usually, VIP guests sit in the back, but you’re extra special.”

“This is awesome. I’m so glad I came here today.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, I am too.”

The first stop was the elephants. He took her picture with a professional camera at the gate of the paddock, and then stayed by her side as she took her own pictures and sketched a bit of one of the elephants. They spent a long time at each paddock, only moving on when he’d asked her multiple times if she was sure she didn’t want to stay longer.

The truth was that even though the animals were amazing up close, she was mostly enjoying her time with him.

She couldn’t really understand how her feelings were so strong for him when they’d just met. She felt like she was half in love with him already, which seemed impossible.

But...it also felt very right.

She hadn’t believed in love at first sight until she’d met Lucius.

She sure as heck believed in it now.

They spent the longest at the last paddock, where Tank the moose, deer, and antelope hung out near a pond and grazed on the grasses around the large space. She leaned against the brick wall by the gate and sketched the big moose.

“I wouldn’t want to meet him outside of the paddock,” she said. “He looks like he could do some damage with those horns.”

“He’s a gentle giant,” Lucius said. “Unless he’s in a bad mood, and then watch out.”

She laughed.

He leaned over and peeked at her sketch of Tank.

“You’re so good at drawing.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I love it so much. And having a chance to really sketch like this is more than I could have asked for. This has been so incredible.” She gave his biceps a squeeze and for a moment she swore his blue eyes turned amber.

But just as quickly as she thought she’d seen them change, they were blue again. A pretty summer sky blue that matched his lightly tanned skin and dark blond hair.

His walkie beeped, and he lifted it and pressed a button.

“Lucius.”

“The next tour is about to start, where are you guys?”

“We’re at the last paddock.”

“Good. Do you need more time?”

He gave Sidney a questioning look, and she said, “I’m good.”

“We’re finishing up.”

Hanging the walkie back on his belt, he said, “We have time if you’d like to stay a little longer.”

“You don’t have to go back to work at all?”

He paused for a moment, then said, “No, why?”

“Well, I was...maybe not done hanging out with you if you’re free.”

“I’m very free,” he said, his voice dropping a little lower. “In fact, I was going to ask if you’d like to go out to dinner with me tonight.”

A date too? Holy crap.

“I’d love to.”

“Great, there’s an awesome little steak house not too far from here. It’s casual. I can pick you up, unless you’d like to just hang with me until dinnertime?”

The chance to hang with him for a few more hours and then go on a date? Hell yes.

“I’d love to hang out with you.”

He leaned over slightly and smiled down at her. “I’m not done spending time with you either, Sidney.”

She loved how he said her name. Like it was his favorite word.

Hers was currently Lucius.

They stood like that, inches apart and neither moving, for what felt like an eternity. Then he leaned back and gestured to the Jeep. “We can go get a snack and hang out while you work on your sketches,” he said. “You’ll also get a souvenir photo album that we can pick up at the security office in an hour or so.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She tucked her sketchbook into her bag and followed him to the Jeep. In minutes, they were on their way back to the front of the tour, where he turned off the engine and left the keys in the vehicle. After taking out the memory card from the camera, he offered her his hand and said, “I need to drop this off at the security office and then we can hit up the ice cream stand, or the candy shop or the kiosk that sells popcorn if you’re in the mood for that.”

“I did want the ice cream earlier, but now I think that popcorn sounds perfect.”

She took his hand, loving how warm he was and how much she liked touching him, even something small like holding his hand.

She’d never been so affected by a guy before, but she liked it.

She liked him.

She couldn’t believe she’d taken a chance on coming to the park for the tour and to sketch animals and ended up meeting an amazing guy.

Could he be her Mr. Right?

He sure seemed like it.

If only she could kiss him and find out if he was a good kisser. Because that mattered. But she was sure judging by his full lips that she’d love kissing him. And doing other things.

As her mind strayed to other, sexier thoughts, she had to stop her train of thought before it got too far off the rails and focus on Lucius, who was telling her about when he’d moved to New Jersey and started working for the park.

“I’m glad you came to New Jersey,” she said as they reached the security office.

“Trust me, sweetheart, I am too.”

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Lucius didn't like leaving Sidney, but he had some stuff to attend to.

He left her on a bench outside the security office and said, "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here," she said, taking her sketchbook out of the crossbody bag and pulling a pencil from its leather roll.

He paused and looked at her. So freaking gorgeous.

His lion was already falling for her.

How could he not? She wasn't just beautiful, she was funny and sweet and he couldn't wait to get to know her better.

He now understood why males didn't like being away from their soulmates, because he didn't want to leave her side. But he had to make some arrangements quickly, and the security office was the place to do it.

"Hey," he said, as the door shut behind him.

Jupiter stood at the desk and was talking to Justus, one of the bears who worked with the security team.

"How's it going?" Jupiter asked.

"Awesome. I need some help, though."

He handed the flash drive to Lori, who handled the printing of the souvenir books, and then leaned against the counter. “I need an apartment set up right away. I’ve also got a date and need an escort to the steakhouse in town.”

“You thinking of bringing her back here?” Jupiter asked as he lifted his phone.

“I just want to be prepared.”

“Jenni didn’t go into the paddock today,” he said. “So she and Devlin could grab clothes for you and stock the apartment with food and toiletries just in case you bring her back here.”

“Congrats, man,” Justus said. “I can’t believe the email coupon brought a soulmate here.”

“Me either,” Lucius said.

“It’ll give hope to so many of our people,” Jupiter said with a nod, then looked up from his phone. “Okay, Jenni said they’ll get right on it. We’ll put you in apartment three. You can use your swipe card to get into it.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

“What time did you want to go for dinner?”

“Six?”

“Sure, come to the employee lot,” Jupiter said. “Javan and Xavier will follow you.”

The park alphas had a rule that no one went anywhere alone, and that included dates. He and Sidney could be in the car alone, but they’d be followed by Javan and Xavier,

who'd keep their eyes on them. It was always better to be safe than sorry, and the few times the park had been targeted by shifters wanting to take over, they'd been caught off guard.

"It'll be an hour, hon," Lori said from the little room where she printed the pictures and assembled the photo albums.

"We'll be back, thanks."

He rapped his knuckles on the counter and turned to get back to his soulmate. Just at that moment, he had the strangest feeling of sadness mixed with anger wash over him.

He moved to the door and saw through the window that Sidney was on the phone, pacing and gesturing angrily with her free hand.

He realized he'd been catching a hint of her emotions because they were soulmates, even though they weren't mated yet.

She must be extremely emotional for him to pick up on them at this point.

He wanted to go to her and comfort her, but he decided to give her time to finish her call without intruding.

"I'm just going to hang for a minute," he said, turning back to his friends.

"Sure thing," Jupiter said.

Lucius tried not to listen, but even inside the security building, his excellent hearing thanks to his shifter genetics allowed him to catch most of Sidney's side of the conversation. He had a feeling that Sidney was going to be very upset when she got

off the phone. Hopefully, she still wanted to go out tonight because he didn't want to be done spending time with her, but if she needed to leave, he'd understand.

His lion let out a grumble and he mentally shushed the beast.

Her happiness was the most important thing to him now.

She was the most important person to him.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to be late tonight," Sidney said after she'd waited a couple minutes for her mom to answer the phone at the salon.

"What?" her mom practically screeched. "I thought you were just going to be gone for the afternoon."

"I was planning that," she said. "But I also told you I was taking the rest of the day off. Which I think is pretty dang fair since I never get to take any time off in general." Hell, Sidney couldn't even recall any actual vacations she'd taken in the last year or two, not even a long weekend to do something fun. She couldn't believe that a trip to a safari park seemed like a vacation. How pathetic was that?

"Well, I expected you back before the end of the day to help close."

"Why? I told you I was going to be gone."

"It shouldn't take that long to go on a stupid safari. Honestly, Sidney, you need to get your priorities straight."

"Priorities?" Sidney asked, standing from the bench to pace because she was getting agitated and couldn't sit still. "You mean the salon? That's your priority, Mom, not mine. I want to draw."

“Your doodles? That’s hardly going to turn into a career.”

Doodles? “Why can’t you be supportive of me? I’ve been supportive of you.”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“What? No, you can’t.”

“Well,” her mom said with a grunt, “then why do you keep dreaming about something that will never get you anywhere? The salon is the family business and I need you to be here to help me.”

“What if I don’t want the life you chose?” Sidney slashed the air with her free hand as anger and sadness twined inside her. “You want me to answer phones at a job I don’t like my whole life?”

“You could have gone to cosmetology school.”

“Mom! I never wanted to cut hair for a living, I want to be an artist. Your dream for me was for me to be a stylist, but that was never my dream. I’ll never really be happy trapped there.”

“Trapped?”

“Yeah, Mom. I feel trapped. You don’t pay me enough for me to move out on my own, so I’m stuck living in the apartment with you, and you constantly make demands of my time with the salon and belittle anything that I do with my art. Do you know that I’m good? That people buy sketches from my online store on that craft website?” Tears pricked Sidney’s eyes and she hated that she wanted to cry.

Her mom was so quiet that Sidney had to look at the screen to make sure the call

hadn't disconnected.

"Well," her mom said finally. "I guess I'll see you tonight."

Sidney sighed. That was her mom in a nutshell. She would just shut down instead of finishing a conversation if it got confrontational. But the sucky part was that nothing would change. Come Monday, her mom would expect her at the front desk working hard and wouldn't want to discuss this argument.

But Sidney was really tired of the status quo.

"I'm not done talking about this," Sidney said. "We can talk tomorrow."

"Well, I really don't think there's anything to say."

"I do. There needs to be some changes. I...need to be able to live my life for myself however I want, and you need to do what you promised me when Dad died and hire a replacement."

"I'll see you tonight," her mom said with a clipped tone.

"Don't wait up," Sidney said.

The call ended and she stood a few feet away from the security building that she'd been pacing in front of. Her heart was heavy. She hadn't meant to get into an argument with her mom, but when she'd turned her phone on after Lucius went inside, she'd seen her mom had called and texted numerous times, wanting to know when she'd be back, so she'd decided to deal with it.

She and her mom were in some kind of dysfunctional relationship right now and her mom couldn't seem to see that it wasn't good for either of them. But Sidney coming

to the park and meeting Lucius had given her a chance to examine herself and she'd seen the truth: she was locked up in a situation where she didn't have any peace or happiness.

Even though she'd just met Lucius, she sure as heck felt peaceful and happy with him.

The best thing that had ever happened to her was getting that tour coupon in her inbox because it brought her and Lucius together.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

When Lucius was sure that the call was over, he stepped out of the building. She turned to face him, eyes luminous and shoulders hunched.

“Hey,” she said, trying to sound happy when she clearly wasn’t.

“Are you okay, sweetheart? You look upset.”

“Just...my mom.” She waved her hand dismissively.

“Do you need to leave?”

She sniffled and pushed her phone into her bag. “Before I talked to my mom, I toyed with the idea of going home to change for our date, but now I don’t want to.”

“You look perfect anyway,” he said.

She snorted. “You’re sweet. I wouldn’t have minded changing into something a little dressier, but if I go home, I’m going to get into another argument with my mom and hard pass on that.” She smiled at him. “Do you need to go back to work? You were in the office for a while.”

“Not at all, I’m free to hang out with you. Unless you don’t want company?” He didn’t want to push her if she wanted time to herself.

“I’d love some. I think you said something about popcorn?”

“You got it,” he said.

They made their way to the kiosk that sold popcorn and cotton candy, which was staffed today by Marcus, the alpha bear.

The bears handled the food for the park, both for the patrons and the shifters who lived and worked there. There was an employee cafeteria aboveground as well as a cafeteria underground where their people had private living areas with each shifter group living together. The marketplace had not only a great cafeteria that served three meals a day, but also a sundry store, a nail salon, and a makeup shop, and there were offices and conference rooms underground as well.

He wished he could tell Sidney all about his life and take her to his home in the lions' private living area. He wanted to show her the greenhouse where they grew the plants for the lions' mating ceremony. But mostly he wanted to show her his lion, and tell her everything about himself so there were no secrets.

But that wasn't how things went in the park.

Shifters didn't tell the truth of their beasts until they had won the heart of their soulmate. That ensured the secret would be kept. So for now, he had to keep a big secret from his soulmate, and he hated it.

But soon, hopefully, she'd fall in love with him and he'd be able to show her his lion.

His beast made an inquisitive purr in his mind that was filled with hope.

"What can I do for you and your friend today, Lucius?" Marcus asked as he handed change to a woman who was buying a bag of blue cotton candy for her child.

He looked at Sidney and she said, "Is the colorful popcorn flavored like anything or is it just sugary?"

Marcus reached under the counter and set a small cup of the colorful popcorn on top. “Try it for yourself. It’s sweet with a hint of fruit. We picked the colors for Zephyr, the macaw.”

Lucius held the cup while Sidney took a few pieces and popped them in her mouth. “Oh, it’s good! Very sweet but a bit like fruit salad. Neat.”

“Would you like a bag? It’s on the house,” Marcus said.

“Actually, while I like it, my favorite is regular old butter popcorn.”

Lucius smiled. “I like that the best too.”

Marcus scooped butter popcorn into a square white-and-red striped box and said, “Drinks?”

They both took bottled water. “Thanks for the snack,” Sidney said.

“You’re welcome, stop back any time.”

“Thanks, Marcus.”

They walked away and found a bench near the carousel, settling in to watch the families as they waited in line for a turn around the old-fashioned ride. His friend August’s soulmate Ginny, who was a jackal shifter, ran the ride.

They snacked on popcorn in silence for several minutes.

Then he said, “Do you want to talk about the conversation with your mom?”

She sighed. “I wasn’t being too loud, was I?”

“Not at all, I just know you’re upset and I’ve got two perfectly working ears if you’d like to talk.”

She exhaled through her nose and didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she told him everything in a rush: the argument with her mom, the way she’d always felt pressured to support her mom but had never gotten the same support.

“Hell, you and I just met and you’ve been more interested in my art in the last couple of hours than my mom has my whole life. My dad was supportive of my art, but he was also really involved in the salon and did a lot of things for my mom. When he died, my mom needed me to keep the salon from going under, so I stepped in and took his place. But it was never supposed to be a permanent change.”

While she talked, she’d gotten out her sketchbook and sketched one of the horses on the carousel. He was amazed at watching her draw as she talked, the pencil smoothly moving across the thick paper as she made the horse seem like it could jump off the page.

“Did you want to go to art school?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I’m okay with not having gone at this point, though I would love to work in something related to art, even if it’s just working at an art supply store or teaching classes somewhere part-time.”

“It’s not fair that your mom put so much pressure on you and didn’t offer you any support.”

“Well, life’s not fair.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but I think family should try to make it as fair as they can. Support and love go a long way.”

“True.”

She put the pencil down on the bench and held up the sketchbook.

“It’s a beautiful drawing, Sidney,” he said.

She gifted him with a very big smile, her eyes glittering with happiness. “Thanks, Lucius.”

She put her things away and they finished the popcorn, but she didn’t want to talk about her mom or herself at all; she wanted to hear about his life. He’d told her some things, but so much of what he’d gone through and what had brought him to New Jersey was related to him being a lion shifter, so there was a limit to what he could say.

“Well, my dad Caesar works at the park here in the security department, and so do my brothers Jupiter and Amadeus.”

“You guys have some interesting names,” she said.

“Right?” He laughed. “My dad said it’s because his family always named the guys unique names and he wanted to continue the tradition.”

“What about your mom?”

Now that was a conversation he didn’t really like to have, because he always felt betrayed by the situation. But he could at least tell her a good portion of the truth, even if it hurt his heart to retell his history.

“So we’re originally from California. Our parents were together for a long time, but then when I was little, our mom decided she wanted to be with someone else, so she

left our dad, and us, and started a new life for herself. My dad had friends out here at the park, so we moved and have been here ever since.”

“Wow, that sucks,” she said. “Are you in touch with her at all?”

