



The Lion's Reluctant Mate (Monsters of New York #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Alice doesn't even like gin, but her therapist's advice to tackle her social anxiety leads her to step into the Gin Room. For thirty minutes, she resolves to sit alone and prove she can handle it. What she doesn't expect is to meet Axel, a man whose intensity is as alluring as it is terrifying.

At forty years old, lion shifter Axel never thought he'd find his mate. But there she is, his baby girl. Alice awakens every primal instinct he has, but her fear of the unknown world he belongs to forces him to tread carefully. For him, the stakes couldn't be higher: he's not just fighting for her love, but also her trust.

As the pull between them grows undeniable, Alice finds herself torn. Can she overcome her doubts and embrace the passion Axel offers, or will the secrets of his world drive her away forever?

Total Pages (Source): 26

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

Alice hesitated at the entrance to the gin bar.

Unlike other bars in the area, this one didn't have a flashy neon sign advertising what it was.

Instead, embossed in fancy gold letters and lit by a soft yellow glow, the words, THE GIN ROOM, invited the customer inside .

The glass windows at either side allowed a distorted glimpse into the interior.

She couldn't tell if the venue was packed or empty.

Hannah, from whom she'd heard about the place, had sworn that on a Thursday evening it tended to be a light crowd, especially if they had just opened.

She'd told her it was the place to go to if she wanted to unwind after a hard day at work, and practice being around others.

The Gin Room is on the high end of the spectrum and has the best gin variety in town at reasonable prices. You can't ask for more.

Taking a deep breath, Alice opened the door.

She was greeted with soft jazzy music playing in the background and the scent of sandalwood.

She looked around. The place was empty except for the bartender behind the counter

and the waiter lighting the candles on the low round tables, each surrounded by burgundy velvet chairs.

For an instant, she wished she hadn't come alone, but she shook the thought away.

This was why she was here. Her therapist had told her she had to go alone to places and try to enjoy the moment, regardless of people around her.

While she was there, she could read a book or take some notes on her feelings, but she had to stay for at least thirty minutes.

Swallowing hard, she approached the counter and took a seat at one of the stools.

"Gin and tonic, please," she said. How many times had she rehearsed what she was going to say?

"Welcome to The Gin Room." The waiter, a tall lanky guy dressed in a white shirt with a black vest flashed a grin at her, the light hit the flashy earring on his lower lip. "Any specific gin? We've got Bombay, Tanqueray, Beefeater—"

"Um, the pink one?" she interrupted him before she became overwhelmed with the options.

"Pink one it is. Gordon's okay?"

"Yes."

He nodded, turned his back on her, and set about getting the beverage.

She let out a sigh of relief. She was sure her therapist wouldn't be pleased about the fact she'd come at the least busy moment, but hey, she was here.

Right? Surely, that had to count for something.

She clasped her hands together to stop from tapping on the counter.

Suddenly, the door banged open. She turned her head, and her jaw dropped.

A man, well over six-feet tall stood at the entrance, two giggling girls at his side, hanging onto each arm.

Alice blinked. She was stunned by the lack of clothing on the women, which was in no way appropriate for a place like this, but she was more stunned by the man ushering them silent with a gaze.

He was handsome. Well-built but not in a brawny way, he wore what she had no doubt was an expensive perfectly tailored suit.

His hair was on the longer side, reaching below his shoulders in reddish-brown salt-pepper waves.

He walked into the venue as if the place belonged to him, his presence seeming to take over the space and squeezing the air out of her lungs as if he were physically holding her.

His gaze fell on her. She hurried to look away, her cheeks burning with shame.

The unwelcome yet familiar ball of anxiety began to form in her belly.

This was why she didn't go to places alone.

People saw her and she didn't want to be seen.

She wanted to be invisible. Thankfully at that moment the bartender came back with her drink.

He must have noticed something in her expression because he gave her another goofy grin.

“That’s Axel Sala, he is part owner of the bar, which is why he can come in here with whomever he pleases.

” He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

“If it were up to me, I wouldn’t allow this display, but he’s the boss.

In any case, don’t worry about him because he has a booth and his office at the back, so he won’t bother you. He’s discreet.”

He winked at her, and she managed to make a noncommittal noise at the back of her throat in response. Seemingly satisfied, the waiter walked away. Alice sighed. Her therapist wouldn’t approve. Her voice rang in her head, similar to the voice of her conscience.

You had the chance to start a conversation. Why didn’t you take it?

And say what? Axel Sala was a hunk? That she agreed about the women? That she wished she had the confidence to be one of them? Ugh. She glanced back to where he’d stood. He was gone, which was a good thing. Right?

She picked up the glass and took a sip. Some of it spilled down her chin onto her shirt, making her realize her hands were shaking.

“Fuck.” She sat it down and dabbed at her chest with a napkin. “Easy now,” she

murmured.

She shut her eyes and attempted to take slow deep breaths, but the image of Axel kept dancing at the edge of her consciousness.

She absently wondered what color his eyes were.

Blue? Brownish like his hair? She couldn't quite tell where she was sitting, but the word "fiery" kept popping into her brain.

No one had eyes like flames, though, unless.

.. She bit her lip, opened her eyes, and hurriedly took another shaky sip of her drink.

Unless they were a shifter. She rubbed the groove on the counter. Shifters.

They'd recently come out into the light and apparently had been among them forever, but she didn't know any and wasn't sure she wanted to.

There were rumors. Hundreds. Thousands. They were beastly, beyond humanity. They hunted people down. She tried to ignore them, and one couldn't help but wonder if there was some credence to it all.

If Axel were a shifter, she wouldn't be surprised.

He was too tall and too good looking for a normal human being.

He was the kind of guy who would never see her, the kind who would bully her—like the ones in school and college.

Her heart picked up its pace and she groaned.

She was supposed to be writing, working on her social anxiety, not musing about some stranger with two dollops at his side and remembering the past.

“Enough,” she scolded herself. “This is the present. Stay here.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out her notebook and pen. Opening it onto a blank page, she began to write.

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A xel watched her from the back, trying to ignore the dumb bimbos he'd brought with him for entertainment.

Granted, they hadn't been annoying when he'd picked them up, but now that she was here, everything else had lost its luster.

It was interesting because at his age he'd never imagined he'd meet her, and yet there was no doubt.

The animal within him was as clear as daylight. It was her. His mate.

He snorted. What was he going to do with a mate?

Especially one who seemed to be afraid of her own shadow, if the way her heartbeat was any indication.

His proclivities were gray at best, and she seemed, well, innocent, naive, like a recently picked puppy from a litter.

Curious, but terribly afraid. He would have to show her there was nothing to be afraid of.

Not him. Not the world. He would have to teach her what he liked.

What if she didn't like it? The unwelcome thought entered his mind, and he snarled.

That was not an option. He was too old for change.

Axel took her in. At another time in his life, he wouldn't have given her a second glance.

She was pretty but she wasn't exuberant.

Sweet. The look of a good girl. His heart skipped a beat.

His cock throbbed. Fuck. He was just looking at her and already diving into the fantasy.

When was the last time that had happened?

How would she feel about being his good girl?

Would she let him strip not only her clothes but also her layers of pent-up emotions, digging deep until he reached the bone?

He could fully make her his, and free her from the constraints that held her back.

He clenched his fists. His heart beat in his chest like never before.

Excitement coursed through him. The idea of making her his thrilled him as much as if he were about to go hunting.

He smiled. Then again, wasn't that what he was going to do? Hunt her. Catch her and eat her up.

He cocked his head. She was writing furiously in a notebook.

Was she a writer? He could play with a writer, they tended to have active imaginations but were also a bit insecure.

She didn't seem like a writer, though. She was wearing office attire.

Pantsuit, conservative blazer, and a white shirt.

Her hair was in a ponytail and her reading glasses kept slipping down her nose.

"Axel, join us," he heard one of the bimbos call out to him.

He turned around and surveyed them. He had chosen them for their looks.

Young. Skimpily dressed. Tiny waists. Big tits.

Not too bright. He shook his head and glanced back at his prey.

She was so different. Yes, she was young, but her physique was not what he normally chose.

She was well-endowed but nothing extraordinary.

Except for the perfectly plump and ample curves.

His cock twitched as the image of him pummeling into her and holding her from those love handles entered his mind.

He sighed contentedly. He was screwed, and he'd never welcomed something as much as he looked forward to this. He took a step forward. He was never the man to say no to a challenge. It was time to act.

Page 3

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A lice scribbled into her notebook. She had successfully managed to do what her therapist ordered.

She was sitting at a bar. Check. She had spoken to the waiter and ordered a drink.

Check. She had made eye contact with that man she couldn't get out of her mind.

Bonus check. She had sat here writing and sipping her drink, alone, for at least thirty minutes. Check.

She glanced at her smartwatch and cursed.

Damn thing had run out of battery earlier in the day.

She rummaged in her purse for her phone.

Fifteen minutes? It had only been fifteen minutes.

How was that possible? She glanced at her drink.

It was almost empty. She rubbed her temples.

Okay. She could do this. She could sit here alone for another quarter-hour.

No one was looking at her. Heck, the place was practically empty except for a few people.

This wasn't their busiest time. She was safe.

She wasn't being paid attention to. She was just another customer enjoying a drink.

Another person in the multitude. So why did she feel as if someone was staring at her?

"It's your anxiety." Ugh, she could hear her psychologist lecturing her— "People are too busy minding their own business to worry about you."

Okay. She could do this.

She set an alarm on her phone and stuffed it back in her purse. Fifteen more minutes.

She glanced at her notebook and frowned.

She had mentioned him. Repeatedly. Which meant her therapist was going to ask her about it.

Her cheeks burned. She didn't want to talk about him.

It had been a brief glimpse. A moment her heart had fluttered.

He wasn't her type. She didn't have a type.

But if she did, it wouldn't be him. He was too big, too dominant.

He'd eat her up and swallow her whole. She picked up her pen.

Nope. She preferred to let it remain a fantasy.

“What are you writing?”

She jumped in her chair. She dropped her pen, but large hands grabbed it before it hit the ground and placed it back on the counter. Slowly, she turned around. Her heart picked up its rhythm.

He was here.

Her mouth dried. She frantically searched her brain for something to say but words eluded her.

Why was he standing so close? His perfume wafted up her nose.

Woodsy, yet spicy. She found his gaze. She had been right in describing his eyes as fiery.

They were the color of molten amber, not brown or green, but a warm mix which reflected the light and gave the impression of being molten fire.

“Are you okay? I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Had his voice lowered? It echoed within her, developing an ache which spread across her chest. She tore her gaze away—which was a mistake. They landed on his lips, framed by a carefully groomed beard. They stood out like a cherry atop a decadent piece of cake.

“Look at me, Baby Girl.”

Her gaze lifted back to his eyes as her brain processed what he’d called her.

“I’m not your Baby Girl,” she managed to say. The words came out in a whisper so

low she didn't think he could have possibly heard her.

"Not yet, you're not." He grinned. And the sight made something within her snap. Desire flushed her skin, and a tremble coursed through her.

"Please," she murmured.

He took a step closer. He wasn't touching her but he didn't need to. She could feel herself moistening, her nipples hardening beneath her shirt.

"Please what, Baby Girl?"

"Please, step." She wanted to gesture with her hand, but her fingers were glued to her sides.

"Closer?"

He took another miniscule step. He didn't have much room after all. His body bumped against her knee sending an electric shock through her. A growl-like sound came from somewhere. Whether it was him or her she couldn't say.

"Back" she murmured.

"What's your name, Baby Girl?" He touched her knee.

She shook her head. It was too much. He was too close. What did he want from her? A man like him would never notice someone like her. Anxiety came spiraling in, creating a tight knot in her stomach. Nausea assaulted her. She was going to be sick.

He must have noticed because this time he did take a small step back.

“Breathe,” he demanded. “Through your nose, and exhale through your mouth. Slowly. That’s it.”

He gently grasped her hand and placed it on the counter.

“I am here. My hand on top of yours. Warm. You are touching the counter. Do you feel the wood? The small indentations? The stickiness? Ew...”

She chuckled. Tears prickled her eyes.

“That’s it, Baby Girl.”

“My name is Alice.”

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The animal within him jumped for joy. Alice.

He had gotten a name. It had almost cost her a panic attack but there had been progress.

When he approached the girl, Alice, he thought it would be a piece of cake.

He hadn't considered this vulnerability, this total fear.

His protective instincts had flared even as his libido had awoken.

If there had been any doubt she was his mate, it had

dissipated as soon as he approached her.

His whole being sang like a violin string at the proximity of her, and he could sense it was mutual.

Perhaps that was what had triggered her reaction.

He took a quick glance at her notebook. No.

By the words scribbled, there was more. It wouldn't be difficult to seduce her, the difficulty would lie in gaining her love and affection.

It would be a slow process, one he hadn't savored in a long time.

One he hadn't realized he yearned for until now. Until Alice.

"I'm Axel."

She nodded. "Nice to meet you, I guess."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Alice." He sat down on the stool next to hers but didn't remove his hand. He was dying to entwine their fingers together, but he had to act slowly, or he'd spook her again.

"What are you doing here by yourself?"

"Um, writing. Having a drink. What happened to your companions?"

Her cheeks flushed as she seemed to realize the inappropriateness of her question.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. It's none of my business."

"It's a fair question. They are in the back entertaining themselves. They don't need me. They just wanted to come into the bar."

"Oh."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

He smiled.

"Baby Girl."

"I'm not a baby," she protested.

“You are to me. I’m forty.”

“You don’t look—” Her cheeks reddened.

“A day over forty,” he chuckled. “Lying doesn’t become you. I know you can see the gray in this light.”

“You still look young.”

Axel laughed. He debated what his next move should be. Be brazen and hope for the best, or wait to see if she said something? She seemed to be at a loss for words, hastily taking a sip from her almost empty glass.

“Would you like to go somewhere with better lighting to see them?”

Her eyes widened and she hastened to remove her hand from under his.

Too fast.

At that moment, something in her purse started to vibrate and jingle.

“I’m sorry. No. I must go. I ... um, it was nice meeting you.” She scrambled out of her seat and hurried to grab her belongings. “Thank you for—”

“Give me your number.”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m not that type of ... um ... person. I need to go,” she repeated.

“Alice.”

She paused briefly and glanced at him. Her cheeks flushed red. Her pulse beat

frantically in her neck. Axel pressed his lips together. He had to let her leave, didn't he?

“Bye.”

She almost ran out of the bar. He watched her leave, slightly stupefied at his inability to keep her with him.

What was he going to do now? He ran his fingers through his hair and glanced at the empty stool next to him.

His gaze fell on the floor. A smile flitted across his lips.

He bent over and picked up the notebook.

In her haste she must have dropped it on the floor instead of into her bag.

Now, if she was the type of girl he suspected, she would have written her address somewhere.

He flipped the pages to the front. Bingo.

Name and address. He grinned. His Baby Girl was not escaping him anytime soon.

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A lice didn't run, but she walked fast. Her heart was beating a mile a minute in her chest, and she couldn't get rid of the desire coursing through her.

She'd never wanted to fuck someone as much as she wanted that man.

What was with her? She wasn't that type of person.

She didn't go weak in the knees at the sight of a man.

Yet, Axel. Axel. She stopped to catch her breath.

She glanced back. Was he following her? He was nowhere in sight, and she let out a breath she hadn't been aware of holding. He'd given up.

"Good," she murmured. Though a sense of disappointment lodged in her chest. Why? She bit her lip, adjusted her purse, and continued on her way. Why was she disappointed? Damn therapist making her analyze her every move.

Why was she disappointed? Because she desired him.

And she'd never had a man like him show any interest in her.

Really, men hardly showed interest in her at all.

She'd never been the popular girl or the one who attracted the hunk.

She'd had one boyfriend in college and that had not ended well.

It had lasted a year, and he'd belittled her the first chance he had.

Axel was different. He spooked her in a way which was unfamiliar yet enticing. Hadn't she told her therapist she wished she were more brazen with the opposite sex? She sighed. She should have stayed. She should have taken the risk. Her therapist would be as disappointed in her as she was.

She stopped at the entrance to the subway and glanced back.

She could return. She could find him there and give him her number.

She shook her head. Who was she kidding?

She'd blown her chance. If she went back, he'd think she was an absolute nutcase.

One moment wanting one thing and the next changing her mind.

Unstable. Indecisive. Insecure. Besides, she didn't have the guts.

"Bye, Axel," she murmured.

Head down, she entered the station. There was no going back.

She rushed to catch the train. Entering the wagon, she found a seat and entertained herself by doom scrolling through TikTok.

Somehow, the algorithm had picked up on her mood and kept showing her videos of therapists giving advice on how to act if you met someone you liked.

She shut the device off and closed her eyes, attempting to stop the myriad of thoughts racing in her brain.

Axel's eyes. His grin. His smooth voice which seemed to caress every inch of her skin.

Squirming in her seat, she switched to her phone again.

Finally, she arrived at her stop. She walked to her apartment and hurried up the three flights of stairs.

She couldn't wait to change into something more comfortable and bury her nose in a book so she could get rid of all thoughts of Axel. She turned the last corner and gasped.

The sound echoed in her ears.

"Axel."

He was here. Dressed in a leather jacket and holding a motorcycle helmet in one hand, he grinned at her. His presence at her doorstep was even more commanding than before, the small hallway suffocating her. She wasn't sure if she wanted to run into his arms or back outside.

"What? How?"

"If you'd agreed to give me your number, I wouldn't have had to track you down."

"But this. It isn't ... I should," she mumbled incoherently. "Call the police."

He pulled out a familiar looking book from inside his jacket.

"You forgot this."

“My notebook.”

“That’s how I found where you lived.”

Relief flooded her. At least there was an explanation. This time she did move forward. She reached for her book, but he lifted it out of her reach.

“Not so fast, Baby Girl.”

“It’s my—”

“Personal belonging. I know, and as tempting as it was, I resisted reading anything, except the address and the first page. As soon as I saw how personal it was, I stopped.” Sincerity seemed to lace his words and she couldn’t help but believe him.

“Thank you,” she said.

“That’s more like it.” He smiled. His eyes twinkled. “Now, as I have saved your notebook from the hands of an ill-intentioned reader—our barman is not the most discreet person—I think it’s only fair you give me a reward.”

“A reward?” Her pulse leapt.

He nodded.

“What kind of reward?”

“First, you’re going to invite me inside.”

Her heartbeat drummed in her ears. Invite him inside? They would be alone. The fantasies she had refused to entertain on her way home returned with full-blown

force. Fear clawed its hands on the edge of her consciousness.

“I don’t live alone,” she said.

“No one answered when I rang,” he pointed out.

“Oh, they must be out.” The familiar knot in her stomach reappeared. How could she avoid this? Did she want to?

“Then what are we waiting for?” He cocked an eyebrow and moved to one side, giving her room to open the door.

She glanced at him. The knot moved lower, changing its location.