“No, her new life didn’t include keeping us in her life. I think it bothers Jupiter and Amadeus more than me because I was so young when she left that I don’t have a lot of memories of her. But they’re older and they do. No matter how old I was when she took off, though, it was rough growing up without a mom even though my dad did as best he could.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Honestly. Plus, if all that hadn’t happened, then I wouldn’t be here with you now.”

She shook her head with a chuckle. “That’s putting a nice spin on a devastating past.”

“Hey, I’m all about silver linings, sweetheart.”

His phone buzzed and he saw it was a text from Devlin letting him know that the apartment was set up.

“It’s been an hour,” he said. “Why don’t we grab your photo album and we can hang out in my apartment for a while, it’s here in the park.”

“You live here too? Now that’s pretty cool.”

“Yep, there’s a small complex and I was lucky enough to get one of the apartments.”

She took his hand and they stopped long enough to toss their trash, then continued to

the security office where he introduced her to Jupiter, then picked up her album.

“Thanks, Lori,” he said.

“Anytime.”

Sidney looked through the album as they walked back to the apartment complex. They talked about the park and his job, and how different it was for him working with his family than for her working with her mom.

And then he opened the door to his apartment and smiled down at her.

“We’ve got reservations for dinner at six. How about the nickel tour?”

“Lead the way,” she said, grinning.

The dinner was spectacular. It wasn’t just that the meal was good, but that spending the day with Sidney and going on their first date was incredible. He was falling hard for her, and his lion was entirely smitten. It took all his willpower not to just tell her the truth. Because he was sure she would keep the secret, and it killed him not to be able to share it with her.

But he wasn’t going to take any chances and was going to follow the rules set in place by the park alphas. His dad had sent him a text while he was at dinner to say how happy he was for him and was looking forward to meeting Sidney, and that Amadeus was too.

He was so glad he had a supportive family.

It made him ache a little for Sidney.

But hopefully, she and her mom would come to an understanding about things and Sidney could carve out some happiness for herself. Especially since he wasn't allowed to live anywhere but the park, so once they were mated, she'd need to live with him. At least he would support her art. Whatever she wanted to do, even going to art school, he'd encourage her to pursue whatever made her happy.

He would do anything for one of her sweet smiles.

He opened the passenger door of the SUV for her, and she paused before she got in.

"This has been the best day, Lucius. I've never had such a perfect first date. Everything about today...was just amazing."

She smiled up at him, and the sweet scent of her arousal made him want to purr.

"I've had a great day with you too, Sidney. You're beautiful and special, and I'm so glad we were able to spend the day together."

She moved closer, her body brushing his as she stared up at him. Her eyes darkened and the scent of her arousal deepened even more, until he felt like he was going to drown in her sweet scent.

She rose onto her toes and pressed her lips to his.

His brain misfired at the feel of her against him, his lion roaring in happiness and his whole body jolting at how amazing this first kiss was.

Their lips parted together as her arms went around his neck. He let go of the door and pulled her even closer, slipping his tongue into her mouth to deepen the kiss. She melted in his arms with a soft moan, the kiss seeming like it would never end. And he was totally okay with that.

When the kiss ended and he felt practically drunk on how intoxicating she was, he helped her into the SUV, then got behind the wheel.

She leaned against him, her arm around his and her free hand on his thigh. It wasn't until they were back in the park and he asked where she'd left her car, that she said his very favorite words: "I don't want the night to end."

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney wasn't really a forward person, but she couldn't imagine going home to the apartment she shared with her mom when being with Lucius was the only thing she wanted to do.

She'd never in her life felt so connected to a guy before. Had it only been a day? Because it felt like she'd known him forever. She'd told him things about her past that she'd never told anyone. She felt closer to him than anyone else in her life, and it was because of that feeling, that connection, that she told him she wanted to spend more time with him.

He looked at her in the darkness of the SUV for a quiet moment, and then he said, "I don't want it to end either."

She swore he purred a little, a gruff grumbling sound in his chest and she thought it was awesome.

He parked in the employee lot and entered a code into a gate to let them into the park. He held her hand as they walked through the park to his apartment. It was pretty sparsely decorated, but it had a comfortable couch and she'd snuck a peek at the master bedroom when she'd used the bathroom before their date and loved the big bed and the sage green quilt and pillows.

As they reached the small apartment building, she thought over what an awesome first day they'd had.

Great food, great conversation, and so much sexual tension between them that she thought she would combust if she didn't kiss him.

So she had.

In the parking lot, she'd initiated the best kiss of her life.

Which led her to this point, where she wasn't sure what was going to happen when she got into his place, but she sure as heck knew what she wanted to happen.

He opened the apartment door and held it for her. As she passed through, she walked into the front room with the sectional sofa with lots of throw pillows and flat-screen TV and turned to face him.

"I just wanted to say something," she said.

"Anything," he said as he shut the door and joined her.

He towered over her, all strength and protectiveness.

"I don't want you to think that I'm just avoiding going to my home because of the situation with my mom and that's why I wanted to spend more time with you."

"I don't think that."

"Good." She felt a little awkward, but pushed past it. "I like you. A lot. It's weird because I feel like I've known you for years, like it hasn't just been hours since we met in the safari tour line, you know? I'm probably not making any sense."

He stepped even closer and cupped her face. Lowering his head to kiss her, he brushed his lips against hers and said, "You're making lots of sense. I feel the same way. I didn't want to say goodbye to you, but I didn't want you to think that I had any expectations about being with you."

“I don’t think that,” she said, then smiled as she realized she had parroted what he just said.

She tilted her head up for another kiss and when he gave it, she rose onto her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. He slid his hands softly down her throat and over her shoulders, before cupping her hips and bringing her closer to him. Then he spun them both and pressed her against the wall.

The movement surprised her. She gasped into his mouth and he chuckled. Gently biting her bottom lip, he kissed his way down her neck and sucked on the place where her neck and shoulder met.

Her hands roamed his broad shoulders and down to his tapered waist. He was built like he worked out all the time with muscles on top of muscles. She was dying to see what he looked like naked.

When she tugged on his shirt, he pulled back from sucking on her neck and pulled his shirt over his head.

“Oh, wow,” she said as she got her first look at the muscles she’d felt under the fabric. He was even more gorgeous than she’d thought he would be without a shirt.

“Your turn, sweetheart,” he said with a rough tone.

She flexed her hips and leaned back into the wall a little, then pulled her shirt up slowly. She was very thankful she’d had the foresight to wear a matching bra and panty set, because she was dressed really casually in a gray top and shorts, but her underwear? Lacy and feminine.

It’s why she’d bought the set—because it made her feel sexy.

He was the first guy to see them, and she adored that because it made it all the more special.

As she lifted her shirt over her head, Lucius growled appreciatively and she grinned. “I love that sound,” she said. “So primal.”

“Just for you,” he said, hooking his arm around her waist. He laid his hand on her lace-covered breast and kissed her. He played with her, sliding his fingers inside the cup to tease her nipple and then finally pushing the material down to free her breast entirely. He found the clasp in the center of the bra and undid it, and then she was laid bare for him, and he growled again as he left the kiss to use his lips and tongue on her nipples.

She writhed in his hold as he teased her expertly, her breasts heavy and aching, and her core throbbing with need.

“Ah, Lucius, just touch me,” she whimpered, digging her nails into his shoulder.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth deeply and slipped his fingers down her stomach to the waistband of her shorts. He let her nipple go with a soft pop and straightened to gaze down at her as he undid her shorts and slowly slipped his hand inside.

“Are you wet, sweetheart?” he whispered, like the words were precious and shouldn’t be spoken loudly.

Her toes curled in her shoes and she whimpered out a yes .

He kissed her and worked his hand between her thighs. As he slid his fingers along her pussy, she realized how wet she actually was. She’d never been so turned on in her life.

She moaned into his mouth as he pushed two fingers into her pussy. She was desperate for more, desperate for him, so she shoved her shorts and panties down and managed to toe off her shoes and kick her legs free of her clothes.

He chuckled against her lips.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Sidney, and so wet, you’re like a dream come true.”

She cupped his head and panted as he began to finger her faster, his thumb grazing her clit. She kissed him, holding onto him for dear life as he fingered her to the height of pleasure, then pressed his thumb against her clit at just the right moment to send her flying over the edge. As she pulled back from the kiss and cried out in her pleasure, Lucius shoved his jeans down his legs to free his cock and lifted her into his arms as he pressed her back against the wall.

In moments he was inside her, thick and hard, and so deep she thought her eyes would cross at how good he felt.

He cupped her ass with both hands and pulled his length from her before plunging back in. She moved on him, bouncing on his cock and gripping his shoulders for leverage before reaching back to push against the wall and take as much of him into her as she could. She’d never felt so wanton and so right with a guy before, but Lucius made her feel things she’d never felt and she never wanted it to stop.

“You feel so good, I’m going to come,” he ground out, gritting his teeth together until a muscle jumped in his jaw.

She held onto him as he pounded into her, letting herself go into the pleasure that was still swirling through her.

“You do too, Lucius, you feel perfect.”

He snarled and bit her neck as he came, his teeth digging into her skin and sending a riot of shivers down her spine. She felt his cock spasm and thicken inside her, and she hooked her ankles together at the small of his back and hugged herself close.

Kissing his neck and his cheek, she rested her head on his shoulder as her heart pounded out a swift beat and her mind felt muddled from so much pleasure.

He kissed the place on her neck that he'd bit and held her close. "I'm sorry I bit you, does it hurt?"

"Nope."

He turned with his cock still buried in her heat and carried her back to the bedroom. He climbed onto the bed and slid from her, then kissed his way down her body and pushed her thighs roughly apart. Her head kicked back as she moaned when he flicked her clit rapidly with his tongue, sending heat spiraling through her again.

His fingers sank inside her, fingering her as quickly as his tongue moved on her clit, and it took no time at all for her body to hit another peak of pleasure that ripped a happy shout from her as her body locked down on his fingers and her vision blurred.

He pressed a light kiss to her sensitive clit and kissed his way up her body before cuddling at her back and kissing her neck.

"I never want to come without you, sweetheart. I always want you to have the most pleasure."

"You're off to a really good start," she said.

He laughed and kissed her. "Baby?"

“Yeah?”

“Stay tonight. I don’t want it to end.”

She turned her head to look at him and saw the sincerity in his eyes.

“I’d love to. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else tonight but right here with you.”

“Me too,” he said.

He snuggled against her, making her feel warm and safe, and totally sated.

She’d never felt so good in her life. Lucius was one special guy and she was so glad she’d met him.

And she was pretty damn sure she was falling hard for him.

Half in love with the sexiest guy on the planet.

How amazing was that?

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney woke up with something warm and furry at her back.

It took her a moment to remember where she was.

In Lucius's apartment.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but she did remember snuggling with Lucius after they made love the first time and talking in that quiet, dreamy sort of way when everything was all sex and muddled thoughts, before they tumbled in the sheets again.

But there was definitely something furry at her back.

So he had a cat?

She yawned and looked around the room as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She couldn't see much of anything besides shadows.

Her hand brushed her waist where Lucius's arm was draped, but she felt only a large...furry paw?

"Lucius?" she whispered as her brain tried to figure out why she felt like a paw was pressed to her stomach.

She fumbled on the side table for her phone but didn't see it and realized it must be in her bag, which was somewhere out in the front room.

Lucius didn't answer her, but what felt like a paw on her belly tightened and something like claws dug gently into her bare skin. She sucked in a sharp breath.

Was she dreaming?

She had to be. But she felt like she was awake.

Slipping carefully from the bed, she hit the floor and barely stifled the squeak of pain as her knees connected with the carpet and jolted a shock through her bones. Scrambling through the bedroom to the front room, she found her bag and pulled her phone out. She hit the flashlight button on the screen and located her clothes.

She stared at her clothes and shoes on the floor and heard the squeak of the bedsprings down the hall.

She had to be imagining things. Why on earth would a paw be on her? She must have seen too many animals today and be stressed from the argument with her mom. That...had to be it.

She'd go in the room with the flashlight, see Lucius asleep, and realize she'd just had some crazy dream.

Rising to her feet, she kept the flashlight trained on the floor and slowly made her way back to the bedroom. Her brain was highly suggesting she just leave, that there was something dangerous in the bedroom, but that couldn't possibly be the case. It had to be Lucius. She'd fallen into a peaceful sleep with him, his arms around her, and she'd remembered a last thought that she'd never felt so safe and cared for, and that she was somehow already half in love with him.

So why was she scared out of her gourd right now?

Her hand shook as she reached the doorway and lifted the phone's flashlight to illuminate the bed.

No. Freaking. Way!

There was a lion on the bed.

A...lion.

A lion?

A scream rent from her throat and the lion sat up and stared at her.

She grasped the bedroom door and slammed it shut as another scream of terror came out of her. She dropped the phone in her haste, rushing to get to the front door. She grabbed her shorts and shirt and pulled them on as something heavy hit the bedroom door and a roar echoed in the apartment.

Snagging her bag from the coffee table, she rushed for the door and threw it open, racing barefoot out of the apartment.

“Help! Help!”

She ran away from the apartment complex and right into a man, who grabbed her arms and kept her from falling when she slammed into him.

“Hey, are you okay? Are you Sidney? I'm Amadeus, Lucius's brother and one of the security guards.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She opened her mouth to tell him what happened when the distinctive roar of a lion came from the apartment behind them.

“Holy shit,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“We have to run!”

Something sounded like a bomb going off followed by the sound of splintering wood.

“It escaped! We have to run!”

“Shit, damn it!” Amadeus said. He grasped her upper arm and hurried her along.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be hurt.”

“How can you say that? There’s a freaking lion coming after us!”

He grabbed his radio off his belt as they rushed from the complex and said, “It’s Amadeus, we’ve got a problem in the apartment complex. There’s a lion in apartment three and I need all the alphas in the employee cafeteria immediately.”

He steered her toward a building that was dark.

“Hey, I want to leave,” she said, trying to pull away from him.

“Sorry, Sidney,” he said. “I can’t let you leave right now.”

“What? What the hell, Amadeus! Where’s Lucius? What is going on?”

The terror she’d felt at waking up in bed with a lion was now replaced with anger and confusion. Amadeus wouldn’t let go of her arm, and no matter how she struggled, she couldn’t get free.

A light turned on as they passed near the building and it illuminated a door. It opened suddenly and she recognized Jupiter from the security office.

“Amadeus won’t let me go,” she said. “Make him let me go!”

“Sorry, Sidney,” Jupiter said as he stepped aside and watched Amadeus pull her into the building. “You can’t leave. I’m sorry.”

The door shut and Jupiter stood in front of it. Amadeus released her arm and said, “I’m sorry, Sidney, I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

She rubbed her arm where his viselike grip had kept her with him and looked at the two men.

“Why aren’t you worried about Lucius? I told you there was a lion in the apartment. What happened to him? What’s going on here?”

Jupiter pressed his lips into a thin line and shared a look with Amadeus.

A door opened at the back of the large room, which she figured for some sort of cafeteria with tables and chairs and a kitchen area. Men walked in, single file, and one of them was Marcus, who she remembered from the popcorn stand.

They all looked tired and disheveled, and it was no wonder since her brief glance at her phone screen before she’d turned on the flashlight in the apartment had shown it was past four a.m.

She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and tried to calm her flying pulse. She wasn’t in danger right now, but she definitely didn’t feel safe.

“Where is Lucius?” she asked.

A man who looked a lot like Lucius and shared features that resembled Jupiter and Amadeus stepped forward from the group of men who’d come into the room from

somewhere at the back of the building.

“My name is Caesar,” he said.

She blinked a few times as the name spun in her head.

“You’re Lucius’s dad.”

“Yes. Jupiter is head of security in the park, and I’m also on the security team as is Amadeus. Now tell us exactly what happened, Sidney.”

She looked past Jupiter to the exit, and he narrowed his gaze and shook his head slightly as if warning her not to make a run for it.

She couldn’t figure out why she felt so unsettled all of a sudden. She was scared at what she’d witnessed when she’d woken up and she was worried about Lucius. But everything about her current situation made her feel entirely uneasy.