Her pussy throbbed. She didn’t want to send him away again.

This was her second chance. Rummaging through her purse, she found the keys.

He could hurt her. Anxiety reared its ugly head again. Mock her. He couldn’t want someone like her, could he? She didn’t know him. He could be a killer for all she knew. She wasn’t the type of girl to bring a stranger home.

The pressure of his palm on the small of her back brought her back to the moment.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Alice. Open the door. You can do it.”

His soothing tone boosted her confidence. He wanted her or he wouldn’t be here. She pushed her insecurities aside and finally inserted the key into the lock.

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A xel didn't want to remove his hand. For goodness' sake, he wanted to touch her actual skin, to run his fingertips across every inch of her body. He yearned to demand she kneel before him and suck him off.

He was well aware that for the time being, it would have to remain a fantasy.

He hadn't read her notebook. He'd been truthful.

Reading one page had been enough. His Baby Girl had anxiety, and everything scared her.

The last thing he wanted was to join that list of frightening things.

No, he had to gain her trust, to show her he would be her support, not something to flee from.

He had no idea how he was going to do that without fucking her brains out, but he had to try.

They entered the small apartment, and he reluctantly let go of her as she switched on the lights.

"It's small," she said apologetically. "New York is expensive and—"

"There's no need to apologize. I lived in the city too and I was young and broke once."

“Um ... you were?”

He laughed.

“I haven’t always been forty.” He made his way to her worn gray couch. Setting some throw pillows to one side, he sat down. “Yes, I paid my way through college and then got into, er, art consulting before I made enough money to open the bar.”

“How long has it been open?”

“A few years. I met, some ... um,” he hesitated unsure if he should tell her.

“Other shifters,” he finally said. Honesty was the best policy and there was no point in denying the truth from his mate.

His heart skipped several beats as he waited for her to say something.

He could sense her unease. Her gaze darted left and right and the vein in her neck throbbed in quick pulses.

“You must have questions,” he gently prodded her.

“I don’t want to be rude.”

“You won’t be.” He smiled encouragingly.

“What are you?” Her gaze lifted to his and dropped just as quickly. Her cheeks reddened and she hurried to busy herself picking up the contents of the coffee table.

“A lion.”

The glass she had been holding smashed into a thousand pieces.

She cursed quietly and bent over to retrieve it.

He stood and placed his palm on top of her head.

She froze. Desire coursed through him. One pull and she'd be at his crotch, one kiss away.

Not yet, you pervert. He sunk his fingers in her hair and bit back a growl of satisfaction.

Tugging lightly, he forced her to lift her head. She met his gaze, her eyes wide.

“Don’t be afraid, Baby Girl.” Slowly, he crouched so they were eye to eye. “I’m not going to hurt you, Alice. Never.” He released her hair and slid his hand down to cup her cheek. Grasping her chin, he kept her eyes pinned to his. “Tell me what is on your mind.”

She tried to shake her head, but his grip was tight. “No,” she said hoarsely.

“Tell me,” he demanded, lowering his voice an octave. Fear danced in her gentle brown eyes. “I will not judge you.” She shut her eyes, but he’d already seen tears gathering at the corners.

“You won’t?” she murmured.

“Never,” he said vehemently.

A long sigh escaped her body, and she softened in his grip. Somehow, she trusted him and it made his chest burst with pride.

“You’re the king of the jungle, and kings—lions—always have many, um, lionesses.”

“It might be so in the animal world, but we are something different. We have mates, Baby Girl, for life. No other is as alluring to us besides our mate. And then we have family.” He hesitated. “Our pack. Our pride.”

“There are more like you?”

“Yes. I have a pride.”

“Oh.”

“They are there when you need them. They have your back. We work together, but in the end, we are like any other family.”

“I see.”

“What about your family?”

She finally looked at him. He released her and she resumed picking up the pieces of glass.

“They’re nice. I love them. They’re family.”

“But?” he encouraged her to continue.

She gave him a fleeting smile and his heart almost burst from within its constraints. The animal within him purred, pleased with the progress.

“They’re critical. Nothing is good enough for them.”

“So, you’ve been brought up with the idea you should be perfect.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“No one is perfect.”

“That’s what my therapist says.” She snorted.

“But you are practically perfect for me.”

Her gaze reminded him of a trapped prey, wide-eyed and desperate. She scrambled to her feet.

“I’m going to throw this out,” she declared.

He allowed her to go to the kitchen alone.

Standing back up, he sat on the couch again and took in the petite apartment.

It was cozy, with some photos of the two girls who shared it on the wall along with a large-sized print of Henry Matisse’s, *Cat With Red Fish* .

He wondered if she was an art enthusiast. If she was, she’d love his place.

Patience, Axel.

They had made progress but there was no way she’d agree to go there, yet.

“Would you like something to drink?” she called from the kitchen.

“A glass of water would be nice.”

He heard her opening and closing cupboards, no doubt taking time to calm herself. Finally, she returned with two glasses of water in her hand.

“Here.” Just as she approached him, she tripped, sending part of the water splashing over him.

“I’m so sorry,” she exclaimed. She stared, obviously embarrassed and apparently unsure of what to do.

Axel chuckled. He took the glasses from her and placed them on the coffee table.

“Show me to the bathroom.”

She nodded and hurried down the hall. He followed.

“Here. I’ll get a clean towel.” He entered the blue-tiled bathroom.

His shirt was wet, but it was by no means drenched.

Nonetheless, a devious plan began to form in his mind.

His beast mewled in satisfaction. He undid the buttons on his shirt and took it off.

He didn’t need to turn around to know she had returned. Her gasp filled the space.

“Here,” she murmured. She stuck out the towel at arm’s length. He took a step forward coming into contact with the material.

“You got me wet. You should dry me.”

“What?” She stared at him but didn’t run away. Progress.

He grasped her wrist, gliding her hand across his chest. Her fingers flexed.

Her lips parted. He slid the towel across his body.

Her gaze became hooded. Her heart pounded.

Intense. Wild. It called to him. His cock hardened.

Her scent wafted up his nose. Desire spiraled through him.

The beast within him purred. More. More.

“That’s it,” he cooed.

Taking her other hand, he pressed her open palm to his pec. She didn’t resist. A low whisper of a moan escaped her lips. He growled in response. She glanced at him.

“This—”

“Is very good,” he praised her. “Continue, Baby Girl.”

Her gaze dropped again, and she focused on his chest. Slowly he released his grip on her. To his delight, she continued to caress him, almost like in a trance. He touched her shoulder, and she froze.

“Don’t stop, Baby Girl.”

“You have so many tattoos.” Her hand fell to her side.

He swore at himself for his impatience. He should have continued to let her explore at her own pace.

“Yes. They paint a picture of who I am. This one”—he pointed to the half-geometric lion below his heart—“is the symbol of my pride.”

“And that one?”

She pointed to the triskelion.

He frowned. He could lie, but what was the point?

“My tendencies in bed. BDSM.”

Her cheeks reddened so fast he thought she was going to faint.

“Oh, wow. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He grabbed her before she could run away and pulled her right against him.

Her gasp was music to his ears, but the fact she didn’t try to get away from him was solace to his soul.

He gently grasped her chin, forcing her gaze to him.

Her pupils were dilated and her lips parted.

Axel pushed the urge to kiss her to one side. Not yet.

“Have you ever tried BDSM?”

“No.”

“Would you like to?”

She averted her gaze. “No.”

“You’re lying, Alice. Don’t lie to me, Baby Girl.” He lowered his tone to a deep whisper. “I will always know.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A lice's heart was going to come out of her chest. She was pressed against him so she could feel every curve and hardness in his body.

Her pussy was soaked, pulsing with the need to be filled.

But it was his gaze and the tone of his voice that kept her captive.

She couldn't look away. She couldn't lie to him.

She believed him when he said he'd always known.

"I have fantasized about it," she admitted.

"Good girl," he rumbled. Her chest tightened at the words. "How did that make you feel?" he asked.

She swallowed hard. "Good," she admitted.

"Do you want more?"

Heat traveled from her head to her toes.

"Yes," she said.

His gaze lit up like a rekindled flame.

"I'm going to kiss you," he said, softly. "You're going to accept it."

She nodded.

“I want you to say it. Yes.” He seemed to hesitate. “Yes, Daddy.”

Fire coursed through her. She could no longer tell if it was mortification or desire. She wet her lips. His gaze darkened. Pleasure coursed through her.

“Yes, Daddy.”

The words came out with surprising ease. A smile flitted over Axel’s lips, and a sense of calm washed over her. He would take care of her. He would protect her. Axel.

He brushed his lips against hers. A moan lodged at the back of her throat from the mere contact.

“Alice, Baby Girl,” he murmured.

He pressed them to her mouth again, this time more forcefully. She whimpered.

“ Alice, are you home ? Alice ! OMG, you’re not going to believe this .”

Her world shattered at the sound of the familiar voice.

The door slammed shut and the clapping of heels on the floor filled her senses.

A sliver of fear and shame ran through her.

She veered around but wasn’t fast enough.

Her roommate had already seen them. Axel, shirtless in her bathroom.

She was in his arms, all but ready to kiss him, no doubt bright red.

“Alice, what is going on?” Nessa practically shrieked.

Her friend stared at them from the doorway, her jaw almost on the floor.

“Nessa,” she shrieked out the name. “You’re...”

Nessa grinned.

“I’m so sorry,” she fussed. “I didn’t realize you had a visitor. I’ll go.” She backed out of the hallway chuckling.

“No!” Alice cried, struggling out of Axel’s grip.

He released her immediately. Reality came crashing down around her.

The knot in her stomach returned with fury.

She was in her apartment with a virtual stranger, and they had been about to kiss.

Her skin burned and a tremble coursed through her body.

Her roommate had caught them in the act.

What would she think? She wanted the floor to swallow her whole.

Instead, words spewed out of her mouth without control.

“Nessa. Axel was just about to leave. He came to return my notebook. I left it at the bar and then he asked for some water, and I spilled it on him, and I was bringing him

a towel. We hardly know each other. Nothing is happening. He ... it wasn't—"

She stiffened at the warm touch of his fingertips on her shoulders, but the flow of words died. She stared at Nessa, who stood next to the couch with a big grin on her face.

"It's okay, Alice," she said. "I'll leave."

"No." Axel interjected. "I'll go." He squeezed her shoulder. "Breathe," he whispered. As if on command she let out a long breath. "Alice, you will see me to the door."

"Yes, of course," she replied. A moment later, she realized it hadn't been a question.

He walked past without another word. Alice stared after him. Longing assaulted her system, taking her by surprise. She didn't want him to leave. Did she? Nessa nudged her on the ribs.

"Are you sure you don't want me to leave?" she whispered. She winked at her. "You never bring anyone over, and you looked busy."

"Yes, it's fine. Shut up," she replied coarsely.

Axel stood at the door waiting for her. Turning to Nessa, he extended his hand. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Nessa, albeit in strange circumstances."

Her friend flushed and a flash of jealousy ran through her. Alice frowned. She crossed her arms over her chest. Had he done something to her?

"Alice."

He extended his palm to her. Hesitantly, she took it. Bending over it, he kissed the top

of her hand. His lips were soft and gentle. There was no pressure, no demand. He glanced up at her, his fiery eyes piercing.

“We shall stay in touch.” He didn’t say it aloud, but he didn’t need to.

The words “Baby Girl” lingered in the air.

Heat infused every cell in her body and the urge to tell him to stay crossed her mind.

She pushed it away and pulled back her hand, aware that Nessa was still standing a few feet behind her.

“Bye.”

Giving them both a brief nod, he picked up his helmet and walked out. As soon as the door shut, Nessa turned to her.

“Alice, what the fuck?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry,” she began to apologize though she wasn’t even sure what she was doing it for.

“Girl, I know you haven’t had anyone over, but him? He could be your father. Did you see the gray in his hair? I mean, he’s a hunky silver fox, to be fair, but how old is he? Fifty?”

“Forty.”

“Forty!” Nessa kicked off her shoes. “He was no doubt looking to take advantage of you. A sweet, innocent, twenty-something. Those men are predators. You should be more careful.”

“Yes,” she said.

Nessa continued ranting without paying attention to her. “Did you go to that bar Hannah told you about? Was that where you met him? I knew that bar was fishy. A gin bar? I mean, come on, that’s for old people.”

“I…” Alice was at a loss for words. The gray in his hair. Yes, he had a few silver strands in the reddish mane he sported, but Nessa was taking it too far. Wasn’t she? “He—”

“I know you haven’t been on a date in ages with your anxiety and everything, but I’m sure you can do better than that.

” Her friend walked to the living room and threw herself on the couch.

“I’m going to take you out to a real party to meet some men our age.

You really need to go out more anyway. Didn’t your therapist say so?

I’m sure she would disapprove of the gray-haired grandpa. ”

She nodded automatically, but Alice wanted to scream.

“Nessa!” she wanted to cry out. “It’s none of your business who I date.

You’re always dating deadbeat losers and getting your heart broken.

” Instead, she remained quiet. Her heart racing and her palm and lips tingling where Axel had touched them.

She glanced at the door. She wanted him to return and finish what they had started.

This had been her second chance, and she had blown it again, allowing shame to control her life.

The crushing weight of reality settled on her shoulders.

She'd blown it. Once again, instead of taking the plunge she'd panicked and sent what she wanted away, missing out on something which could have been amazing.

“And even if it wasn't, at least you would have tried . ” Her therapist's voice seemed to whisper in her ear once more.

Well, it was too late now. He was gone. The moment had passed and would never repeat itself. She fought back the tears and struggled to pay attention to Nessa who was going on and on about her date that night with a financial analyst who was apparently loaded.

Focus, Alice.

His parting words snaked their way into her mind. “We'll be in touch.” Her heart skipped a beat. Would he fulfill his promise? Would she have another chance?

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A xel rode his motorcycle through the city.

The warm wind swept at him, and he bit back a frustrated growl.

He needed to get away from the asphalt jungle and go for a run, let out some of the pent-up anger and frustration his lion was holding in.

It had taken all his control not to grab Alice and kiss her senselessly in that bathroom.

He'd managed to hold back and then her friend had come barging in.

Friend? He snorted. The young woman was very clearly a narcissist, only interested in hearing the sound of her own voice.

If she had been a true friend, she would have kept her opinion to herself or at least until Alice had asked her for it.

Unfortunately, his Baby Girl was too afraid of others to stand up for herself.

Her fear kept her from enjoying life to the fullest. He didn't know where it stemmed from, but he would do anything to take it away from her and make her live.

He skipped his usual exit to his city apartment since it was being renovated and instead continued onto the highway, heading to his pride lands.

There, he would run and relax for a bit and come up with a new plan to conquer his mate.

One hour later, he parked in his driveway.

He didn't bother going into the house. He rid himself of his clothes.

Sweat coated his body. He was so ready for this.

The transformation was painless, the limbs readjusting, fur growing at the speed of light.

He'd barely completed the shift, he set off at a run, enjoying the feel of the earth on his paws.

This wasn't the savannah, but he'd take it over anything else.

Here, they had the privacy they needed to be who they really were.

Here, at home, they could shift and run free.

This was the central home to his pride. All of them could come here whenever they wanted and enjoy this freedom.

The smell of the dirt and the trees around him filled his nostrils.

He didn't need anything else, except his mate.

He roared in agony at the thought of her.

She wanted him but she was so far from him.

He picked up the speed, fighting the thoughts.

He spotted a rabbit and ran after it to get his mind off things. Finally, tired out, he climbed a tree.

The image of Alice came to him, and he mewled with desperation.

How the hell was he going to get Alice, such a frail creature, to accept being part of a lion pack?

Though she wouldn't have the ability to shift, she would become the leader of the pride at his side.

Would the other lions accept her? Most importantly, would she accept herself?

He could protect her from the others, but not from herself.

That was something she would have to do on her own.

He sighed.

The mating ritual was easy. He had to mark her as his, but she had to claim him as well. With her fearful nature, he could already picture her refusing him, stating for a reason that she wasn't good enough, and condemning them both to a loveless life.

Alice. What had hurt her? He wanted to protect her from all pain, from all loss and fear, and make sure she never suffered again.

Yet, he couldn't. Why was life so damn complicated sometimes?

Just a few days ago he had been out in the city fucking whomever he wanted however he wanted, mindless of love or mating, and now he was here, desiring the only woman who seemed to be afraid of her own shadow.

He let out a frustrated roar. Scared, a flock of birds took to the sky. He followed their trajectory to another tree.

He was exasperated, but he would not back down. He hadn't gotten to where he was in life by giving up.

He climbed down from the tree and began walking back to his clothes.

He glanced at the mansion in the distance.

He hadn't even considered the other factors in his life.

He would have to explain his business to her —how he had made his fortune.

He shook his head. None of that mattered.

The first thing he had to do was conquer the damsel.

Once that was done, everything else would follow.

He would get Alice to be his Baby Girl and his queen.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A lice lay awake in bed. She stared at the ceiling. She didn't know how long she'd been tossing and turning. She couldn't calm her thoughts or her body.

She had gone to bed shortly after Nessa had arrived, complaining of a headache.

Really, she just wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

She was restless. She had tried journaling, but the words were not flowing so she'd opted to play some soothing music and try to get some sleep.

It wasn't working. Her thoughts raced in all directions.

First, she replayed the encounter with Axel in the bar. What if she had said yes to him then? Would they have ended in a back room? His hot mouth on hers. His firm torso pressed to her breasts. The space too small for them to maneuver but enough for them to satiate the heat coursing through them.

She groaned and turned to one side. He was a shifter. She wasn't sure what that meant. The new species had come out recently and not a lot was known about them, except that they could change at will into other creatures. Some of them hunted.

Did Axel hunt? Where? And weren't lions notorious for having a pride?

He'd said he had one. The tattoo on his chest was the symbol of his pack.

Weren't male lions accompanied exclusively by female lions?

Was that why he had been accompanied by those women at the bar?

Were they part of his pride? Were the scantily dressed women lionesses at his beck and call? Where did that leave her?

It couldn't be. Could it? He was too old for them.

Old. Nessa had said so and she was right.

Old enough to be your father. She didn't know if that was the case, but she felt as if it didn't matter.

So, what if he was older? He had more experience, more knowledge.

At his side she could navigate this world fearlessly.

It didn't matter that he was older. He was more mature.

More worldly. She was the problem. She was too young.

She didn't have a lot to offer. She was a recent graduate, working to survive and little more.

She liked to read, doom scroll through her phone, and occasionally hang out with her friends.

What could she offer him that he didn't have or that he could find elsewhere?

He'd lived countless adventures, she was certain.

She was boring in comparison. Nothing. She had nothing to offer.

She turned to the other side, brushing her breast in the process.

Except one thing. He seemed to be interested in that: her sex.

She lay on her back. Why was she worrying about offering him anything else?

He hadn't asked. This wasn't about love.

It wasn't about partnership. Heck, it wasn't even about friendship.