Exhaling sharply, she put her bag on the nearest table and said, “I woke up in bed with a lion. I got dressed and ran from the apartment, but I heard it behind me. I heard it roar and then what sounded like the door splintering when it was hit. I was trying to leave, but Amadeus brought me here. I just want to know if Lucius is okay. Why isn’t anyone really talking to me?”

She rubbed her arms as a chill wove down her spine.

Turning slowly, she looked out the large windows into the darkness of the park, and there, standing like some kind of mythical beast come to life, was the lion she’d been in bed with.

He roared so loudly that she could feel it in her heart and it made her eyes sting with

fresh tears.

What the hell was going on?

And why was no one surprised to see a lion through the window?

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Lucius woke thinking it was storming because there was a sudden flash of light. He sat up and saw Sidney holding her phone with the flashlight pointed at him.

And then she screamed.

It was such a terror-filled sound that his lion immediately went on alert for danger.

She slammed the bedroom door and ran screaming out of the apartment.

He rose to his feet but they were paws, and that's when he realized he'd somehow shifted in his sleep and not woken up during the process.

It seemed impossible, but here he was in the fur and his mate was scared to death.

He roared, wanting to tell her to wait and that she shouldn't be afraid, but he knew she'd hear the roar and be even more scared. He had to get to her before she got hurt or lost in the park.

Leaping from the bed, he moved to the door and pushed it with his paw, but it was latched. It was unfortunately a knob type and not a handle, and he didn't have the dexterity to twist it. Roaring again to alert anyone in security about the situation, he did the only thing he could think of and backed up, bracing himself for a run at the door.

He hit it with all his weight and force, and it cracked but didn't open.

With a snarl he backed up again and crouched down, his muscles tense and his

whiskers twitching. He leaped at the door and hit it again, and this time as the damaged door took his full weight, it splintered and fell apart and he tumbled into the hall.

He could see the front door was open, and when he picked up Sidney's sweet scent mixed with fear and the saltwater of tears, he let out another roar for help. Padding through the front room and through the door, he lifted his muzzle and inhaled, following her scent.

He also picked up the scent of Amadeus and knew that his brother wouldn't let her leave the park, but would be most likely taking her to either the employee cafeteria or the security office.

It was late and the park was dark, but he had no trouble making his way through the park as he followed Sidney's scent. He paused near the security office and didn't hear anyone inside, so he suspected Sidney and his brother were in the employee cafeteria. The windows were made of one-way glass so he was unable to see inside, but he could feel a pull to the building and knew his soulmate was inside.

Moving close enough to the building for the motion detector to kick on, he positioned himself in front of one of the windows and bellowed out a roar for his mate.

Sidney .

The cafeteria door opened and his dad walked out, closing it quickly behind him.

“Morning, Son.”

Lucius snarled and lifted a paw to gesture toward the building.

His dad crossed his arms across his chest. “You fucked up. You shifted while you and

Sidney were asleep and you scared the hell out of her. Thankfully, Amadeus was patrolling near the apartments and caught her before she went screaming through the park and left. He called Jupiter to gather the alphas and brought her to the cafeteria. Now she's not just scared, she's angry and wants to leave, but she also wants to make sure you're okay." He looked over his shoulder and then back to Lucius. "She cares for you a great deal, that's clear, but this is a full-blown disaster...you know that, right?"

Lucius nodded and grumbled out an apology, hanging his head. His claws flexed against the pavement, scraping loudly.

His dad ruffled his ears. "It'll be okay. The alphas want to talk, so I'll call them out here and your brothers can keep an eye on your mate. Don't do anything stupid." He turned to go back into the cafeteria and then turned back for a moment. "I mean, don't do anything more stupid."

Lucius rolled his eyes. Sitting back on his haunches, he let out a whine, wanting desperately to get to Sidney. He wanted to shift back to human, but his dad hadn't told him he should, so he was stuck for the moment as a lion and unable to comfort his mate or tell her what was going on.

He couldn't imagine what she was feeling right now and how absolutely terrified she must have been.

The alphas came out and as the door shut he could hear Sidney say irritably, "I just want to see Lucius, why is that so hard? Is he okay? Someone talk to me, damn it!"

His whiskers twitched. She might be scared, but she cared about him and that meant the world to him.

Joss shook his head. "How on earth did this happen?"

“Well, it happened to Win,” Atticus said. “Which is why we said no more sleeping outside of the park.”

“Clearly that didn’t stop Lucius from shifting,” Alistair said. The alpha elephant looked at him and chuckled. “You must have felt really comfortable with her to shift like that.”

Lucius did feel comfortable with Sidney. His lion had probably picked up on the feelings that had been coursing through him all day. He felt like he’d known her forever. And making love to her? Feeling her fall apart in his arms and knowing that he was the reason for her bliss? It made him feel like they’d been together for years, not just hours.

Marcus scrubbed a hand through his dark hair. “You know the drill, Lucius. She can’t leave the park until we know for certain that she won’t tell a soul our secret. What happened tonight is dangerous on so many levels.”

Lucius nodded and exhaled, his whiskers twitching.

“I think,” Caesar said, rubbing his chin, “that we should bring Lucius into the cafeteria and let him shift in front of her. That way, she’ll see the truth with her own eyes and it won’t just be him telling her that he’s the lion.”

“That makes sense,” Joss said.

“Yeah, unless she freaks out again,” Marcus said.

“Well, if she does, we’ll all be there to help,” Atticus said. “Lexy freaked out when Win shifted to human, but it helped her see the truth.”

The alphas were quiet for a moment. Lucius leaned to the side and stared at the

building, wishing he could see Sidney. He was going crazy not being with her when he could still feel how stressed she was.

Her emotions must be super high if he could feel them when they weren't mated yet.

He chuffed and Caesar said, "Okay, so we'll bring Lucius inside and he'll shift. Then he can talk to Sidney. We'll post guards outside the building in case she does try to run, but once he shifts, we can leave them alone." He gave Lucius a long look. "You know you can't let her leave? You have to make her understand how serious our laws are. She can't tell anyone."

He nodded as the heavy weight of what Sidney was about to endure settled on his shoulders.

She was about to learn a truth that few humans knew.

Shifters were real, and the guy she'd had sex with hours earlier was one of them.

How would she react?

He followed the alphas to the cafeteria and walked inside. Sidney gasped harshly and took a step back, but Amadeus was at her side and barred her from moving too far away.

"You're okay, Sidney, you're safe," Amadeus said.

Lucius didn't particularly like his brother being so close to his soulmate and he growled softly.

"Hey, turn back and we'll talk," Amadeus said.

“What the hell is going on?” Sidney demanded, her voice shaky with bravado.

“Sidney,” Caesar said as the other alphas began to push the tables and chairs out of the center of the room. “We’re sorry that you were scared tonight. We’re sorry that you went to bed with Lucius and woke up with a lion.”

She wouldn’t stop staring at him and Lucius took that as a good sign. She wasn’t trying to climb the walls or screaming her head off.

Maybe some part of her recognized him?

He sat on his haunches and let out a loud purr.

“Where is Lucius? Why isn’t he here and why are you guys acting like this is totally normal? Someone talk to me, damn it!” Her voice rose higher with each word and he could see she was spiraling toward panic.

“Son, you better shift back before she passes out.”

“Son?”

She looked at Caesar and then at him.

It took a moment for Lucius to stop concentrating on Sidney and focus on turning back to human, but once the shift took over, he easily returned to his two-legged form. He straightened and rose to his full height.

“Sidney.”

Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates and she started to breathe fast like she was hyperventilating.

“I didn’t just see that. I didn’t!” She took a step back and then shook her head, smacking her cheek. “Wake up. Wake up!”

“You’re awake, Sidney,” Lucius said.

Something soft hit him in the side and he saw a pair of sweats from a stash kept in the kitchen storage area. Slipping them on to cover himself, he cautiously walked to her, his hands up like he was showing her he was unarmed.

“Stay back.”

He froze. “Okay, sweetheart.”

“Nuh-uh, don’t call me that right now. What the hell is going on here? You’re...what did I just see?”

Her face flushed and she looked around the room, where the alphas stood around the perimeter. His brothers had slipped outside to guard the door in case she tried to bolt.

“I’m a shifter,” he said. “Everyone here is. I’m a lion and my dad is alpha of our pride.”

“That’s not possible.”

He moved a little closer and her upper lip curled, which made him freeze again.

“It is possible. You saw me go from lion to man.” He took a small step toward her and then another when she didn’t react to him getting closer. Lowering his voice, he said, “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry I scared you. I don’t know how I shifted in my sleep, but my lion is so enchanted with you he must have wanted to come out to see you for himself. I would never have shifted on purpose to scare you.”

“You can’t control him?” she asked warily.

“No, I absolutely can. But the lion and I are part of the same person, and I can only assume that I felt so comfortable with you that my shift just happened. It wasn’t a conscientious choice, and I’m incredibly sorry that you were frightened.”

“Frightened isn’t quite a strong enough word.” She relaxed fractionally, but her wary gaze told him she was still working things out in her mind.

“Terrified?”

“At the least.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You said that.” She rubbed her thumb between her eyes. “You say...shifters? These people here can turn into animals? How does that even happen? And how have I never heard of this before?”

“It’s a secret we’re very careful to keep from humans,” he said. “You can imagine how devastating it would be to our people if word got out that shifters were real. Humans aren’t known to be compassionate to creatures that are different than they are.”

She stared at him in silence for a long moment.

He glanced at the alphas and his dad shrugged.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” she asked finally.

“Yes,” he said. “When I knew I could trust you and you loved me. You’re my

soulmate, Sidney, the one female on the planet meant to be mine. Fate brought you to the park so that we could meet.”

“A coupon brought me here.”

He snorted and she glared at him and then, very faintly, a small smile curved the corner of her lips.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” he said, closing the distance between them. “So fucking mine, Sidney. Tell me that you know what you saw was real and that you forgive me for scaring you. But most of all, tell me you understand how big of a deal the secret of shifters is. It’s a secret that has to be kept at any cost.”

He stared down at her earnestly, wishing desperately that she’d understand what he was saying.

She stared up at him, and for the first time, he realized how disheveled she was. She’d probably put her clothes on in a hurry and she was shoeless with messy hair and dark circles under her eyes.

He lifted his hand and pressed it gently to her cheek.

“Sidney?”

She placed her hand against his and tears glistened in the depths. “I understand that it’s a secret that needs to be kept, but does that mean I’m...is someone going to put me away?”

The scent of her fear spiked in the air between them and he growled.

“No! Sweetheart, never. You’re mine to protect and keep safe. I would never let

anyone hurt you. But you can't leave the park until all the alphas know that you can be trusted with the secret of shifters. I'm sorry for everything, I'm sorry that I didn't earn your heart before everything went to hell, but this is where we are now."

"I need," she whispered, her voice thick. "I need to sit?—"

Her eyes rolled back in her head and he caught her, lifting her into his arms.

"Damn it."

"You want to take her down to your house?" his dad called.

"I thought I couldn't bring her down there yet?"

"You might as well," Marcus said, shaking his head. "The proverbial cat is out of the bag and you should be comfortable while she comes to terms with everything she learned."

He nodded.

His dad walked outside to tell Jupiter and Amadeus what was going on, and then caught up to him as he carried his mate down the stairs to the lions' private living area. In minutes, he'd put his soulmate to bed in his house and met his dad at the door.

"When she wakes up, tell her everything again in case she feels like she was dreaming. If she wants to see you shift again, you can do that in the paddock or here in the open area."

"Thanks, Dad. And I'm sorry."

“It’s okay,” he said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “Thankfully, you were in the park when it happened and your brother was able to keep her contained. It’ll work out. You’re soulmates and she cares for you. That’s what matters the most.”

With a nod, Lucius walked back into his house and closed the door. Climbing into bed with her, he pulled her close and she snuggled into him without waking.

“I’m sorry, Sidney. Forgive me.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney woke slowly feeling like she was wading through surf that was trying to pull her under as she tried to get to the shore. Her limbs felt heavy and her head hurt, but those feelings ebbed away as she opened her eyes and stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

She wasn't sure where she was, but she was certain it wasn't in the apartment. As she pondered her current state, the last memories she had flooded through her mind and a bolt of fear spiked through her.

Had she really seen Lucius as a lion who turned into a human?

“Hey, sweetheart, you don't have to be scared.”

It was infuriating how much she liked his voice when she was pretty sure the reason she was scared was because he had a huge secret and she was suddenly part of it.

Turning her head slowly to the side, she saw him up on one elbow, his hair ruffled from sleep and looking far too sexy for someone she was pretty sure she should be pissed at.

Because he'd...lied to her?

Yeah, but also because he'd scared the hell out of her.

“I'm not scared.”

He arched a brow. “You smell scared.”

“Is that something you can do being an animal? Smell when people are scared?” She sat up and scooted away from him, but stayed on the bed. She was angry and confused, but she didn’t want to be too far from him.

“I’m not an animal, I’m a shifter. A human who can turn into an animal.”

“I think you’re splitting hairs.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But yes, I have heightened senses in my human form. I can hear better than a human and can smell better. I can run faster and I’m stronger than a human also.”

She mulled that while she stared at him.

“Where are we?” she asked finally.

“Underneath the park.” He told her about the massive underground space where the shifters who called Amazing Adventures home lived and went about their daily lives. “Every shifter lives and works here. The groups have their own private living areas, and we share a central marketplace with a cafeteria, offices, and a few shops. Anything we can’t get here, we order in or go out to get.”

“And no one knows, huh? Like...you’re just a total secret from humans?”

“It’s a secret that’s taken very seriously,” he said. “It’s about life and death. We can’t risk the general public knowing. So when we started sending out the VIP coupons, it was understood that if someone’s soulmate was found, they couldn’t share the truth of their shift until the couple was in love. That ensures the soulmate is just as serious about keeping the secret as their shifter mate.”

She frowned. “How are the VIP coupons related to any of this?”

“The alphas decided to send out coupons for VIP tours to bring single males and females from the tri-state area into the park in hopes that some of them might be soulmates. It’s worked for a few of our people. My brother Jupiter’s mate Celeste is human and she came here because of the VIP tour. And of course, it worked for me too.”

He smiled but he looked worried.

She hummed. “Really? I was sent the coupon for the tour because I was single?”

He nodded.

“That’s...wild. How many coupons have they sent out?”

“Thousands.”

“And only a few have been soulmates?”

“Yes. A soulmate for a shifter is that one right person for them. Some shifters don’t want to wait to find their soulmate and will just take a mate from one of their kind, but I wanted to wait for you. I hoped I’d meet you soon.”

Her anger was leeching away because she could understand why his people wanted to keep the secret of shifters safe. If she was a shifter and it could mean their people getting hurt by humans if they found out, she’d be damn sure whoever she fell in love with wouldn’t tell a soul.

He reached for her hand, and she let him hold it. “I really am sorry about everything. I wish I could have just told you the truth last night. I wanted to. My lion was being so bossy in my head and wanted me to mark you as my mate and tell you everything.”

“Mark?”

“For lions, the male will sink his fangs into his mate’s neck and the marks will scar, which tells anyone who sees them that she’s mated. It’s like a wedding ring you can’t lose.”

“Don’t the girls get to bite?”

“You can bite me anytime.” He waggled his brows, and she did not think it was adorable.

She let go of his hand and swatted his arm. “Would you stop being cute? I’m traumatized over here.”

He barked out a laugh, and she was suddenly on her back and he was looming over her, his eyes a beautiful amber color. “Sidney, I’m crazy about you. Since the moment you stepped foot into the park, I felt connected to you. And making love last night, well, it was the best night of my life. Please tell me that you can forgive me. I have so much I want to share with you.”

She stared up at him as he held himself over her.

Did she believe in soulmates? Maybe she hadn’t really until she’d come to the park. But she couldn’t deny that she’d felt drawn to the park once she was there, and after meeting Lucius, she hadn’t wanted to leave his side. She’d never ever jumped into bed with a guy the day she’d met him, but it had seemed right and she had no regrets about that.