She didn't know him, and he didn't know her.

There was only one thing that tied them together. Sex.

He had demonstrated an unabashed sexual interest in her.

She could have a one-night fling. Right?

She'd never had one before, but surely she could manage.

It would have been perfect if Nessa hadn't arrived when she did.

With the momentum ruined she'd recovered her bearings and that brief moment where she'd felt endless peace in his arms, vanished.

She couldn't go on. All that was left of her encounter was a pair of wet panties and a sense of shame.

But he was gone now and so was Nessa. She was alone in her room.

She could dream. Pretend they would find each other again and when they did, he'd

kiss her senseless.

Her breath would be stolen from her lungs and her knees would buckle but he'd catch her. "Baby Girl," he'd whisper.

"Daddy," Alice murmured in the darkness of her bedroom.

He caressed her cheeks, his fingertips soft and arousing every inch of her body from the simple touch. She arched into him, silently beckoning for more.

"That's my good girl." He stopped at her neck. She glanced at him. Slowly, he reached lower, opening the first button of her shirt. She bit her bottom lip to keep from moaning.

He dipped lower. One by one, he popped the buttons, until there were none left. He opened her shirt, exposing her breasts.

"Beautiful," he muttered. "Take off the shirt, Baby Girl."

She would comply without a word, casting it aside. In her bedroom, she rid herself of her pajama t-shirt.

"Unzip your skirt. Slowly."

"Yes, Daddy."

She reached behind her and unzipped the gray pencil skirt. Shimming, she allowed it to drop to her ankles.

"Come here."

Suddenly, she switched the location of her fantasy. They were no longer in her home. They were back at the bar. He was sitting down on one of the low velvet chairs. The soft jazzy music filled the ambiance, but they were the only ones there.

“Come, Baby Girl.” He patted his lap.

She made his way to him, naked except for her panties and bra.

“Dance for me, Alice.” He smirked, and she smiled in response. The confidence she never had in real life washing over her in this fantasy.

Allowing herself to be washed over by the music, she began to move her hips.

She moved closer to him, gyrating. She stood with her back to him swiveling her ass from side to side over the erection clearly outlined on his pants.

His large hands grabbed her hips, taking control of her movements.

He lowered her further, rubbing her pussy against his hard dick. She moaned.

“Turn around, Baby Girl.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She did as he asked, and he brought her down to sit on him. Another moan burst through her lips at the contact. His lips found hers, kissing her hard. She whimpered against him. He undid her bra, her nipples hardening even further in the cool air.

In her bedroom, Alice squeezed the taught tips and groaned.

“Daddy,” she murmured. “Axel.”

She pictured his mouth on her breast, sucking one turgid point and then another. Her hips rolled over her bed, and she slid her other hand to her moist pussy. She began to rub her clit.

“Daddy, please.”

“Tell me what you want.”

“Fuck me, please,” she begged shamelessly.

“No. Get off on me, Baby Girl.” He began to rock her against the outline of his cock.

“I want to see you come by your own hand, Baby Girl.”

She nodded. Her eyes drifted shut. She rubbed her pussy, sliding her fingers beneath her panties. Faster and harder, picturing the outline of his cock rubbing against her clit. She bit back the moan lodged in her throat, aware that Nessa was in the other room.

“Daddy, please.”

“Come, Baby Girl, let me hear you scream.”

Her hips lifted and fell, her orgasm washing over her in a wave. She bit her other hand, moaning out his name, “Axel.”

Moments later, Alice opened her eyes and removed her hand from between her legs. Her pussy still pulsed from the orgasm. She groaned and punched the pillow. Surely, she would never see him again, but at least she had her fantasies.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A lice snoozed her alarm clock and turned to one side.

She couldn't remember if she'd dreamt anything but whatever it was, she was sure it had involved Axel.

Her alarm clock rang again, and she turned it off.

Her eyes widened as she realized the time.

Shit. She was going to be late. She rushed to get dressed and practically ran out the door.

Luckily, she barely arrived five minutes late to work but when she walked through the door the commotion startled her.

"What's happened?" she asked the receptionist.

"OMG, Alice. You happened." She pointed excitedly at the enormous bouquet of flowers covering her desk.

"What?" she murmured. Her face flushed. Heat ran through her body. Confusion mingled with embarrassment.

"Alice," another colleague yelled out her name. "Dish out! Who's the admirer?"

She ignored her and unsteadily made her way to the desk. The folded envelope with her name on it caught her eye.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“Yes,” she managed to croak out. I’m admiring the flowers.”

“Open it, open it,” someone chanted.

“Maybe we should let her open it privately and go back to work.” Her boss popped out of nowhere giving everyone a stern look.

The gossipers mumbled an apology and walked out.

Her boss then looked at her. “I know you have no fault in it, but tell your admirer not to do it again. It disrupts the office.”

“Of course. I’m sorry,” she murmured.

Apparently satisfied, her boss returned to his desk. Finally alone, she sat down. Trembling slightly, she picked up the envelope.

Good job, Baby Girl. I imagine the ruckus this bouquet might have created, and I apologize. See you tonight at 7PM at the bar.

Yours Always, Axel – Daddy.

Her heart skipped several beats. Daddy. Last night’s fantasy burned brightly in her mind. She pressed her legs together, her pussy tingling in remembrance.

Tonight? Was that an invitation? It wasn’t phrased like a question.

So, it was an order? She couldn’t quite decide.

Both? He'd included his phone number at the bottom.

Should she write to him? Shoot. She should refuse.

He was ordering her about and they hardly knew each other.

Surely, that was a red flag. Nessa wouldn't like it.

"Too old and bossy," she'd say. The issue was, she enjoyed being told what to do, and she didn't think he was that old.

She put the card in her purse. She had the option not to go. She didn't have to obey. Yet, she wanted to. Every fiber in her being was compelled to do as he asked. Surely, this was her last chance. How many more opportunities could the universe grant her?

She stared at her laptop. She had to work, though how she would manage to do so all day was beyond her.

Somehow, she made it. She'd sat through the day and ignored the curious glances from her colleague, or the occasional pestering question.

She didn't know if it had anything to do with the letter because every time she glanced at it, or felt nerves assaulting her, she'd remember the first words: Good girl, Baby Girl.

How could a set of four words calm her? By the end of the day, she'd decided it wasn't the words, it was the man behind them.

Knowing that Axel was the one saying them was what kept her grounded.

He was counting on her to be a good girl. She couldn't disappoint him.

Alice stepped onto the street. The Gin Room was a few blocks away.

Yesterday, she'd walked there. Anxiety kicked her in the stomach like a freight train.

It was time. He was waiting for her. She had saved his phone number, but she hadn't responded to the card because she wasn't sure if she'd go or not.

What if he had left? What if he'd decided she wasn't coming?

She should have responded. She bit her lip.

It hadn't been a question. He was waiting and this was her final chance.

What did they say? Third time's the charm?

That was it.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

Axel took in the blueprints laid out in front of him. He couldn't focus properly, and he knew why. Alice.

She'd haunted his dreams and all his waking moments.

He'd sent the flowers on a whim, only realizing his terrible mistake when he was filling out the card details.

She would hate him for making her the center of attention.

Would she forgive him? He'd hoped that by leaving his phone number she'd get in touch with him, but he'd heard nothing from her all day.

Surely, she felt the connection too. The desire which burned deep within them, and which would only be sated once they mated. God, he hoped it was soon. He needed her. The urge to regain his wits was pressing. He had work to do, and not only the bar.

He hadn't lied to her when he'd told her he'd worked his way through college. He had. He simply hadn't mentioned what he had been doing.

Art thievery.

Back then, shifting was still hidden to the general public.

He was an unknown and he had taken advantage of his prowess to get into places and steal what was asked of him: rare and valuable pieces of art.

He'd made a lot of money and eventually started to meet others who were also into the same thing.

His pride had formed. He'd become the king of the pride, and before he knew it, they had become a well-known art gang.

He rarely did any thieving nowadays, that's what he had a pride for, but occasionally he took the odd job here and there, and he supervised all his family's work to ensure success.

He glanced at the blueprints again. It was Alice's office building.

That's how he'd known where she worked. He'd caught a glimpse of her work badge the other night.

His client wanted a piece of art the CEO of the company had in his office.

Apparently, it hadn't been painted by a famous artist, but it was unique.

According to his client, the missing piece to his collection.

Axel's client had told him he'd tried to buy it from the CEO but hadn't been able to. So, he'd come to him.

Access to the building wasn't hard, but the mission had two major problems. One was getting to the top floor and then out.

The second was the hyenas. Natural lion enemies, they worked at the building and were quick-witted.

It wasn't the first time the predator shifters got in their way—nor would it be the last.

He checked the time again. Alice should be about to arrive.

He rehearsed his plan. Talk to her and invite her out to dinner.

That was it. He had to take things slowly with Alice or she'd panic.

A night out where they could relax and get to know each other more intimately was perfect.

The lion within him roared with displeasure, sending a jolt of pain across his spine.

The beast wanted more, but it was going to have to wait.

Abruptly, the sting dissipated. Axel sniffed the air. She had arrived. Her unique scent tinged with fear reached him. The animal was already attuned to her presence even if his human side still had a fight ahead of him

Axel folded the blueprints and stuck them into the pocket of his jacket. He had to make a move soon, but right now, Alice was his priority.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

What was she doing here? Alice hesitated at the door. Nerves made her fingertips tingle unpleasantly. Her heart thrummed in her ears erratically.

The bar hadn't changed, except for one thing: it was packed.

Right and left people sat around or stood, chatting amicably, almost drowning out the suave music.