She did regret waking up with him as a lion and also passing out when her overactive imagination had her picturing the wildest scenarios of her being locked in a cell because she now knew the truth of shifters.

Lucius had assured her that wouldn't be the case. They weren't going to keep her locked up, they just didn't want her leaving the park until they knew she could be trusted. Since she was a virtual stranger, it wasn't like she could just tell them to trust her, she had to prove it. But how could she prove that she wouldn't tell a soul?

Because she wasn't going to.

Not that anyone would believe her anyway.

But even if she was positive the whole world would believe her, she didn't want to put Lucius in danger. Or his family and friends.

"I can't tell my mom."

"No, I'm sorry."

She gave him a curious look. "The apartment? You don't really live there."

"No, they were built so that we had a place to bring our soulmates before we told them the truth. It would be hard to bring someone home with us when we lived in secret, you know?"

"That makes sense." She stared at him for a long moment, trying to remember what it looked like when he turned from a lion to a man. She'd been so freaked out she hadn't believed what she was seeing. "You really are a lion."

"Yeah."

"Can I see it again?"

"You want to watch me shift?"

“Yes.” She nodded decisively.

“Okay. We can do that. I can take you up to the paddock and shift for you. I’ll be stuck in my shift for a few hours, though, so maybe I can invite my brother and his mate Celeste so you can meet her and you can have someone to talk to.”

He straightened and helped her sit up. As they got off the bed, she said, “Wait. The paddock. Where the animals are? Does that mean there aren’t any real animals in the park at all? They’re all shifters?”

“Yes and no. Most of the animals in the paddocks are shifters—lions, bears, wolves, elephants, and gorillas. The other paddock has regular animals that we call norms .”

“Tank is a norm?”

“Yep.”

“That would be weird to be able to be a moose.”

“I suppose,” he said with a chuckle. “Although since our people keep to themselves normally and it’s rare for so many groups to live together like this, it’s possible there are moose shifters out there somewhere. There are polar bears, owls, red foxes, and panthers that we know of. Who knows what else can shift into something we’ve not come across?”

She let that roll around in her head for a bit. “Okay, so I want to see you shift, but I’m starving. Is there food here, or do you just eat raw steaks?”

He laughed and put his arm around her, pulling her close. Her hands landed on his pecs and she loved how warm his skin was.

He stared down at her for a long, quiet moment. “Are you really okay, Sidney?”

“I am,” she said. “It’s fantastical, like the craziest thing ever, but I did see you turn from a lion to a human, and knowing that shifters have a soulmate and you felt a connection to me immediately helps me make sense of why I felt so connected to you. It feels extremely fast, but it also feels right.” She pursed her lips and then said, “I’ve never done that before, gone home with a guy after the first date. I just wanted you to know that it was special for me.”

“I’ve never done that either, sweetheart. It was very special for me too.” He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and she shivered. “Do you forgive me? I keep asking you to, but you keep dodging the question.”

“I do,” she said. “Are there any other big secrets I should know about?”

“Nope,” he said. “But I’ll tell you all about myself and being a shifter and my people, and I promise not to keep secrets from you.”

“I promise to keep your secret. From my mom, from everyone. I don’t want to put you or your family and friends in danger. I can see how dangerous it would be for the public to know about shifters. I know your people don’t trust me yet, and that’s okay. It’s all so new and everything, but I’m promising you that I’ll keep your secret in my heart and not tell a soul.”

He nodded. Lowering his head, he kissed her and the whole world fell away for a brief moment. She put her arms around his neck and anchored herself to him, reveling in the kiss.

Just an hour ago she’d woken up pissed, and now she was kissing him back like her life depended on it. They still needed to talk and get to know each other, but at least she understood her feelings now. It wasn’t too fast; it was how it was supposed to be

with soulmates.

How crazy was it that she'd gone to the park and met a guy who happened to also be a lion?

"Oh, can I sketch you?" she asked.

"Sure," he said with a chuckle. "Your bag is in the kitchen. The alphas have your phone since they don't want you to have it without someone keeping an eye on you with it. Sorry."

"That's okay. I just need to check in with my mom. I told her I'd be late, not that I wouldn't come home at all."

"Do you need to go home?"

"I don't know. Can I leave?"

"I can take you to your place with an escort, but you can't stay. I have to bring you back here."

She rested in his embrace. She thought she should feel a little stifled and angry that she wasn't allowed to just leave on her own, but the idea of how serious the secret of shifters was kept coming up as a very good reason for them being careful.

"I'm not going to worry about it today," she said. "I'd like to text my mom and tell her I'm taking the day off and I'll be by tomorrow. I don't know what to do about all that, though."

"We can figure it out, together."

“Good. Now about breakfast?”

“Let’s go to the market, sweetheart. Then I’ll shift for you.”

She couldn’t wait.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Lucius found out her phone was with his dad for safekeeping, so they went to his house where Sidney sent her mom a text, which she showed him as she typed, tilting the screen so he could see. He hated that she was being treated like a criminal who couldn't be trusted, but rules were rules. All in all, she seemed to be taking things in stride and he was grateful for her change of heart.

“Okay, she’s pissed I’m not coming home today,” she said with a sigh as she read her mom’s response. “I think tomorrow is going to be a battle with her. I’m not in the mood at all.”

She handed the phone to Caesar and said, “You can turn it off. I told her I’d be back when I’m back and that she needs to accept that I was due for some time off and I’m enjoying myself.”

Caesar pressed the side button and the phone turned off. “It’ll be here when you need it again. Sorry about all this.”

“Don’t be,” she said with a wave of her hand. “I spend too much time on it anyway.”

In the market, Lucius and Sidney grabbed breakfast from the counter, where he introduced her to Alpha Joss’s human mate, Jeannie.

“Welcome,” Jeannie said as she took their orders for the special of the day, which was banana walnut pancakes with warm syrup and fresh churned butter. “If I can answer anything for you about being a human among shifters, just reach out. I’m happy to chat. In fact, the mates all get together a few times a month to hang out, so you’ll be invited to that next time.”

“That sounds great, thank you so much.”

They sat at a long table where his brother Amadeus and several of their friends were also seated, and he introduced her to everyone. They got coffee and orange juice, and when Jeannie called their order, he grabbed it and brought it to the table.

“This looks amazing,” Sidney said.

“Nothing but the best for our people,” Amadeus said. “The bears handle the food for park visitors and employees, but Jeannie was working in the food service industry before she met Joss, so she’s working with them. Lexy is human and she’s mated to Win, one of the gorillas, and she’s a baker. She runs the candy shop along with our resident lioness, Jenni, plus Lexy’s friend Trina, who is also human and mated to Justus over there, who’s a bear.”

Justus waved from the end of the table.

“Jenni is the only lioness?” she asked.

“Yep,” Lucius said. “She’s mated to Devlin, who’s a human.”

“So who is left without a mate in the pride?”

“Our dad and Amadeus, plus Javan and Xavier,” Lucius said.

Amadeus grumbled, “I need to find my soulmate like yesterday. Do you have any sisters, Sidney?”

She smiled. “Sorry.”

“Crud.”

“What do the lions do?” she asked.

“Security,” Lucius said. “Our pride isn’t too large, but Jupiter runs things and our dad is his backup. There are wolves and bears who also work in security.”

“That’s wild,” she said. “So are there humans who work here who aren’t mates?”

“Nope,” Lucius said. “Mercer, who’s also a lion, has a human soulmate named Rhomi. The alphas let her work at the park before they were mated and she knew the truth, but she had limited access in the park. It’s not something that would normally be done.”

They ate and talked, his friends sharing stories about shifting and hope for finding their soulmates, and then her sharing her sketches from the day before.

“Wow, you’re really good,” Amadeus said. “And I’m not just saying that because you’re my sister-in-law.”

“Thanks,” she said and then pushed her plate away. “I’m stuffed.”

“I’ll finish it,” Lucius said.

“You’re still hungry? There were eight pancakes on your plate!”

“You bet,” he said. “Shifters always have huge appetites. Plus I’ll need my energy for shifting.”

“Speaking of shifting,” his dad said as he stopped next to the table. “When are you going out?”

“As soon as we’re done with breakfast.”

“Okay, so the tours start at noon today, which means you need to be back in the maintenance building before eleven or you’ll be stuck for the day in your shift.”

“That’s no problem,” he said. He looked at his phone. It was just after eight, which meant he should have no trouble shifting at eleven, and if he wasn’t ready yet, he’d just hang out in the shed until he was.

“We should get going?” she asked.

“Yep. I texted Jupiter and Celeste to meet us up there.” He finished eating the rest of her pancakes, and then they took the dishes to the cleaning station. She put her crossbody bag over her shoulder and took his hand.

On the way out of the marketplace, they stopped at a small market run by two wolves named Anke and Zeger, who greeted her warmly. Lucius told her that they could get her anything she needed. Then he introduced her to Celeste’s best friend Adriana, who did manis and pedis in a small salon, and Dani, who was mated to gorilla shifter Neo, and ran a small makeup shop.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Dani said with a warm smile. “If you’d like to come hang out with me, I can give you a mini facial and get whatever products you like. I’m putting a bag of supplies together for my friend Tris.” She fluffed some tissue paper and gently placed it between packages of face wash and body wash.

“Does she live here?” Sidney asked.

“She lives in Little River with her mate,” Dani said. “So I don’t get to see her as much as I’d like, but Little River isn’t too far away. She lives on a farm and is the caretaker for the guys who own it.”

“That’s really neat. I hope to meet her someday, and meet everyone else too.”

“The park is a really wonderfully welcoming place,” Dani said. “Holler at me anytime.”

“I will, thanks. It was so nice to meet you.”

“You too!”

Lucius led her out of the market, down the hall, and back into their private living quarters.

“What did you think of the marketplace?” he asked.

“Everyone is so nice! I can’t believe there’s a nail salon underground here, plus a makeup store and a market too, not to mention the food. Which was amazing. This place is awesome.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said. “The alphas want to make sure we have everything we need here.” He used the code to unlock the door that would lead to the maintenance shed in the lions’ paddock.

The door to the shed was open and Jupiter was staring down at him with a smile.

“I wondered when you were going to show up.”

“I had to finish her pancakes. She only ate three.”

“They were huge!” Sidney said. “But so good. And he showed me the nail salon, market, and makeup shop too.”

Lucius lowered the door into the floor and said, “Sidney, this is my brother’s mate Celeste.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sidney said.

Celeste gave her a hug. “It’s so nice to meet you too. Welcome to the family.”

“Lucius said you’re having a baby, congrats.”

Celeste settled her hand on her bump and grinned. “Thank you. We’re excited even though I’ve got swollen ankles and an insane craving for steak.”

“I don’t mind that part,” Jupiter said with a smile. “Steak for every meal is right up my lion’s alley.”

“Dad reminded me to be back in here by eleven when everyone else will come out to get ready for the tours today,” Lucius said. “Can you keep an eye on the time for me?”

“Sure thing,” Jupiter said.

Lucius held out his hand to his mate. “Come on, sweetheart. They’ll stay in here until I’m in my shift. Jupiter doesn’t want Celeste to see anyone else’s junk.”

“Damn straight,” his brother said with a growl.

Celeste hugged her mate with a chuckle. “Yours is the only junk I want to see.”

Lucius pushed the heavy doors of the shed open, let his mate out, and then closed it behind them.

“Now remember that I’m still me.”

“Okay?”

“I mean, even in my lion shift, I can understand you, but I won’t be able to speak to you and I can’t change back right away. I just don’t want you to get scared.”

“I think waking up with your paw on my stomach was enough scaring to last a lifetime. This is going to be a cakewalk.”

He grimaced at the reminder that she’d been terrified. He undid the button of his jeans and paused. “Are you going to be okay sleeping with me tonight?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Did you want me to sleep on the couch or something?”

“No, I just don’t want you to be scared to wake up like that again.”

“You’re not going to eat me, right?”

His mind blanked out for a moment. What?

Her cheeks pinked. “I mean, as a lion you’re not going to hurt me?”

“Absolutely not,” he said. “My lion would kill to keep you safe and wouldn’t dream of hurting a hair on your head. I’m still me and still in control of everything, I’m just a lion.”

“Okay, good. Then yes, I will happily sleep with you tonight, especially if you’re interested in a repeat of last night.”

“Did you tell her that we have really good hearing?” Jupiter called through the shed doors.

“Oh crap,” Sidney said. “Sorry!”

“No worries,” Jupiter said. “It takes getting used to.”

“I just want to point out that I wasn’t eavesdropping,” Celeste said.

“Throw me under the bus, why don’t you, woman?” Jupiter said with a growl, and then Lucius heard the distinct sound of his brother and his mate making out.

Good grief.

He stepped close. “I’ll definitely, happily, and eagerly give you a repeat of last night.” He whispered in her ear, “You taste amazing and I love how you sound when you fall apart.”

She bit her bottom lip. “You better shift, Lucius. You’re too tempting like this.”

“As my soulmate wishes.”

He stepped back and stripped, a little sexier than necessary to give her a good show, which he could tell she appreciated because he could smell how turned on she was. When he’d put his clothes to the side of the shed, he let his shift come over him, going from two legs to four paws.

He stretched fully, his claws sinking into the dirt and his tail whipping back and forth as he yawned.

“Oh.”

He froze mid-yawn, jaws wide and fangs surely gleaming in the sunlight. Was she going to pass out?

“You okay out there, Sidney?” Celeste called. “It’s okay, he’s still himself, just

furry.”

The shed doors opened and Sidney looked back at them, and then at him.

“I was just shocked to see it happen. It’s one thing for the lion to become a guy, but a totally different experience the other way around. I wasn’t sure I believed my own eyes last time, but I sure as heck do now. Holy crap. You’re a lion!” She dropped to her knees and held out her hands, and he moved slowly to her, lowering his head so she could pet him.

She sank her fingers into his thick mane, then scratched his ears. He rolled to his side and she stroked her hands down his side with a smile.

“My boyfriend is a lion. Or wait, I guess the right word is mate.”

“Yep,” Celeste said. “But we don’t use that word when we’re away from our people, so boyfriend is fine. Or husband, when the time comes.”

“You guys get married?”

Sidney stood and Lucius rolled to his feet.

“If the couple wants to,” Jupiter said. “You two can discuss that when you’re ready for it. For now, how about we walk around the paddock and you can ask us any questions you’d like. Then I heard you wanted to sketch for a while, so there’s a great shady place under that tree by the pond that you can hang out with Lucius until he’s done with his shift.”

“Sounds perfect,” she said.

He walked with her, occasionally bumping against her as they made their way around

the large paddock. She asked Jupiter and Celeste questions about being soulmates and having a baby, about what it was like to be a shifter, and some of the dangers that they'd faced in the park.

By the time the two of them were settled under the tree in the shade and Jupiter had excused himself for a bit to take Celeste back to their home for a nap, promising to return before eleven when he needed to shift back to human, Lucius was positively falling for Sidney.

She was inquisitive and sensitive, and she clearly was open to learning about him and his people. He loved how her mind worked and how concerned she was that the park and its shifters were safe.

She sat a few feet from him and sketched him as he lounged near the pond, the sun dappling his fur with gold and shadows from the tree above.

"I had the best time this morning," she said as she sketched. "Thank you for this. Thanks for taking the time with me to help me understand how serious everything is here. I don't feel like a prisoner, I feel like I'm being brought into the most special, secret group on the planet and that I've been given a tremendous opportunity to find my soulmate and make a life with him."

She smiled at him, and he purred loudly.

"When you're human, I'd like to talk to you about the future, okay? I have some questions, especially about how you can't live anywhere but here."

He nodded, his tail flicking in the tall grass.

"In the meantime, lemme get back to this sketch. You're a freaking handsome lion, Lucius. Plus, you're sexy as hell as a human." She gave him a sexy smile before

turning her eyes back to the sketchbook. “I can’t wait until you’re human again.”