The knot in her stomach began to tighten.

Someone could approach her, speak to her, and then what?

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

She took a step back. Suddenly, she felt it.

His gaze was like fire calling to a moth.

She turned toward the pull. How he had known she'd arrived was beyond her, but there he was, waiting.

He stood at the doorway to the VIP area.

Their gazes locked. Her fantasies didn't do him justice.

Today he wore a white shirt open at the top, giving an enticing glimpse of his chest, along with dark jeans.

His hair was pulled back into a man-bun, adding to his attraction.

She swallowed hard. He beckoned her with a finger, and she moved forward, her feet almost moving on their own accord. She stopped a hair's breadth away from him. His grin undid her, and her breath jammed in the back of her throat.

“Good girl.”

She almost moaned at the words. So simple and yet so powerful.

No one had ever called her a good girl. All her life, all she got was constant criticism.

As a child she was told she was not good enough.

Bullied by her peers, she was too fat, too tall, too weird.

Her parents always thought she didn't study enough.

“You should be getting A+, not A- or B+. It's not good enough.

” As an adult at university, she had had teachers telling her she could do better.

Her classmates criticized her work. It wasn't good enough.

Nothing ever was. No one had told her she had done well.

That it was enough. No one had praised her and called her a good girl.

Except him. This man, this stranger, for that was what he still was, had reached within her and drawn out an aching need she had ignored for years with two simple words.

“Come in, Baby Girl.”

Alice followed him inside without a word.

She didn't know what to say or how to act.

Doubts still assaulted her. What was he expecting of her?

Would they just kiss? Have sex? Maybe he didn't want any of that.

Maybe this was some kind of game for him.

After all, he was a wealthy man, older than her by at least fifteen years, and she was nothing more than a puppet in his hands, a mere toy to play with and later discard. Could she even do this?

“Sit.” He pointed at the dark leather sofa in the room and headed to a minibar in the corner. She obeyed. She sat stiffly, watching him as he poured two glasses of brown liquid. He handed one to her. “Drink.”

Abruptly, her sense of preservation snapped into her. “What is it?” She cleared her throat. “What is it?” she repeated.

“Cognac. Drink a sip.” He took one himself. “It'll help you relax.”

“Why do I need to relax?”

He gave her a lopsided smile.

“Because you're so nervous if I were to touch you right now, you'd snap like a wooden board.

Drink,” he said again. A shiver ran through her.

Had he lowered his voice or was it her imagination?

She swallowed drily and glanced at the glass in her hand.

What if it were drugged? She had been watching him prepare it but—

“I didn’t put anything in it. I don’t need to, Alice.

Coming here has been your own decision, and what’s more, in case you have any doubts, I would never dare hurt you.

” He paused. “Not in that way.” The sly grin that crossed his features made her cheeks warm and this time she did take a sip.

She coughed, surprised at the strong flavor.

He chuckled. “I take it you hadn’t drunk this before. ”

“No,” she said. Tears gathered at the corner of her eyes. He handed her a handkerchief and took the glass from her, replacing it with another in seconds. “Drink. It’s water.”

Trusting him, and uncomfortable with the burning in her throat, she gulped down the contents. The cool liquid soothed her immediately. “Thanks.”

“I will never hurt you, Alice.” He stared at her, and she shivered involuntarily. She dropped her gaze, nervously toying with the empty glass in her hand. Her mind reeled with a jumble of thoughts she couldn’t organize. She surprised herself when words formed on her tongue and tumbled out.

“But you want to.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

Axel nodded. “Very much so. I want to tug on your hair and spread your mouth around my cock. I want to tie your hands over your head and spank you until your entire backside is red as a rose.” He took in an audibly shaky breath.

“I want to hurt you, but I also want to love you.” Without giving her a chance, he continued, “I want to caress every inch of your body, hold you in my arms, and keep you safe from all harm, both outside and inside.” Axel tapped his head.

“I want to make you forget your pain, your fears, and just enjoy, live the moment with me.”

Alice stared at him wide-eyed. He spoke of more than sex. She tried to make sense of everything he’d said, but only the last words seemed to stick with her.

“I want to make you forget your pain, your fears, and just enjoy, live the moment with me.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” she whispered.

“Living in the moment,” she hurried to explain.

Dread clawed at her neck, scratching its way downward.

She attempted to push it aside, focusing on the rest of his confession.

Sex. Being tied, spanked, but also caressed.

Her pussy tingled. “Well, and the rest ... I’ve never—”

“I will teach you,” he assured her. Axel crouched so he was staring at her eye to eye.

“I will keep you safe, Baby Girl.” He cupped her cheek, and she bit back a gasp.

Soft, velvety spirals of electricity seemed to shoot from his fingertips onto her flesh.

Warm and delicate, they invited her to sink further.

“Every time you touch me...” she murmured. She placed her hand over his. “I just ... I don’t understand.”

Axel nodded.

“I know, and there’s a lot for me to explain, but this is not the place. Would you be willing to come to my home?”

Alice stared at him. Her mind was turmoil, but even though apprehension still twisted her gut, the warmth in his gaze was a welcome pool she dove into instinctively.

“Yes,” she heard herself answer.

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Normally, people would describe him as calm, laid-back, but fierce when needed.

Axel believed this was the first time he'd jumped the gun.

He'd laid everything on her. What he wanted to do to her physically and emotionally.

To boot, he'd invited her to his home to do it.

He was certain she wouldn't accept. After all, he hadn't taken the time to build her trust, which from the little he knew of his Alice, was something she required.

However, the moment he'd had her close, the second he'd touched her, the animal within him had taken control.

More and more the lion wanted her, needed her to be his.

Every minute stretched like an hour without completing the mating.

Alice had to feel it too or she wouldn't have come or even touched him. He had the impression everything she'd done to this point was going against her character. It was insanity, and yet neither of them could stop it.

"Yes," she said.

The widening of her gaze betrayed her surprise.

His beast let out a satisfied roar within its confines, sending a flash of pleasure

darting through his system.

Axel clasped Alice's hand and kissed the top.

She shivered and he smiled, pleased at her reaction.

The fact they were running a wild race didn't matter—doing it together was the key.

“Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?” he asked.

Alice's jaw dropped.

“No.”

“Guess today will be a day of many firsts. Come on.” He pulled her to her feet. She rose unsteadily, balancing herself with a hand on his chest. His lion mewed with delight at the touch, and he tugged her closer. She froze.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—” she blurted.

“There's no need to apologize, Baby Girl. You can touch me all you want.” He slid her hand to his open collar. She didn't fight him, her digits flexing on his flesh. Her lips parted inviting a kiss. His lion roared, demanding more.

“I...” she whispered. “This.” She shook her head slightly. “I can't breathe.”

Axel clenched his jaw. Her breathless words slammed him back to the reality of the moment. What was he doing? He had to take things slowly. He took an unwilling step back.

“It's okay, Baby Girl. One breath at a time. In through your nose, count to four, now

out.”

Alice followed his rhythm. “That’s right.” He held her hand and squeezed. “Easy does it.”

After a few seconds, she finally managed to give him a weak smile.

“Thanks.” Her cheeks burned. “It wasn’t really a panic attack. I just, well, touching you...” She left the sentence hanging.

Axel chuckled.

“Trust me, I feel the same way. Are you ready, then?”

She nodded. Relief swept through him, and he let out a breath of relief he’d been unaware of holding. Not only did she also want him, she still desired to leave with him.

“Let’s go.” Grabbing his helmet and leather jacket, he led her through the back door of the bar to an alley where he kept his bike.

“This is it.”

Alice remained rooted on the spot, staring at the vehicle as if it were an alien contraption.

“It doesn’t bite, I promise.” Opening the helmet lock, he pulled out his spare helmet. “Here, you must wear this.”

She took it but still didn’t move.

“Let me help you.”

Gently, he brushed back her hair and adjusted the hat onto her head. He swallowed, fighting the urge to steal a kiss. Instead, he turned and put on his own protection. Getting onto the motorcycle, he reached for her hand.

“One foot up and then the other,” he instructed, steadying her. “That’s it. Hold on to me. Tightly.”

He revved up the engine.

“The most important thing you must remember is that when we hit a curve, you lean toward it, okay?”

“Yes,” she replied, pressing herself closer to him. A sigh escaped him. She was here. This would work out. Eventually.

He hit the road, enjoying the wind on his face and the warmth of her body behind him. This would be their future. He grinned, happiness covering him like a warm blanket. He took a bend, and she did as he instructed, albeit he didn’t miss her yelp of fear.

Slowly, Axel.

He hadn’t caught his prey yet. Finally, after what seemed to him an endless ride, they reached his home. He hit the remote and the heavy gates opened slowly. Her gasp was audible in his ears.

“You live here?”

He rode through the dimly lit driveway trying to take in the sites like a newcomer

would.

A golden sea of tall grass sprawled in both directions dotted with trees and shrubs.

The starry sky was clear above them, almost devoid of any light pollution.

Finally, as they approached the end of the road, the large Southern style house came into view.

“Welcome to my pride lands, Baby Girl.”

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A lice couldn't believe it. Axel lived in a mansion.

She walked next to him, dazzled by the sheer size of the house in front of them.

He unlocked the door and invited her inside.

Her jaw dropped when the lights came on.

The chandelier glowed softly over marble floors and a sweeping grand staircase which curved upward.

In the center, an ornate pedestal had an arrangement of bright yellow and orange flowers.

She turned an almost full circle, taking in the set of archways which led to other rooms.

“You live here? But you only own a bar. How?”

“Hasn't he told you it's a bit more than that?”