He couldn’t either.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney had the best time out in the paddock. She loved that it was just the two of them and that even though the paddock was a huge, open space, it still felt private. When she finished her sketch of him, she closed her book and put her things away, and then laid her head back against his chest and closed her eyes with a yawn.

“I’m laying against a lion,” she said with a snort. She opened her eyes and looked up at the impossibly blue sky and fluffy white clouds that were visible through the tree’s canopy. “I can’t believe how normal this feels.”

He purred and his body vibrated, which made her back tingle. Turning to her side, she stretched her arms over his chest and rested her head on his tawny fur. His mane was thick and the color of melted chocolate, and his eyes were a beautiful amber color.

She’d never seen a lion up close.

It was wild that she was hugging one.

Even if it was her boyfriend.

At dinner the night before, she’d told him so much about her life, but she started to share again now that it was just the two of them and she had him as a captive audience.

She told him about growing up in a home where the most important thing was the family business, and how everything got put on hold because of it.

“My dad loved my mom so much,” she said, rubbing her cheek on his fur. “He

sacrificed a lot for the business so she could have her dream job. When he died, I knew my life was going to get infinitely harder because she had relied on him so much, and then she turned all that reliance on me. I don't think she ever saw what she did as anything but appropriate, and if I ever pushed back, she'd guilt me and make me feel bad." She mused on that for a little bit, thinking that her relationship with her mom had probably been heading toward Sidney simply taking off and going no-contact so she could get her sanity back.

"I guess I'm loyal to a fault, though. I could have left, I could have put my foot down and refused to work there. She wasn't even paying me minimum wage, though, so I saved my money as best I could, but it was never enough for me to get a place of my own. I was screwed coming and going."

He murmured sympathetically, and she smiled.

"We're soulmates. It's such a weird thing to say because it sounds like a fantasy. But I was immediately attracted to you, and I didn't want to be anywhere but with you. It explains why I felt so drawn to you. Because we were meant to be together. The coupon was just the means to bring us to the same place."

He growled softly in agreement.

"I think," she said, "when you're done being a lion for the day, that you and I need to talk about the park and your life here so that we're on the same page. Then I'll figure out how to deal with my mom." She sat up and looked into his eyes. "You'll help me, I hope?"

He nodded and pressed his cheek to hers with an answering purr.

She hugged him around his neck and buried her face in his mane, inhaling the sunshine and tall grass scent of him.

She wasn't sure how long they'd stayed like that, but Jupiter appeared at some point and said it was time for Lucius to change back because the others were coming up for the tours.

She rose to her feet and grabbed her bag, stretching with a squeak.

"What do you think?" Jupiter asked as he walked with them back to the maintenance shed.

"About what?" she asked.

"Lucius, shifters, the park, everything."

"Oh, I'm a smitten kitten," she said with a laugh. "Lucius and I need to talk about a lot of stuff still, but I understand how awesome of a responsibility the secret of shifters is, and I'm honored to be part of it. It's freaking fantastic, though. It feels like a dream."

"Celeste said she felt the same way when we met, that she thought she was falling for me too fast but she couldn't stop herself. Being soulmates makes us compatible on a level that isn't the same for humans alone."

"Thanks for sticking with us today," she said. "Lucius is lucky to have you for a brother."

"Hey," he said, pulling the shed door open, "I'm lucky too. I get to be with my family at the park. There's a lot of shifters who aren't so lucky."

She and Lucius walked into the shed after she picked up his clothes from outside, and Jupiter shut the door. He hurried down the steps and left them alone. She turned to watch Lucius shift. Seeing him return to human was just as amazing as seeing him

turn into a lion.

She jumped into his arms and kissed him.

“You’re not scared anymore, huh?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Not even a little bit.”

He lowered her to the ground and then dressed. He gave her a quiet look as he pulled his jeans on. “Thanks for sharing so much of your life with me while I was a lion. I love hearing you talk.”

“Thanks for listening.”

He gave her his thousand-watt smile and finished dressing. He bent to lift the door in the floor when it opened and Caesar appeared.

“Hey you two, how was the time in the paddock?”

“Great,” she said.

“I heard you like to sketch?” Caesar asked.

She nodded. “I got a great sketch of Lucius.” She lifted her book from the bag, flipped to the page she’d just drawn, and handed to it Caesar.

“Holy shit, this is amazing,” he said. “It looks like it could leap off the page.”

“That’s so sweet, thank you.” Her cheeks hurt because she smiled so big.

Caesar looked like he was going to say something, but then he just smiled and handed

the sketchbook back. “What’s on tap for you two today?”

“I’ve got some stuff to tell her about the park and my situation here,” Lucius said.

“We’d love to have a pride dinner tonight if you’re not going anywhere.”

Lucius looked at her, and she said, “Sure, that sounds great.”

“Good, my house at six. See you guys then.”

Lucius took Sidney’s hand and led her down the steps. They passed the other lions on the way up and greeted them. “Dad said we’re having dinner with the pride, are you guys coming?” Amadeus asked.

“We’ll be there,” Lucius said.

“Cool, he put ribs in the oven to slow roast during the tours. I can’t wait.”

“Awesome,” Lucius said.

As they continued down into the private living area, she said, “I take it the ribs are good?”

“Yeah, he makes his own barbecue sauce too. Jenni makes kickass cheesy potatoes, and Rhomi will probably make strawberry shortcake because that’s Mercer’s favorite dessert.”

“I can’t wait to get to know everyone,” she said.

They walked into his house and shut the door.

“Can I see the drawing?” he asked. “I only got a glimpse of it when you showed my dad.”

“Sure.” She pulled it out and flipped to the page.

“Oh wow, he’s right. It’s awesome. So detailed. I look pretty damn regal.”

“I think so too.”

She put her things on the counter and turned to face him.

“Before we do anything fun like strip and do wicked things to each other,” he said, “we need to talk.”

She nodded. He sat on the couch and she joined him, tucking one leg under the other and leaning against the back of the couch to face him.

“So there’s just a couple things I need to tell you and then we can talk about stuff with your mom and I can help you come up with a plan to deal with all that.”

“I’m all ears,” she said.

“I can’t live anywhere but the park,” he said. “It’s a rule that everyone abides by. There’s safety here, and it helps the alphas ensure that we’re all accounted for. I can’t go buy a house somewhere and make a life with you, my life is here. It has to be.”

She stared at him quietly because she was sure he wasn’t done yet.

He cleared his throat. “I want you to stay with me. I want to pack up your things at your mom’s place and move into my house, so we can start our lives together. I want to mark you as my mate and join with you in front of the pride in the ways of my

people. And mostly, I want to make you the happiest female on the planet, because I'm the happiest male."

"I'm okay with all that," she said. "But I'm worried about just walking away from my mom. I don't want to ruin our relationship, but I don't know if even giving her two weeks' notice will do anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she may not even try to find someone to take my place so she can try to guilt me into staying. She wouldn't know that I have no choice but to be with you."

"Well, you do have a choice."

"I thought I couldn't leave?"

"Uh, yes, for right now, but if you wanted to stay at the apartment while we get to know each other and not live together, I could arrange that for you."

She leaned back a bit. "You don't want to live with me? You just said a whole bunch of really nice stuff about starting a life with me."

His brows rose. "No! I mean, yes, I do want to live with you. I don't want to go a night without you in my arms. But if you want time to get to know me before we move in together, we can do that."

"I don't want to be anywhere but with you, Lucius."

"Good, I don't want to be anywhere but with you too. So what do you want to do about your mom?"

“I don’t know, honestly.”

He hummed and pursed his lips. Then he said, “What about a temp agency?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if she hired someone to fill in so you don’t have to give notice? You could spend a couple hours training someone.”

“That would probably cost a lot of money.”

“I can cover the cost for a few weeks. You could create a job listing and post it online too. If your mom won’t take the initiative, then you can on her behalf.”

“That sounds like a great idea. If she won’t go for it?”

“Sidney,” he said, his voice dropping to a low purr. “You have the right to make your own life choices. I’m not just saying that because I want you to choose me, but because it’s only right. You’ve put yourself on the back burner for such a long time. You can put yourself first.”

She tapped the side of her head. “It makes me feel like a bad person to do what my heart is telling me.”

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I think that’s your mom’s voice in your head. You’re not a bad person for following your dreams. She’ll come to terms with it because you’re not going to give her a choice in the matter.”

She inhaled and exhaled slowly until all the air was out of her lungs and they burned for a moment. As she filled her lungs again, she said, “Can you take me there in a little while? So I can pack and tell her everything?”

“I’d be happy to. What time?”

She pushed off the couch and rose to her feet. Grabbing the hem of her shirt, she said, “I don’t know, how long do you think it’ll take for you to make me scream your name in pleasure?”

His eyes darkened and he rose slowly to his feet. “What’s the number you’re thinking?”

“As many times as you want.”

“As many times as you want, sweetheart.” He ducked his shoulder and hauled her over it until she was hanging upside down and staring at his butt. She gave it a pat with a giggle.

“You’ve got an hour, I think. After packing up, we have to be back for dinner at six,” she said.

He prowled to the bedroom, his hand on her thigh and his lion purring loudly. “Challenge accepted.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Lucius didn't like that Sidney was nervous, but as they waited in the employee lot for their escort to her mom's salon, he couldn't help but feel how nervous she was. She was practically vibrating with nervous energy, pacing by the SUV he was going to drive.

"My car?" she asked, chewing her bottom lip as she turned on her heel and walked the length of the SUV.

"It's here somewhere," he said. "My dad said he brought it to the employee lot."

"Okay." She blew out a breath. "I don't care about it. My mind is just going a mile a minute and it passed through my runaway train of thought."

He smiled and reached for her as she came back his way. Pulling her close, he loved how she melted against him.

"It's going to be okay, sweetheart."

She tilted her face to look at him. "My pacing is a dead giveaway that I'm nervous. I can't just be still when I'm anxious."

"Yeah, but I can also feel your worry. Whatever happens, I've got your back. Your mom's had some time to think about everything. Maybe she'll be really happy for you."

Sidney pursed her lips, then sighed and rested her head on his chest.

“I don’t really like confrontation,” she said. “If I did, I would have left ages ago, but it makes my stomach hurt to think about talking to her and telling her I’m quitting.”

He knew she wrestled with not giving her mom notice for the job as well, but they’d made some arrangements her mom could utilize, and she’d told him she’d been to salons where they didn’t even have a front desk person full time.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry that things happened the way they did, I’m sorry I can’t live anywhere else, and I’m extremely sorry that because my lion couldn’t wait to meet you, I’ve messed up your relationship with your mom.”

She grasped her hands together behind his back. “I’ve already forgiven you, so I don’t want you to keep apologizing, okay?” She tilted her head back to look at him, squinting one eye as if to show she meant business. “And honestly? Even though my stomach hurts because I don’t want to get into another argument with my mom, I feel free. For the first time in years, I feel like I’ve got freedom to make my own choices.” She went onto her toes and kissed him. “I choose you, Lucius.”

His lion growled in happiness as he chased her lips and deepened the kiss. He wanted to go back down to the house so he could show her how much she meant to him, but his sensitive hearing picked up people approaching and he knew they really needed to get on the way anyway.

The sooner they left, the sooner they were back and having dinner with the pride, and then...whatever the night brought.

“Hey, guys,” Amadeus called. “Ready to go?”

Lucius reluctantly loosened his hold on Sidney so some space appeared between them, and let out a little snarl toward his brother.

She grinned at him. “Be nice, he’s helping us out.”

“I’d rather be nice to you.”

“You can be nice to me later.”

“Oh, I will,” he said, letting his lion out a little so his voice lowered.

Behind his brother was Benjamin, one of the wolf shifters, and Indio, one of the elephants.

“Hey,” he said, introducing them to Sidney. “We need three escorts?”

“On the way back, I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if we swung by the feed store so I can grab some supplies for the petting zoo?” Indio asked. “The place we order from has a shipping delay.”

“Yeah, of course,” Lucius said. He opened the passenger door for Sidney and helped her in, then said, “We’ll see you guys at the salon. The apartment is above it, so we won’t have to go far to grab her things.”

“If there’s heavy furniture I’m going to call sitting in the SUV instead of hauling things around,” Benjamin said.

“No furniture, just clothes and toiletries,” Lucius said with a chuckle.

“Oh whew,” Indio said. “I was a little worried I’d invited myself along and would have to move a couch or something.”

“Unbelievable,” Amadeus said. “We’ve all got extra strength from our beasts and you’re both bitching about furniture.”

“It’s still the weekend, give us a break,” Benjamin said. He grinned. “Now if it was my soulmate, I’d be flexing so much she’d swoon.” He popped a pose like a bodybuilder and Lucius groaned.

“Let’s go before he strains something,” Lucius said.

While the trio flexed and compared their biceps, Lucius got behind the wheel of the SUV and said, “Baby, I love those guys, but they’re all kind of idiots.”

She smiled. “I’m glad they’re willing to escort us. I don’t have much to bring to your house, but it would take us a couple hours to pack if it was just us I think.”

“Your house,” he reminded her. “What I have is yours now.”

She beamed at him and it made him feel ten feet tall.

Backing away from the spot, he drove down the aisle, turned right, and passed through the guard station, waving at Felix who was inside and hit the button to lift the gate for them. “Not too long now, sweetheart,” Lucius said as they left the park and headed toward the parkway. “Do you want to talk about your mom or something else?”

“Anything else,” she said. “Distract me with something.”

He hummed. “Have I told you about the lion mating ceremony yet?”

“No. What’s that entail?”

“Well,” he said, glancing in the rearview and seeing his friends behind him in another SUV, “picture it being pitch black outside, the whole pride gathered in the paddock, and me chasing a rabbit...”

Sidney opened the back door of the salon and stepped inside, holding it open for Lucius to follow her in. The familiar scent of hair spray and shampoo swirled in the air, and the soft hum of a hair dryer and the quiet chatter of stylists and clients made Sidney feel both at home and more stressed.

As they walked through the storage room that doubled as an employee breakroom, she spotted her mom cleaning her station.

Taking a deep breath, Sidney left the storage room and walked over to her mom.

“Hey, can we talk?” Sidney asked quietly. She tried to sound casual but she could hear the stress in her voice and it made her chest ache.

Her mom glanced at her. “I’m a little busy. I’ve got two clients coming in soon and you skipped out on me this weekend, so I’ve been running around crazy catching the phone and booking appointments.”

“Mom, it’s important.”

“Fine.”

Her mom gave a final swipe of the counter with a cleaning wipe and dropped it in the trash. Folding her arms, she said, “What’s going on?”

Sidney glanced at the nearby stations. Two other stylists were working on clients and she suddenly felt like everyone could hear what she was about to say. Grasping her mom’s arm gently, she led her away from everyone.

“I want to tell you that I’m quitting and won’t be coming back to the salon to work, and I’m also moving out.”

A myriad of emotions flashed over her mom's face before her brows lowered and she frowned severely. "You're quitting? Just like that? You can't be serious. Anyone else would give me at least two weeks' notice."

Her mom's voice was so sharp and her gaze so harsh that Sidney wanted to wilt. She could see Lucius out of the corner of her eye and knew she was doing the right thing. The alphas of the park had been gracious enough to let her come with an escort and pack her things and quit her job, but they weren't going to let her stay away from the park or Lucius. Too much was at stake and they still didn't fully trust her.

But even if they did trust her, even if she could stay at the apartment or work a couple weeks and help out, she wouldn't. She'd given enough blood, sweat, and tears to this salon and was ready to move on with her life.

"I'm very serious. The guy I went on a date with last night, he's my Mr. Right. My forever guy. He asked me to move in with him, and I'm going to. I want it, more than I've ever wanted anything, even doing my art."

Her mom scoffed loudly. "You've known him a day and he's your Mr. Right? Give me a break, Sidney. You're throwing away everything for a guy you just met? What are you going to do when this all blows up in your face and you've burned bridges?"

"I haven't thrown anything away," she said, feeling indignant. "I'm moving on. It's time, for goodness' sake. It's what I need to do for my own sanity and what I want to do, because he's a great guy and we're going to build a life together."

"What about the salon, Sidney? You can't just walk away, it's the family business and you're valuable. Your dad and I put everything into this business."

"I know, Mom, but it was never supposed to be my life. I didn't want to go into the salon business, I never wanted to be a stylist. You've never treated me as if my wants

and needs matter. It's always what you want or what's best for the business."

"You can't leave me in the lurch!"

Lucius walked out of the storage room and put his arm around Sidney. She nearly collapsed into him—she hadn't realized how much she needed his support until he joined her.

"I can help with that," he said. His voice was deep and smooth, and filled with confidence. "My name is Lucius and Sidney is not only my girlfriend but she's my forever-girl. I will happily cover the cost of a temporary receptionist until you find someone to replace Sidney." He handed over an index card that he'd printed the information from the temp agency on. "Someone can start as early as tomorrow afternoon if you call the agency in the morning."

Sidney's mom stared at him in silence. Then she snapped, "You're the hero, now, huh? You think you can throw money at me and it changes anything? You can't pay to replace my daughter, and this salon is a family issue and not your problem to fix." Her eyes blazed and she knocked the card out of Lucius's hand. "You want to run off together? Fine. But if you walk out of that door, Sidney, you can just keep walking."

Sidney flinched at her mom's tone. "Mom."

"No," her mom said. "You make the choice right now, young lady. You want to leave, then go. But don't come crying to me when it all falls apart and you have no one and no place to live."

Sidney blinked at the sting of tears. Lucius gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Let's go, sweetheart."

She nodded, not sure she could speak without sobbing. Without another word, they

turned and left the salon through the back door. She pushed at the emotions churning in her stomach and pointed to the metal staircase that led to the apartment.

His friends joined them as they climbed the stairs to the apartment she'd lived in for most of her life, and she opened the door.

“Let's get this over with,” she said.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

By the time they got back to the park, Sidney had broken down a couple times but was feeling better in general.

She'd hoped that the conversation with her mom wouldn't go south, but it had, and her mom's harsh words and condemnation had hurt more than she thought they could. She never thought that her mom would cut her out of her life, but it was probably something she should have expected.

Her mom tended to lash out when she was hurt, and she often spoke without worrying how her words would affect others. So Sidney shouldn't have been surprised by anything her mom said.

But she was still hurt.

She couldn't believe her mom really wanted to cut her out of her life, and part of her thought that her mom's words were over the top and she'd reach out at some point to heal the brokenness between them. But how long would that take? And what if she never reached out?

Lucius had been so amazing while they packed up her clothes and things. He'd told her that he was sure her mom would bridge the gap at some point, but Sidney was allowed to make her own choices.

Do you want to live with me, sweetheart? Do you want to be mine and for me to be yours?

Yes, of course! I want it more than anything.

Then this is the right path for us both. She'll come around in time, I think. And if she doesn't, she's the one who shut the door, not you.

Rubbing her chest, she opened the passenger door and hopped down.

Lucius was at her side a heartbeat later, and she leaned against him. "If you keep hugging me, I'm going to cry again. You're being too sweet."

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Hug me just a little tighter and then tell me a joke."

"A joke?"

"Yeah, something goofy."

He gave her a tight squeeze and then said, "What kind of tool does a gorilla use?"

She lifted her head to look at him. "I don't know."

"A monkey wrench."

"Oh, that's awful," she said with a laugh.

"You didn't say it had to be a good joke."

"True."

"We taking this stuff down?" Amadeus called.

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks for your help, guys.”

“You bet,” Benjamin said. “Thanks for not making me carry a couch.”

“You still had to carry feed for the petting zoo,” Indio said.

“Good point,” Benjamin said. “I vote we don’t let Indio come on trips with us anymore.”

“Hey!” Indio said. “For that you can carry the bags all the way to the petting zoo for me.”

“Damn it.”

Sidney chuckled. She knew the guys all liked each other. They had such a great relationship even though they were different animals. And she liked Lucius’s brothers a lot too.

“We should get your stuff to the house because dinner is in about an hour,” Lucius said.

“Sounds good to me,” she said.

The SUV was full of trash bags of her clothes and toiletries, and a suitcase filled with her art supplies. Lucius had marveled at her stack of sketchbooks and mugs full of pencils, and the easel that she liked to put in front of a window so she could sketch with natural light.

“I just realized there’s no natural light at your house,” she said as she picked up one of the bags.

“Ah, crap. Well, there’s plenty in the park, though,” he said.

“True. But I should probably get a regular job, right? You said that everyone works here.”

“We can figure that out later, there’s no rush,” he said. “We just met and are still getting to know each other.”

“I don’t want anyone to think I’m trying to be a mooch or anything.”

“No one would think that, I promise,” he said.

“Here,” Amadeus said as he joined them pulling a cart. “I called Jupiter and asked him to grab a couple carts for us to haul Sidney’s things and the petting zoo supplies.”

“Good thinking,” Lucius said.

“I do have good ideas from time to time,” he said.

They loaded her things onto the cart and followed Indio and Benjamin as they moved their cart of petting zoo supplies through the gate into the park. They parted ways, Sidney and Lucius taking her things to the employee cafeteria to utilize a service elevator, which would take them to a hallway where the private living quarters were located as well as the marketplace.

He unlocked the door to the lions’ area and in no time they were unloading her bags and dumping everything onto the bed.

They were quiet while they sorted her things; hanging, folding, stacking. It wasn’t that it was hard work or needed a lot of mental attention, but she was still sorting

through the argument with her mom.

“You know what bugs me?” she said finally as she carried a stack of shorts into the walk-in closet and set them next to shirts she’d already placed there.

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“Like I wonder if she ever would have been happy for me? I mean, I know that what’s happening between us is fast because we’re soulmates and she doesn’t understand that part of it, but I’m excited about a new relationship and finally doing something for myself, and she just absolutely shut me down.”

“Well, she probably felt attacked.”

She came out of the closet and stared at him. “What?”

“I mean personally. You’re her family and she probably never thought you’d leave. I would suspect, too, that she was very aware she wasn’t being fair to you and just hoped you’d keep going along with it.” He put a bundle of socks in a drawer he’d cleared out, then looked at her. “She thinks you’re selfish for not sticking with her even when you were miserable, but she’s the one who put the family business ahead of everything else.”

“Yeah.” She sat on the bed with a sigh. “I hate that things are crappy between us, but I don’t know how to fix it. I also think I really can’t be the one to bridge that gap, I think it has to be her.”

“I agree.”

He joined her and put his arm around her shoulders, giving her a kiss on the side of the head. “Sweetheart, when we have kids, I promise that I’ll never force them to do

something they don't want to do. Family should support, not stifle. It's easy for me to say that because I grew up with people who wanted me to have the life I wanted."

"But you have to be here in the park," she said.

"Yeah, but I didn't have to go into security," he said. "There's so much I could have done and been safe in the park. Like Justus is a bear. They normally work with food, but he's part of the security team. And Jasper is a wolf, and he's part of security instead of working with the VIP tours. What's that saying? Family gives you roots so you can have wings to fly where you want."

"I've never heard that saying, but I like it. And I like the idea of having kids who can do what they want with their future. Can they go to college?"

"We have school here in the park, and there are online programs we've used, so yes."

"Cool."

She sighed. "I think we have to get to dinner?"

"Yeah, and then we'll come back and finish up."

She rose to her feet and smiled. "I'm pretty sure you promised me that we'd have some time to ourselves."

"But all your stuff is on the bed," he said, gesturing to at least a trash bag's worth of clothes covering the bed.

"We'll just have to be creative. Or toss the clothes on the floor."

"Creative? You got it."

He rose to his feet and hugged her. “I’m sorry things went to hell today, but I’ll never be sorry that you’re my soulmate. You’re precious to me and I only want you to be happy.”

“I’m happiest with you. Happier than I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Good. Let’s get to dinner and then get home so I can be creative .”

“I love how you said creative.”

He wiggled his brows and smiled.

She was falling for him hard.

He’d been there when she felt like her world was falling apart and hadn’t shied away from any of the messy emotional stuff. And he was still here, making her laugh and supporting her.

Having a soulmate was awesome as hell.

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Lucius fell a little bit more in love with Sidney after the pride's dinner. She was so sweet and kind to everyone, wanting to know everything there was to know about lions and being mated to one. She'd made plans for lunch the following afternoon with Jenni, Celeste, and Rhomi. He loved that she was curious about his people.

As they left Caesar's house, his dad stopped them on the front porch.

"I'm sorry to hear things didn't go well with your mom," he said.

"Thanks," she said. "I think Lucius is right and she'll come around in time. I'm sure I surprised her with how fast I moved out. If she'd come to me and said she was uprooting her whole life for a guy she met the day before, I'd consider having her institutionalized."

Caesar grinned. "Yeah, we hear that from the human mates. You understand why you want to be with Lucius, but people who don't understand the pull of soulmates won't. I wanted to ask if you've discussed the mating ceremony and what your plans might be."

"I told her about the ceremony," Lucius said. "We haven't talked about timing."

"Well, whenever you're ready to go through with it, we can have the ceremony after the park is closed. I'm asking about the timing of things because it's very clear to me that Sidney is all-in with keeping our secret, but for the other alphas, they'd like to wait to loosen restrictions until after the mating ceremony."

"What does that mean for me?" she asked.

“You are free to be with Lucius anywhere in the park, and if you leave the park with him, you’ll have an escort—but that would happen even if he was leaving the park by himself. You won’t be given any of the security codes or a swipe card until after your mating ceremony, but as long as you’re with Lucius, there’s nowhere you can’t go.”

“My phone?”

“You can have it back,” Caesar said. He pulled it out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “Thank you for being so gracious about everything. Rhomi said it was difficult at first to keep things from her family because she couldn’t tell them how sure she was that she wanted to be with Mercer when they hadn’t been together very long. Celeste went through a similar situation. They’ll be happy to talk to you about how they deal with the stress of keeping a huge secret from their family.”

“I imagine it will be more of a burden once they have kids because they might worry about their kids saying something,” she said.

Caesar nodded. “It is on the minds of the alphas when it comes to having human mates. But the children will be taught how important the secret is. We have a school here in the park, so the only humans they’d come into contact with will be park patrons and human family members.”

She hummed and looked between Caesar and Lucius.

“I’d like to get to know Lucius better. We basically jumped over everything because he shifted while we were sleeping and spilled the beans.”

“Yes, he definitely let the cat out of the bag,” Caesar said with a wink.

Sidney laughed. “Thanks for dinner tonight. It was really great getting to know everyone.”

“You’re welcome. Goodnight.”

“Night, Dad.”

Lucius took Sidney’s hand and they walked back to his house. He stopped before he opened the door. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Where?”

“Topside. We can just walk around and talk. The park is closed so it’ll just be us and the security guards roaming around.”

“Sure.”

He took her up to the park by way of the employee cafeteria. They grabbed drinks from the refrigerator before they left the cafeteria, and walked toward the safari.

“I think,” she said as they stopped in front of the norms’ paddock, “that even though I like you a lot, Tank was my favorite to sketch.”

“He’s pretty impressive.”

Tank had also been helpful a few times in keeping their people safe. Just recently, when August’s mate Ginny had been attacked by her murderous grandfather’s people, Tank had defended her and stomped a few bad guys into the dirt.

She took a drink of lemon-lime soda and leaned against the bars of the gate.

“Can I plan a date?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“For tomorrow night.”

“Absolutely. What did you have in mind?”

She gave him a curious look. “It’s a secret.”

He hummed in interest. “Does it happen to end with me sending you into orbit with a few orgasms?”

“Ugh, dude.”

Sidney squeaked in surprise as Benjamin walked by.

Lucius grinned at his friend. “Not going to be sorry about that.”

“You newly mated couples make the rest of us sick with your lovey-dovey conversations, but we also really want that for ourselves.”

“What do we want for ourselves?” Silvanus, another wolf shifter, asked as he joined them.

“A soulmate and lovey-dovey conversations.”

“Oh hell yeah. I hate hearing that kind of thing, but I can’t wait to do it myself when I find my forever girl.”

Lucius took Sidney’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “It’s the best feeling in the world.”

The security guards moved on after a bit more of a chat, and he and Sidney continued their walk around the park, keeping the conversation on sharing parts of their lives they hadn’t shared yet. He told her about going to school in the park and joining the

security team when he was old enough, and she told him about her dad taking her to the art museum every Sunday one summer so she could study the great artists.

When they finished their trek around the park, they returned to the house, shoved all her clothes to the floor, and drove each other wild. As he fell asleep with his arms around his beautiful mate, he felt more at peace than he ever had in his life, and it was all thanks to one very special human.

Sidney had an amazing time with the girls at lunch the following day. Celeste and Rhomi were human, so they could understand what she was going through as she learned about shifters and being mated to one. Jenni as a lioness had a unique point of view of being a shifter herself, which was pretty damn cool in Sidney's book.

They helped her gather her things for her special date with Lucius. He was dying to know what she had planned, but she was excited to keep a secret from him for a change.

"Good luck tonight," Jenni said, giving her a hug.

"Thank you, and thanks for hanging out for lunch."

"I had fun, plus it's nice to get away from the candy shop every now and then."

After saying goodbye to the girls, Sidney found Lucius in the house waiting for her. She was so excited to see him, so very happy to be back in his arms.

"Everything feels so right when we're together," she said. "It's so cool to be your soulmate. I just feel...content."

"I do too," he said, hugging her tightly. He buried his face in her neck and she heard him inhale and then let out a low purr that made her skin tingle and her stomach

clench.

“Are you free?” she whispered.

“For you? Anytime.”

He scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the bedroom, where they shared how much they’d missed each other and proved it over and over with their shouts of pleasure.

When the time had come for their date, Sidney told him they were going to the employee cafeteria.

“For our date?”

“For part of it,” she said.

He gave her a curious look and then said, “I trust you.”

“That means the world to me. I trust you too.”

They walked up into the employee cafeteria, which was empty. With the girls’ help earlier, she’d set up a corner of the cafeteria for the first part of their date.

Chairs were set in front of easels that faced each other. Large pieces of paper were clipped to boards resting on the easels, and the trays were stocked with acrylic paints, filled water cups, and brushes.

“Oh, what’s this?” he asked as his eyes lit up.

“I thought we could paint each other’s portraits.”

“Wow, really? I love that idea, even though you’re the artist and I haven’t held a brush for any kind of art project since I was a kid.”

“Well, pencil is my medium of choice, so I’m not super good with paints. I thought this would be fun for us to try.”

“I love it.” He gave her a kiss and then they settled behind easels.

Sidney picked up a brush and dipped it in black paint, then leaned to the side to take a peek at her sexy mate. He smiled at her as he leaned to the side of his easel.

“Great minds, love,” he said with a laugh.

They were too focused to talk at first, but as their paintings came to life, they talked about their favorite things like movies, books, and food. Whenever their gazes met, her heart would flutter.

He was so dang sexy.

They continued to paint, exchanging playful banter and occasional glances until they’d finished their paintings. She turned hers around to show him.

“Wow, that’s awesome! You did a great job.”

“Do you like it?” she asked. She hadn’t tried to paint a portrait before, but she didn’t think she did too badly for a first try.

“I do, you’re talented! Ready to see mine?”

She nodded.

He turned his around to show her, and she grinned and tried not to laugh.

“Okay, I know it looks like something a toddler painted,” he said, his eyes dancing, “but I really tried.”

“You did great.”

“You’re lying like a rug, girl.”

This time she did laugh. “I’m sorry, it was a great try. I love it. And I really enjoyed painting with you.”

They set their paintings back on the easels to dry and met with a hug next to the cleared space. He whispered in her ear, “I think I’ve fallen a little more in love with you just now, Sidney. You’re sweet and special, and I’m a lucky male.”

Her heart felt like it skipped a beat. “I think I’m pretty lucky too. And falling for you.”