She spun around at the sound of the female voice.

Atop the staircase stood a smiling woman with luxurious golden locks.

She was dressed in tight black leggings and a turtleneck which hugged her curves and accented her beauty somehow.

The low growl coming from Axel had the hair on the back of her neck stand. He touched her lower back possessively.

“Scarlet, what are you doing here?”

The woman began walking down the stairs.

“This is the pride home, Sir.” She gave him a smile and a brief nod. “There’s also been a problem. We needed to speak to you but couldn’t reach you on your phone or in your city home since it’s being renovated, so the next logical step was to come here.”

Axel reached inside his coat.

“Shit,” he mumbled. “I must have left my phone in the bar.”

Scarlet chuckled.

“Clearly, you’ve had your mind elsewhere.” She gave Alice a once-over. Alice felt her cheeks redden.

“What has happened?” Axel asked.

Scarlet raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps we should speak in private,” she said.

Axel frowned and sighed deeply. “I’m sorry Alice, I need to tend to this.” He took her hand and squeezed it. “I wasn’t expecting this, or I wouldn’t have brought you here,” he said.

Alice nodded dumbly.

“Of course,” she agreed automatically. “I’ll call an Uber and be out of your way.”

“No.” He grasped her shoulders tightly and looked into her eyes. “I don’t want you to leave. I just need you to wait, Baby Girl.”

“But you ... she ... me,” she babbled incoherently. Her mind raced. He wanted her to stay?

“There are no buts. There is no she. It’s just you and me. Understand?” He waited for her to nod. “Now, you’re going to be a good girl and wait for me here. I won’t be long.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Maybe she’d be better off waiting in the living room?” Scarlet pointed out. Amusement was clear in her features.

Axel scowled, giving the woman what looked like a warning gaze.

“Yes, you’re right. Come, Alice.” He took her hand and led her matter-of-factly under one of the arches.

Alice couldn’t hide her gasp. The room they entered was a blend of luxury and comfort.

The marble floors were softened with a plush rug.

The oversized leather sofas full of throw pillows invited comfort.

A grand fireplace commanded attention, crowned with a striking art piece of a pride of lions.

“Wait here,” Axel said. “I won’t be long.”

Alice nodded, too dumbfounded to say anything.

She watched them walk out together and sunk into the couch.

She stared at her hands. What was happening?

What did that woman want with Axel? Maybe they were romantically involved?

Perhaps he had an open relationship, and he’d failed to speak to her about Alice. Jealousy snaked its way into her gut.

“What the hell?” she mumbled.

She didn’t have a right to be envious of another woman.

Axel was just some guy she was going to fuck.

She placed her palms on her warm cheeks.

Was she even sure about it? Really, she didn’t know him and getting into bed with random strangers had never been her thing.

Yet, she’d agreed to come here, hadn’t she?

She had accepted the invitation. What is more, the previous two times she’d had the chance, she’d regretted not taking it, so there was no going back. She really did want

this.

She smiled. Her therapist would be proud. For once, she was certain of what she wanted, and she had taken the step to grasp it.

Alice wanted Axel. She couldn't say why.

She didn't know if it was because of pheromones, hormones, or simply the fact that she felt safe with him.

When she was with him, she forgot to be afraid, indecisive, anxious—or at least, as much as usual.

She had been fearful when she'd gotten on the motorcycle, but as they'd ridden on, and after the first bend, she'd held onto his solid frame, casting her anxiety aside and enjoying the ride.

He would take care of her. It was almost as if she could be who she really was with him and he wouldn't judge her, wouldn't run like others had.

“Who are you?”

Her head snapped up at the soft female voice.

She stared at the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

She had thought the other one was incredible but surely this one was a model.

At least five foot seven, she stood at the entrance to the living room dressed in curve-hugging skinny jeans and a tank top.

Golden hair cascaded around her framing the face of an angel with cornflower-blue eyes and full, rosy lips.

A natural luminous glow seemed to emanate from her.

“Who are you?” she repeated.

Alice realized she had been staring and blushed.

“I’m Axel’s guest. He told me to wait here.”

“Oh, he’s home then?” She smiled, the gesture full of venom making Alice recoil. The malice in her expression darkened her features, making them almost cruel and predatory.

“I’m Ariadna, his mate,” the woman said.

“Mate?” Alice echoed.

She walked into the room, nodding. Standing in front of the fireplace, she pointed at the painting and at the lioness sitting to the left of the largest lion in the picture.

“Yes. Do you know what that is?”

“I can guess,” Alice murmured.

“Life mates are destined to be together. Our animals ... you’re not a shifter, are you?”

” She paused to give her a once-over. “No, you’re not.

Well, shifters mate. They are bound to one lover for life, and they can immediately

recognize the person that completes them, the person who will lighten up their world.
”

Ariadna’s words slapped her in the face. Fear coiled in her chest, entwining with shame. She shouldn’t be here. This had all been a mistake.

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I’ll leave now.”

“Yeah, so I’m not sure what you’re doing here,” Ariadna continued as if she hadn’t heard her. She stood in front of her. “Unless you’re a gift.”

“A gift?”

Her malicious smile turned dark. She tapped her nose as if she were nothing more than a bothersome child. “Yes, a gift to me.”

Alice gaped. “I don’t understand.”

The woman laughed, the sound grating Alice’s already frazzled nerves. She took an involuntary step back.

“We’re lions, darling. We like to hunt,” Ariadna said.

“Hunt?” Alice gasped. Panic squeezed her innards, nausea climbing to the back of her throat. She was rooted in place.

“Oh, yes, you must definitely be a gift.” Ariadna inched closer sniffing at her neck.

“I can smell the fear on you. When we let you loose on the planes you’re going to run for your life, fight for survival.

You'll be a thrill," the woman whispered, her warm breath caressing her ear unpleasantly and making the hairs on her arm stand.

"No, I'm no one's meal," Alice cried. She took another step. Her fight-or-flight response began to kick in. She needed to get out of there.

"Are you not? Didn't you come with Axel?"

"To fuck!" she yelled.

The woman burst out laughing.

"Darling, he could be your father. Do you really think he would go after someone like you?" She touched her lip with a perfectly manicured finger and took her in. "No, you'll be a delectable meal. As a matter a fact, I don't see why we can't start the game right now."

"Game?"

Alice screamed as the woman's features began to shift and change. Panic surged within her, and she backed up frantically. Her feet tangling on the rug, she tripped and crashed onto the floor with a cry.

This was the end.

Except, it wasn't. A massive lion jumped over her and slammed into the lioness.

They tumbled onto the floor a few feet away from her, snarling and clawing at each other.

Within seconds, the lion pinned the female lion down and roared, the victorious

sound echoing in the room. Then, its gaze met hers.

Alice bolted.

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A xel cursed. When it rained, it poured.

He'd finally gotten his mate in his territory and suddenly he had three of his pride members in his home.

They weren't to blame, his home was the general headquarters for the pride, but damn, they were never here.

He'd been there the day before and the house had been empty.

To make matters worse, Scarlet had broken the bad news to him that the hyenas had changed the location of the art piece they'd been after, so all their hard work had been for nothing.

Then, he'd realized Ariadna wasn't with them and that's when he'd run, and just in time too.

If he hadn't, God knew what would have happened.

He didn't imagine she'd hurt Alice, but she would have scared her more than she already was.

His mate had fled and now he was running after her and about to pounce because his lion was on the chase.

It wasn't a question of common sense, it had become a question of pride and possession.

She was his—his mate—and everyone had to know it so no one would ever dare question her again.

Alice reached the end of the hallway and fumbled with the lock.

He pounced. His animal instincts took over and he bit the top of her shoulder.

She screamed and lost consciousness. He lapped at her blood and the wound disappeared.

She was his. Finally. He roared his approval.

Now all that was needed to complete the ritual was for them to mate carnally and for her to bite him.

She would never truly be a lion, but she'd grow stronger, bolder.

He shifted back into human form and picked her up in his arms, cradling her.

And as he turned around, he caught sight of Ariadna still on her knees.

“Get out of here, Ariadna” he rumbled. “I can’t deal with you right now.”

Heading upstairs, he entered his bedroom and lay his mate on his—no, their —bed.

Now all that was his would be hers. Pleasure coursed through him.

He wanted to peel back the layers of her clothing, but he couldn’t, not yet.

They had to talk first, or she’d lose her mind.

Things hadn't gone the way he'd wanted, but this could wait.

This he would make sure would work out. He grabbed his robe and sat on the armchair at the foot of his bed. He waited.

It didn't take long before she started stirring. With a gasp she sat upright. She touched her shoulder and winced. She glanced at it. The shirt had ripped but there was nothing there, the spot where he'd pierced her gone when he'd lapped the blood.

"It will hurt for a few days."

"You bit me," she wept. Axel stood up to comfort her. She raised her hands with palms outward. "Get away from me."

She curled her knees to her chest and he returned to his position. He waited for her to speak. He'd already fucked up enough as it was. Finally, after a few tense minutes, she glanced at him.

"What have you done to me?"

He was going to explain but something in her voice stopped him.

"What do you mean?" he asked instead.

"I..." She shook her head. "This is embarrassing," she muttered.

"Baby Girl."

She bit her lip.

"I want you. I mean, I wanted you before, obviously, or I wouldn't have come here,

but now, I just want to—” She fell silent.

“You want to what?”

“It’s wrong. You attacked me.”

“Tell me, Baby Girl,” he demanded

Her cheeks flushed as their gazes locked.

“I want to fuck you. I’m burning inside. It’s as if my skin were an incessant fire and all I want to do is strip and feel your hands on my body.”