With their paintings finished, they moved to the second part of the date—making pizzas in the commercial kitchen near the cafeteria. The bears had been happy to share the space with her for the date-night cooking session. She and Lucius used prepared dough to start off their pizzas, choosing sauces and toppings as they chatted happily.

When their pizzas were done, they sat down at the counter to eat. Lucius raised a slice of his pizza. “Let’s toast to a perfect date and the most amazing soulmate.”

She raised her slice and touched his. “To us.”

Sidney realized just how deeply she was falling for Lucius. The evening had been

everything she had hoped for, and as they finished their meal, she felt an overwhelming sense of love and happiness. No one had ever made her feel as good as Lucius did. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she was definitely the lucky one.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The following Saturday, Lucius and Jupiter walked Sidney, Celeste, and Rhomi to the aviary to watch the afternoon show. They were going to hang out with Jess and Auden afterward while Lucius ran errands with his brother.

“I’m so excited,” Sidney said.

“You didn’t bring your sketchbook,” Rhomi pointed out.

“I was sketching a lot when I saw the show with Lucius last week,” she explained, “and I feel like I kind of missed some of it because I was concentrating, so I just want to live in the moment.”

“That’s so cool,” Rhomi said.

Sidney smiled up at Lucius as they walked. “You sure you can’t hang out with us?”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, I promise.”

“I’ll miss you.”

His lion grumbled. “I will too, trust me.”

But he had something important to do, and he only had this bit of time to take care of it.

After dropping off the trio at the aviary, Lucius and Jupiter headed to the employee lot.

“Hey, guys, pop in here for a minute,” their dad called from the employee cafeteria.

Lucius and Jupiter walked into the cafeteria where their dad and the other alphas were waiting.

After greeting the alphas, Lucius said, “Jupiter is going to accompany me on some errands. Justus and Benjamin are also going to follow us. I left Sidney with Rhomi and Celeste, and they’re going to hang out in the aviary after the show with Jess and Auden. So that’s my news, what’s up with you all?”

Caesar smiled at him. “Since we’re doing the mating ceremonies this weekend, I wanted to be the first to tell you that once you’re fully mated according to our people’s traditions, Sidney will be able to have access to the park including codes to our private areas. She’s proven that she cares for you and is intent on keeping our secret.”

“That’s awesome, thanks,” Lucius said. “She’ll be happy. She understood that she was a stranger and needed to earn the trust of the alphas, but it’ll be nice for her not to feel like she’s being constantly watched.”

Alistair nodded. “She’s been really gracious in accepting our laws, and it’s a testament to your bond as soulmates.”

Lucius looked at the group, because he felt like there was something more going on. His dad smiled and said, “I was telling the alphas about Sidney’s artistic talents, and we had a couple thoughts about her working at the park. We wanted to run them by you so you can talk to her and see what she’d like to do.”

“Really? She can do her art at the park? In what capacity?” His lion let out a happy chuff in his head. He knew that Sidney wanted to do her art for a living, but he wasn’t sure how he’d be able to help her make that a reality.

Caesar looked at Joss, who said, “We have a couple of thoughts, which you can discuss with her and let her decide what she’d like to do. We’re really flexible in this aspect because we’ve never had an artist soulmate who was talented enough to work for the park. So the first option is that she could set up a small art station in the gift shop and draw a few hours a day. We could sell her drawings, and even make prints of them and frame them.”

Lucius hummed. “That sounds amazing. What’s the other option?”

Marcus said, “If she wants to do her art out in the park where people can see her, we can set up a station by the security office and she could draw outside, maybe do caricatures if that’s something she wants to do.”

“In the gift shop,” Caesar said, “she’d be with Sarah and Requiem, and if she’s near the security office, she could be on your schedule so you’d be around her. Either way, we’d love to offer her drawings for sale in the gift shop. I think the patrons would really love that.”

“Wow,” Lucius said. “Thank you all for thinking of ways to incorporate her into the park. I think she’ll be thrilled to be able to sketch for the park and sell her drawings. I’ll talk to her about it after I meet up with the girls later on.”

“There’s no rush,” Joss said. “You two are mating this weekend and should take time to enjoy each other. Your shifts will be covered by the security team, of course, for however much time you’d like to take off. When she decides what she’d like to do, just let us know and we’ll get things set up for her.”

Lucius shook the alphas’ hands. “Thanks so much, this is amazing.”

Caesar walked him and Jupiter outside. “Has she heard from her mom?”

“No,” Lucius said with a sigh. “She keeps hoping she’ll reach out, but she said her mom is pretty stubborn and was clearly very hurt by the argument, so she’s not sure how long it will take for her to realize that Sidney was right to put herself first for a change.”

“Hopefully her mom will realize that it’s not worth losing the relationship over and can come to terms with Sidney’s choices, but sometimes parents don’t do the right thing. Present company excluded.”

Jupiter snorted so hard he coughed.

Caesar growled at him and Jupiter took a large step back. “Sorry, you’re always right. Of course.”

“Damn straight,” he said with a laugh. “Good luck with your errands. I’ll see you later.”

Lucius and Jupiter walked away from the cafeteria toward the employee parking lot, where Justus and Benjamin were waiting as their escort.

“Do you know what you’re going to get?” Jupiter asked as they reached one of the park’s SUVs with the logo emblazoned on the side.

“I think so,” he said. “But I’m trying to keep my mind open to whatever they have on hand. I think when I see it, I’ll know which one to get.”

“I’m happy for you,” Jupiter said. “Having a soulmate is the best feeling on the planet.”

Lucius couldn’t agree more.

Meeting Sidney was definitely the highlight of his life.

Sidney absolutely loved watching the bird show again. Maggie and Jess were so knowledgeable and shared about the different birds that called the sanctuary home. At the end of the show, they did a Q&A for the audience, and then the crowd dispersed.

“I loved it even more this time,” Sidney said. “I had some great sketches of the birds before, but it’s cool to be in the moment sometimes.”

“I agree,” Celeste said. “I keep wanting to record everything that’s going on with this pregnancy, but I also just want to be pregnant and enjoy life.”

Rhomi nodded. “I love that the aviary takes care of injured birds and is sometimes able to release them back into the wild. Jess and Auden do a great job taking care of them with Cael.”

Jess walked up to them after the last patron was gone and said, “What did you think?”

“Loved it,” Sidney said. “Even better the second time.”

“We try to make it a little different every weekend so people can get something new out of it if they see it more than once.”

“Great job,” Celeste said. “It’s always fun to watch the show. I wish we had more shows like this.”

“Me too,” Rhomi said. “Maybe the park will keep growing and we’ll have more cool exhibits like this in the future.”

“Well, you never know what might happen,” Jess said.

The trio walked through the aviary hospital and stopped at the huge cages while Jess talked about the birds that were under their care. When they were finished, Sidney said, “Thanks for your time today, it was so awesome. This park is amazing.”

“I’m so glad you’re here and that you and Lucius found each other.”

“Me too.”

She glanced at her watch, realizing Lucius had been gone for almost three hours.

“I wonder if they’re back yet,” she asked.

“Lemme check Jupiter’s location,” Celeste said. “If not, we can go hang out at the house, maybe grab a snack. Oh, popcorn sounds good. Or cotton candy.”

“Love those pregnancy cravings, huh?” Rhomi asked with a smile.

“I sure do.” Celeste stared at her phone for a moment and said, “They’re walking in from the employee lot, so we can meet up with them. I’ll send my guy a text.”

“Thanks again for everything, Jess,” Sidney said. “You, Auden, and Maggie really made this afternoon special.”

“Anytime.”

The trio left the aviary and headed to meet up with the guys. She was about to send a text to Lucius when she heard a very familiar voice.

“Sidney? Sidney!”

“Mom?”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney looked in surprise when her mom called out her name.

She was at the security office and Amadeus was on his phone standing next to her.

“Oh hey, Sidney,” he said, putting his phone back in his pocket. “I was just calling Lucius.”

“He’s on the way here with Jupiter,” she said. She left Celeste and Rhomi and walked to her mom. “What are you doing here?”

Her mom looked tired and frazzled. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hair was in a messy bun.

“I didn’t know where you were,” she said. “I came to find you.”

“How did you know I was here?” she asked.

“Well, I didn’t,” she said.

At that moment, Lucius and Jupiter walked up, and Lucius put his arm around Sidney. “Linda, hey. What are you doing here?”

“I was just telling Sidney,” she said. “I was out picking up supplies at a strip mall in Kennispark and I walked by a jewelry store and saw you in there at the counter. I kept walking, but I saw you walk out with a bag from the jeweler and get into a vehicle with the park’s logo on it, so I figured you were coming back here and you’d know where Sidney was.” She paused then said, “I realized you were moving on without

me, Sidney. You're going to get married and I wasn't even asked if I approved of the engagement because I made such a mess of everything."

Sidney's brain picked up a few key words right then: jewelry, engagement, marriage.

She looked at Lucius, whose eyes were wide and lips were pressed into a thin line.

Her mom had stopped talking, her gaze darting between Sidney and Lucius.

She put her hands to her mouth with a gasp. "Oh no. You...didn't know."

Lucius shook his head.

Her mom groaned. "I'm sorry. Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Mom, it's okay," Sidney said. "Let's go talk in the employee cafeteria instead of out in the open here."

Lucius nodded. "That's a good idea."

Sidney mouthed I'm sorry , and he shook his head and smiled, mouthing No worries with a wink.

Her stomach flipped as they walked to the cafeteria with her mom, saying goodbye to the others. Had Lucius bought an engagement ring for her? Was he going to propose? Holy crap .

Once they were in the cafeteria, they sat at a table near the windows and Sidney offered her mom something to drink from the refrigerators in the kitchen area.

"No thanks, honey." She reached across the table and squeezed Sidney's hands.

“So tell me what’s going on,” Sidney said.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said. “I was so angry when you told me that you wanted to quit and move out because I felt like you were abandoning me. This week without you has honestly been so difficult, and it’s not just that you were a vital part of the salon, but that I missed us living together.” She paused and her eyes were shining with unshed tears. “Honey, I haven’t lived by myself since I married your dad the day after I graduated from high school. I got pregnant right away, and he and I worked so hard to make the salon a reality. I always dreamed you’d want to follow in my footsteps but I know you didn’t want to, I know your heart was never there.

“Your dad told me to let you go and let you live your life, but he died and then I needed you. I needed you at the salon and I needed you at the apartment because I didn’t want to be alone.”

“I didn’t want to be alone either,” she said. “But I also didn’t want to work at the salon. I gave up a lot of myself to be there for you, Mom, it killed me a little bit every day.”

“I know.” She squeezed Sidney’s hand gently. “Delia showed me the portrait of her dog you did for her and it was so amazing. I realized I never gave you any credit for the hard work you put in learning to draw and how artistic you are. It’s honestly incredible to me that you can look at an animal and draw it and it looks so real! I wanted to reach out, but I was so embarrassed by the way I acted. I wanted to tell you that it was too fast for you and Lucius to move in together, you’d only known each other for the weekend, but honestly? I met your dad when I was a senior in high school and he’d already graduated. The day I met him, if he’d asked me to run away with him? I would have packed a bag and gone.”

“Grandma would have been pissed,” she said with a laugh.

“Oh yeah for sure. Even being together for my senior year and then getting married, everyone thought it was too fast. But I know what it’s like to meet your soulmate and find the other part of yourself.” She looked at Lucius. “When I saw you in the jewelry store I panicked. I rushed over here and asked the man in the security office to find Sidney and he said he was going to call you. And then I ruined whatever you were planning and I’m so incredibly sorry. I’m sorry about everything. I’m sorry that I wasn’t gracious when you offered to hire a temp for me, and I’m sorry I didn’t help you pack, and mainly? That I didn’t tell you how happy I am that you’re happy, Sidney. I love you so much.”

Sidney’s eyes stung with tears. She pushed back the chair and rose to her feet, coming around the table to hug her mom. As her mom stood up and hugged her, Sidney said, “I love you too, Mom.”

“Oh honey, you’re moving on with your life and I should have let you do that years ago when you asked me to help you with art school. I’m sorry I messed up so much, and I’m sorry I was afraid to be alone. It’s not your job to watch over me, I’m supposed to help you out. I wish I could turn back time, but all I can do is say I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

They hugged again and then sat once more.

“So where are you living?” her mom asked.

Lucius said, “I have an apartment in the complex at the back of the park for employees.”

“How nice. Short commute. Are you working here too, Sidney, or are you going to go to school?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said. “I’ve just been enjoying hanging out and sketching.”

“Speaking of sketching,” her mom said. “Would you sketch me something for the salon? I’ll pay whatever your going rate is from your online store. You know what I like, something with birds and butterflies? I’ll hang it up behind reception.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Her mom had never once asked Sidney to draw something for her.

She could have cried all over again.

“How’s it going at the salon? You look a little stressed.”

“I was stressed because you and I were on the outs and it was all my fault. But the salon is doing great. Delia’s youngest sister is going to cosmetology school and took your job. She started Tuesday and is so happy to sweep and wash hair, and she’s great with the customers.”

“I’m glad that worked out, I hated how we left things.”

“Me too. But you should come to the salon anytime you need a haircut, and you too, Lucius. I’m pretty good with a pair of clippers.”

“I will, thanks.”

They talked for a little while longer, and then her mom said, “I should get back. I left Delia in charge and said I’d bring back lunch. She probably thinks I fell in a hole.”

Sidney and Lucius walked her out to her car, and Sidney said, “I can’t believe you bought a ticket to come here and look for me.”

“Worth it,” she said. “So next Sunday, I’d love if you would come for dinner. I’ll make your favorite.”

“Oh, meatloaf with sweet glaze and mashed potatoes?”

“You bet.”

“Yum.” She looked at Lucius. “My mom makes the best meatloaf on the planet.”

“Can’t wait to try it,” he said.

Linda hugged Lucius and whispered something to him, and he chuckled and then nodded. “I promise,” Lucius said.

“Promise what?” Sidney asked as she hugged her mom.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. Love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

She waved as her mom pulled out of the parking spot and drove down the aisle toward the exit. Lucius put his arm around her and they walked toward the front gate.

“What did she say?” she asked.

“She said welcome to the family.”

Sidney glanced at him. “Is that all she said?”

“Um, she also said that she has a rifle and a shovel, so I’d better treat you right.

Sidney barked out a laugh. “Now that sounds like my mom.”

“She’s a momma bear at heart.”

“Definitely.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Bear shifter Seneca didn't normally work security, but his bear was feeling cooped up so he'd offered to take an evening patrol and walk the grounds Saturday night after the park was closed. The sun had set and the park was illuminated with lights along the paths that wove around to the various attractions. At the aviary he heard the screech and call of the birds. At the petting zoo he heard Rhomi and Mercer talking to the baby animals as they settled them in for the night.

And at the safari tour, he stopped at the lions' paddock and saw the bonfire winking in the darkness.

He was happy that Lucius had met his soulmate and that she'd come to the VIP tour through the new email marketing program that they'd tried instead of the traditional physical coupons they'd been mailing out for the last couple years.

People were coming for the VIP tours, they just weren't anyone's soulmate.

It had been a long while since a soulmate had come through the tour before Sidney did. Even one soulmate found meant that it was worth it.

He moved on from the lions' paddock and continued his trek around the park.

Somewhere out there, his soulmate was single too.

He'd been wondering how long he'd have to wait to find her. He and his dad had come to the park when he was a kid. His dad, Marcus, hadn't wanted to stay in his family's sleuth after his soulmate—Seneca's mom—passed away, and he'd been friends with the other alphas who'd started the park. The change of scenery and new

friends had helped Seneca not feel so alone. He'd hoped to meet his soulmate when he was young like his dad had, the two of them growing up together, but that hadn't happened. And now Seneca was nearing thirty and wondering if they'd ever cross paths.

He made the final pass by the apartment complex at the back of the park, which was entirely empty now as Lucius and Sidney had moved down into the lions' private living area. Cutting through the center of the park, he reached the security office and stopped to check in with Justus, who was in charge for the evening.

"All quiet?" Justus asked, swiveling in the desk chair at the bank of monitors that showed the security footage around the park. He faced Seneca.

"Yep. I'm going to hit the outside now."

"Gotcha. Have fun."

"Oh sure, it's a blast," he said with a snort.

"Honestly, I like the walking around part better than staring at the monitors, but it was my turn tonight."

"Anything we do all the time gets to be a drudgery, even patrolling."

"True. I'll see you before your break."

"Yep."

Seneca walked out of the security office and stopped to stretch, then looked up at the night sky. A shooting star streaked across the inky darkness and he closed his eyes and made a wish, like his mom used to tell him to do when he was a kid.

I wish I'd meet my soulmate soon.

Feeling a little bit silly, but also oddly hopeful, Seneca whistled a tune and headed for the front gate to walk the perimeter of the tall stone walls around the Amazing Adventures Safari Park. Maybe his shooting-star wish would come true and this would be the year he'd find the other half of his heart.

Lucius caught the rabbit that had been set loose in the paddock for him to hunt while Sidney waited for him on a thick blanket near the bonfire. The pride was watching and waiting, and he wasn't about to make an ass of himself by not catching the furry little bugger.

After quickly killing the rabbit, he shifted back to his human form and prepared it in the shadows so that Sidney didn't have to see him do it, which was the one thing she'd asked about, worried she'd be upset to see a dead bunny.

He put his black trousers back on and then carried the metal rod with the rabbit meat skewered on it and set it over the fire to cook.

Dropping to his knees next to Sidney, he kissed her and gave her a hug.

"You did it," she said. "I was worried you wouldn't be able to be back to human for a while."

"Sometimes we're in our shifts for a few hours," Caesar said, "but sometimes our beasts want to be back with our mates right away and won't hold us in that form."

"I definitely couldn't wait to see you," Lucius said to Sidney.

"I couldn't wait too."

While the meat cooked, the pride sat around the fire and told stories about their people, their families, and past ceremonies. Sidney sat in Lucius's embrace and soaked up everything that was said with a smile on her face. He loved that she was so happy to be part of things and he especially loved that she'd reconciled with her mom, even if it had meant ruining his plans to surprise her with an engagement.

The ring was in Jupiter's pocket. Lucius was just waiting for the right moment to get it from his brother and propose to his mate.

"Look at that freaking sky," Jenni said from where she sat next to Devlin across the bonfire from Lucius and Sidney.

Everyone turned their faces upward to look at the sky that was full of stars and Lucius just knew it was the perfect time. He glanced at Jupiter, who was seated with Celeste, and his brother raised his brow in question. Lucius nodded and Jupiter pulled the box from his pocket and lobbed it to him.

"Oh, a shooting star!" Sidney said. "Make a wish, quick!"

While his sweet mate closed her eyes tight and made a silent wish, Lucius rolled to his knees and faced her, opening the box and holding it toward her.

She opened her eyes and looked at him with a smile, and then her eyes went wide when she noticed the ring. Rolling to her knees to face him, she pressed her fingertips to her lips and smiled.

"Sweetheart, you're the best thing that ever happened to me, even shifting when I was asleep because it meant that my lion was so comfortable with you. I'm sorry you weren't comfortable when you woke up like that, though."

She let out a giggle, her eyes dancing.

“I’m crazy about you. From the second I saw you in the park, I knew you were my soulmate, and I can’t tell you how lucky I feel to have you in my life.” He paused as emotion rose inside him. He’d never said what he was about to say to anyone, but he meant the words with every ounce of his being. “I love you, Sidney. Will you marry me?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. Lucius was holding his breath and even his lion was silent in his head.

She exhaled shakily as she lowered her hands, then said, “Oh, Lucius, I love you too.”

He waited for her to say yes, but she just smiled at him as tears welled in her eyes.

His brows lifted and she went, “Oh! Yes! Yes, I’ll marry you!”

He exhaled in relief and slipped the ring on her finger and they met with a kiss. The pride cheered and clapped, and Lucius hugged Sidney, his lion purring loudly.

“I think this is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life,” she whispered.

“I bet I can make you happier, sweetheart,” he whispered back.

“I’d love that.” She leaned back and grinned. “You make me so happy.”

“You make me happy too.”

When the rabbit was finished cooking, Lucius and Sidney shared it first with each other, and then with the pride.

“You’re going to hang out here?” his dad asked as the pride gathered their blankets

and readied to head back down to the private living quarters.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Remember the pride’s mating traditions include lunch together the next day, so you can join us at my house at noon.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Welcome to the family and the pride, Sidney,” he said.

“Thank you so much.”

The females hugged Sidney and the males congratulated them both, and then he and his mate were blissfully alone in the paddock.

“We’re hanging out ?” she asked, turning to face him on the thick blanket.

“Yep,” he said. He moved off into the darkness a little ways and brought back a rolling cooler and a big duffel.

“Oh, you have something planned,” she said, her voice filled with anticipation.

“Just the best for my forever girl, Sidney.” He did have something planned, and it involved driving her wild until the sun rose and then carrying her home to their bed. Where they could start the next chapter of their lives, together.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Sidney watched as Lucius set up a blow-up mattress and inflated it with a battery-operated pump. While the mattress inflated, he brought out a container of strawberries from the cooler and bottles of sparkling water. When the mattress was ready, he put a fitted sheet on it along with pillows and a light blanket from the duffel.

“What did you wish for when the shooting star went by?” he asked as he lowered himself to the mattress and patted the space next to him.

“Is that like a birthday wish, that you’re supposed to keep to yourself?”

“I...don’t know.” He laughed.

“Well,” she said, “I wished that you and I would have a long and happy life together.”

She’d been so excited when he’d told her earlier that day about the alphas offering her a job sketching in the park. She couldn’t believe how caring everyone in the park was. They were still getting to know her, but they were willing to make a place for her to do what she loved because they loved Lucius.

They were already like family to her, and cared and supported her in a way that she was still getting used to because it was so different from how she’d grown up—always needing to put others first. But after the conversation with her mom earlier and things finally coming to light between them, she felt like she was on the way to having a healthy and supportive relationship with her mom too.

She and Lucius ate the sweet strawberries and talked about the hunt and the shooting star that had led to his proposal.

The ring he'd picked out had a square diamond with a band made of two twisted pieces of white gold, one covered in tiny diamonds. The ring sparkled brilliantly in the firelight.

"Do you like it?" he asked when he noticed she was admiring the ring.

"I do, it's so pretty. I can't wait to see it in the daytime, though. I'm sure it's even more beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you, sweetheart."

She stretched out on her back and looked up at the night sky. She was wearing only a long black T-shirt with nothing underneath. He was still wearing only black pants and nothing else. The traditions of his people were fascinating to her, and they weren't even finished with the full mating ceremony; tomorrow there was another part for them to do.

Lucius settled on his side next to her and rested his hand on her stomach.

"I love you, sweetheart," he said with a gruff voice.

As he leaned over to kiss her, she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him close.

"I love you too."

The following day, she and Lucius had lunch with the pride at Caesar's, and then Lucius took her to a greenhouse in the private living area, which had tables and

hanging shelves filled with plants. At the door, he took a wicker basket off a hook and handed it to her. “First up is the flowers that we’re going to turn into bracelets.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” he said. He led her to the back of the greenhouse where a table held rows of lilies. “These are impala lilies, they’re native to Africa. The pride plants them regularly so that at any given time there are enough blooming for a mating ceremony no matter what time of year it is. Before greenhouses were used, the couple would use dried petals and carefully sew them into bracelets.”

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “And they smell amazing.”

He took a pair of shears from a nearby hook and cut several stems, laying them gently in the basket. “The number of flowers relates to how many people are in our immediate family. You have your mom and yourself, and I have myself, my dad, and my brothers, and even though I’m not in touch with my mom, she is still alive so that makes seven total flowers for each bracelet.”

“Why didn’t your mom and dad stay together? They had three kids.”

He cut the fourteenth stem and set it in the basket then hung up the shears. “In their generation, the males and females would get together just to have kids. They didn’t live together or date, it was just for procreation. They weren’t soulmates, so they never had a real relationship, and when my mom found another male she did have feelings for, she walked away from my dad and us.”

“That’s really sad she didn’t want to be part of your lives, that you didn’t get to have both parents in your life.”

“It’s the way it is for shifters sometimes. I had a great childhood even though I didn’t

have her in my life, but I'm thankful I have you so that our kids will grow up knowing the love of both parents."

"I'm glad for that too."

They moved onto the prickly pear and he showed her how to harvest it. When they were back in the house, he demonstrated how to peel the outer skin and prepare it for the ceremony, and then they braided the lilies into bracelets for her to wear for the ceremony.

They put the bracelets in the refrigerator next to the container of prickly pear. She shut the door and then turned to him. "Is this like a wedding?"

"In what way?"

"I was wondering if there was a no-touching before the ceremony rule, when you're going to mark me, like how humans don't see each other the night before the wedding."

His lion let out a low growl and he reached for her. "Absolutely not. You can touch me anytime, sweetheart."

"That goes double for you."

Lucius and Sidney dressed in the same black clothes they'd worn the night before. They met the pride in the paddock after the park was closed, with another bonfire blazing and the sky full of stars. This time, instead of a regular blanket, there was a thick fur in front of the fire and Caesar was standing in front of it.

She and Lucius knelt on the fur and faced each other.

Caesar picked up the bracelets.

“The impala lilies come from Africa, the place of our shifter ancestors. Some of us will never go there, spending the entire span of our lives in places like this—veiled in secrecy from humans. It’s important that we hold tight to the traditions so that we never forget what we are or where we came from. The fierce beasts that prowled in the darkest nights cherished their mates above all else. It is because of these fierce protective instincts, that our beasts must mark our mates, a visible claim that not only permanently imprints the male’s scent on his mate, but also scars the skin.

“Sidney, do you accept your place at Lucius’s side as his beloved mate? Do you welcome the marking that his beast will give to you tonight, knowing in your heart that this is the first night of the rest of your mated life?”

As Lucius had told her to do, she lifted her hands to his dad and said, “I accept Lucius, his beast, and his marks.”

His dad settled the bracelets on her wrists, and she pushed them up past her elbows, trailing the lilies’ essence on her skin.

Lucius opened the container of prickly pear that had been cut into bite-sized pieces. “Lucius,” his dad said, “do you swear yourself and your lion to Sidney? Do you promise to be with only her for as long as your heart beats? Do you promise to make her life as sweet as the prickly pear fruit, as lovely as the lilies, and to protect her with claw and fang as long as you live?”

“I swear,” Lucius said, feeding a bite of prickly pear to Sidney.

She fed him a piece of the sweet fruit, and then they took turns feeding each other until it was gone. Lucius set the empty bowl aside.

Caesar rested his hands on each of their heads and the pride drew closer to them.

“I welcome you, Sidney, to the pride, and I declare this night that when Lucius has marked and mated you, you will be as a lioness in the pride, honored and adored. The pride will stand with you and for you against any who would harm you. May the cubs you bear grow up to be as strong and fierce as their parents.”

The lions all roared in approval and Sidney smiled. The pride filed by them one by one, each dropping a lily on the ground next to the rug, a token of their approval and a blessing on the mating. They disappeared quickly into the darkness until it was only her and Lucius.

“We’re alone now, sweetheart,” he said gruffly.

Her heart started to beat faster and she bit her bottom lip as his eyes flashed to the amber of his lion.

There was no going back after this. She and Lucius were going to be fully mated after he marked her and that was like marriage for shifters.

She couldn’t wait.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Lucius had to rein his cat in because he wanted to mark her immediately, to know that she'd wear his marks on her neck forever and bind them together in a way that was stronger than a marriage.

Above them, the stars were shining in the dark sky and the moon was partially hidden behind clouds, but they had plenty of light from the fire, and he thought she'd never looked more beautiful as they stripped each other on the fur in front of the fire and drove each other wild.

Her pleasure came first and it always would, because nothing made him happier than hearing her cry out his name and shudder in his arms.

When she'd crested her first climax, he slipped from between her thighs and gently rolled her to her stomach and pulled her hips up. She spread her knees apart and groaned as he thrust into her. He froze for a moment at this most perfect moment, with her pussy clutching him as she rolled through her climax. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled at him, and then she wiggled her hips a little and he lost every ounce of self-control he had.

He only had one thought: make her come again.

He tilted her hips and pulled from her, then slammed back in again, gritting his teeth and pushing away his desire to come himself until she'd had one more amazing climax.

As he thrust into her hard and fast, he reached for her shoulders and pulled her up to cradle her against him, slamming his hips to hers and holding her with his arm

banded under her breasts. She gripped his arms and tilted her head to the side, exposing the length of her neck.

He slid his free hand down her sweat-slicked stomach and touched her clit. She jolted in his arms as he played with her. She moaned as he rubbed her clit, and he felt the moment that she tipped over the edge into pleasure. When she was at the height of her climax, her nails digging into his arm as she cried out his name, he let his fangs out and sank them into her neck.

The connection that bloomed between them was nothing short of miraculous and he felt so close to her, so deeply bonded, that he couldn't stop himself from following her into bliss.

Drawing his fangs from her neck, he scored his tongue and gently wiped his blood in the wound to ensure it would scar permanently. He growled happily as wave after wave of pleasure poured over him like hot water and he was overwhelmed by the smell of the impala lilies and her sweet scent, and how crazy he was for her that he could have shifted right at that moment and roared his happiness.

But he didn't want to shift right now, he wanted to hold his sweetheart and tell her how much he loved her.

So he did.

He eased them both down to the fur and tucked her against him, gently kissing her forehead.

“Sidney, I love you so much, you're so special to me. I feel like I'm seeing in colors now, when everything was gray before.”

She tilted her face up to smile at him, her eyes shining with happiness. “I feel so connected to you now. When you bit me, it was like I could feel your lion.”

His heart was pounding and his lion was purring. “It’s exactly how I feel too. Did it hurt when I bit you? Sometimes lions mark with their claws on their soulmate’s hips, but I’ve heard that hurts a lot more and the healing can take longer.”

She touched her collarbone underneath the mark. “It stung a bit, but I was riding a pretty good high from your talented fingers.”

He grinned. “Good, I didn’t want it to hurt much.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” she said. She snuggled against him and rested her head on his biceps. “Are we sleeping out here again? Because I kind of need to pee. And also this fur isn’t as comfy as the blow-up mattress.”

“We can go back to the house,” he said. “I’m glad you want to, because there’s a rock under the fur that’s digging into my hip.”

She giggled.

They cuddled under the stars for a while, and then they dressed and put out the fire with the bucket of sand kept nearby. After gathering their things, he tucked the rolled-up fur under his arm and took her hand. “Do you feel different?”

“I feel like a lion’s mate.”

“You well and truly are.”

“How about you?”

“I feel like the luckiest male on the planet.”

“So do we have to go anywhere tomorrow?” she asked as they reached the maintenance shed.

“Nope, why?”

“Because I’d like to sleep in and then tire ourselves out by christening every room in the house.”

His lion loved that idea a hell of a lot.

Letting out a chuckle, he closed the shed door behind them. “I think that might be the best idea I’ve ever heard. So are we starting in the bedroom?”

She wiggled her brows at him. “I was thinking the kitchen, but we can figure that all out tomorrow. For now, I just wanted you to know one thing.”

“What’s that, sweetheart?” He held open the door in the floor for her, and as she passed by him to go down under the park to their private living area, she gave him a sweet smile, her eyes filled with love.

“I’m so happy I met you.”

“Me too, Sidney. Me too.”

Thank you so much for reading LUCIUS! I hope you enjoyed hanging out with the lions at the safari park! The next book in the series features bear shifter Seneca as he searches for his soulmate and will be out in September!

And I’ve got amazing news! I’ve written a spin-off series for the stallion shifters featured in previous Were Zoo books, and the first one - CREW - will be out May 2!