“Do it.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You bit me,” she said weakly.

“I did.” He agreed. “But your desire hasn’t lessened.”

“Did you drug me?”

“No.”

“Did you—”

“Alice,” he interrupted her. “You said you wanted to take off your clothes and feel me. Stop thinking. Stop talking. Do what your body desires. Follow its order. Do it.

Now.”

A lice.

His voice struck a chord deep within her. She didn't know what it was, but the way he said her name was commanding yet full of warmth. It was stern, brooking no argument.

“Do it now. Don't make me repeat myself,” he said in a low tone which sent a shiver across her spine.

Her cheeks were warm and probably red, but she was compelled to follow his order .

Do it now. She wanted him. Badly. She had wanted him before but now it was a feverish pitch.

Her pussy was wet and her nipples hard and aching.

The only way to get rid of the ache was to have him.

She didn't know why but she also didn't want to think more.

She was tired of questioning everything.

Exhausted from fearing everything around her. Being with Axel felt right.

All she had to do was follow his order. It was easy.

She unbuttoned her shirt with trembling fingers.

His heated stare had her nervous and aroused.

She crept to the edge of the bed and clumsily took off her shoes and jeans.

Part of her wanted to strip slowly, to make a show for him, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She didn't even dare look at him.

"Come closer, Baby Girl."

Her heart stuck in her throat. She edged toward him, her heartbeat so loud it drowned all other sounds. She stopped a few feet from the chair.

"Closer."

She took another two small steps.

"Kneel."

Alice stooped, still without looking at him.

When he grasped her chin and tilted her gaze upward, she gasped loudly.

She hadn't heard him move, yet here he was standing in front of her, partially naked, the bulge under his robe very visible.

Her mouth watered and she swallowed hard.

Every inch of her engulfed in the flame of desire, which licked at her skin incessantly.

"Good girl."

A moan escaped her lips, drawing a grin from Axel. His gaze narrowed predatorily.

“What do you want, Baby Girl?”

Her gaze automatically flickered to his dick. He chuckled.

“Say it,” he ordered. “I want to hear you vocalize your desire, Baby Girl.”

“I-I want...” Alice swallowed. She shifted uncomfortably, sweat beading on her forehead.

“Your cock,” he encouraged.

“Your cock,” she repeated almost breathlessly.

“Where?” he asked while opening his robe and revealing the most perfect dick she’d ever seen. It curved upward, thick and glistening with pre-cum, the mushroom head both mesmerizing and enticing.

“Everywhere,” she mumbled.

“In your mouth?”

“Yes.” She bit her bottom lip, battling the urge to lean forward and kiss the bulbous tip.

“In your pussy?”

“Yes,” she gasped, picturing it entering her, spreading her wide and filling her.

“In your ass?”

She hesitated.

“Yes,” she finally said, glancing up at him. “Everywhere.”

“Good girl, Baby Girl. You’ve earned a prize for your honesty.” Axel took a step closer and placed the head of his engorged cock on her lips. “Open wide, Baby Girl. Take what is yours.”

She moaned as he slid into her. Her tongue arched upward, licking the thick vein at the length of his cock.

“Fuck, that’s nice,” he growled, pulling back and forth a few times.

She made to grasp him, but he gripped her wrists, holding them over her head.

Again and again, he thrust into her mouth.

Saliva dribbled down her chin. Desire clawed at her skin, leaving an ache which demanded to be satisfied.

Finally, Axel stepped back and released her.

“Did you like it, Baby Girl?” he asked, while massaging her arms.

“Yes...” Alice hesitated. The word Daddy rested on her lips. He’d asked her to call him that two days ago but now she faltered. Would it be okay? Wasn’t it perverted? He was so much older. He could be her actual father. This wasn’t right. Was it?

“Stop thinking,” Axel demanded, tugging at her hair sharply.

She gasped as pain mingled with pleasure.

He didn't give her a chance to regain her bearings as his cock reentered her.

Pleasure burst across her cells, and she moaned around his thickness.

Her eyes watered as he fucked her mouth, slowly and then faster.

Liquid coated the inside of her thighs, her pussy pulsing with every push and shove.
More .

She wanted more. All other thoughts evaporated. Time stopped. Axel pulled her hair, pinpricks of pain traveled across her flesh. All that was left was them. Here at this moment. His hot rod in her, their scents of arousal mingling in the room. He groaned. She whimpered.

Desire. Pleasure. Pain.

More.

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He couldn't read her mind, but he could take a good guess at what she had been thinking earlier.

They had a twenty-year age difference. People would frown upon their relationship.

Calling him Daddy was strange. Improper.

None of it was important. She had to understand, all that mattered was them, what they believed, what they felt.

The love, passion, and commitment they shared when they were together.

Axel groaned as she licked the head of his dick once more. Right now, the only thing that counted was their pleasure. He had to be inside of her. He pulled out his cock and flipped her around. Roughly, he pushed her against the bed and spread her legs. His digits slid into her pussy effortlessly.

"Fuck, you're slick, Baby Girl," he said. "Is this for me?"

"Yes, Daddy," the words came out like a desperate whimper. His heart skipped a beat, echoing the pounding of his cock.

"Baby Girl, I'm going to fuck you so hard."

Grasping her hips, he entered her in one full thrust. Alice ached her back and mewled in pleasure. Axel pulled back, using all his restraint, he kept his dick at her entrance. He grasped her hair again, turning her head slightly so she'd make eye contact with

him.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Fuck me.”

“Excuse me?” he growled.

A slow, sexy grin spread across her lips. She wiggled her hips, forcing him to penetrate her further. Axel spanked her left ass cheek, and she yelped. Her smile grew broader.

“Fuck me, Daddy,” she said.

With a triumphant growl, he flipped her on her back and lifted her legs to his shoulders.

He pushed into her without preamble, pumping hard.

Alice cried out with pleasure. She grabbed his biceps for balance.

Their gazes locked. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated as if she couldn't believe the pleasure coursing through her.

Axel ripped off her bra and bowed his head to suckle her breast. She gasped loudly. Quickly, he switched to the other one. He drove into her faster, her cries gaining a fevered pitch. Suddenly, Alice yelled out his name. Her orgasm washed over his dick, the contractions fueling his own passion.

“You're mine,” he roared. With great effort he pulled back, his cum spewing between her legs and lower abdomen.

Alice didn't move, clearly still relishing her orgasms. Gently he lowered her legs and went into the en-suite bathroom. He returned with a damp towel and wiped away his semen.

“You'll come inside of me next time,” she whispered.

He cocked his head, somewhat shocked by the brazen statement.

“Is that what you want?”

She nodded.

“Use your words.”

“Yes.” She opened her eyes and locked her gaze with his. “Daddy.”

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The words came out of her mouth with ease.

Alice couldn't explain it, nor did she want to.

For the first time in her life, she had stopped overthinking.

It would come back, she didn't doubt it, but being here with Axel, in this moment, had been beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

All she wanted to do was feel this way forever—hot, unconcerned for the past, present, or future, and yet cared for, wanted.

Giving herself up to Axel had been a relief.

The heated desire she'd experienced earlier was gone, replaced by a steady appetite only he could appease.

She craved more. Fully. She wanted his dick pulsing inside of her as he orgasmed.

“Are you on oral contraception? Are you ready for children?”

“I, uh...” She gawked at him as reality came crashing back. Children? No. Axel was still a stranger. “No.”

“We'll use condoms for the time being and we can see about oral—”

“No,” she repeated.

His brow furrowed in confusion.

“Alice.”

She touched her shoulder, which was still tender from his bite.

“I ... this is insanity, Axel. You attacked me. I don’t know what you’ve done to me.”
She scurried away from the bed, fishing out her clothes.

“Alice, stop.”

She ignored him and tried to put on her bra realizing it was broken. Tears threatened the corner of her eyes. She was a nutcase. One second, she was living the moment and the next everything spiraled out of control.

“Alice.” Axel grabbed her by the upper arms and forced her to stand in front of him.
“Baby Girl. You are my mate.”

Alice blinked. The words penetrated her mind. You are my mate. She recalled what Ariadna had said earlier. “Life mates are destined to be together. They are bound to one lover for life, and they can immediately recognize the person that completes them, the person who will lighten up their world.”

“Excuse me,” she said.

Axel sighed. “This is not how I wanted it to go at all,” he muttered. “Come.” He led her to the armchair and sat down, pulling her onto his lap. Alice didn’t fight him. She waited, breath abated, her heart pulsing wildly. Mates?

“Shifters have mates,” Axel said. “The person who becomes their one and only. Once we meet our mates, our animal knows there is no one else out there for us, but for the

mating to be complete I had to bite you. I didn't want the other women to question you or who you are to me."

"Bite?"

"But there is more," he plunged on. "You must bite me too. You have to mark me to make the mating complete."

"What?" Alice gaped at him. Questions and incoherent thoughts tumbled across her tongue, piling in her mind.

"I don't get it," she finally said. "The woman earlier, Ariadna, said she was your mate. Can you have more than one?"

"Ariadna is not my mate," Axel said sternly. "She has always wanted a position of power in the pride. I believe she recognized you as my lover and she became jealous. I am not pleased with her behavior."

"So, she's not your girlfriend?"

"There's no one but you, Alice."

"Will I become a shifter?" she asked.

"No." Axel brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Alice shivered. "Once the mating is complete you might become a bit stronger, or faster, but nothing else."

"Oh." She hesitated. "What if I refuse?"

Axel stared at her in silence for what seemed like hours. He seemed to be measuring his words. Finally, he spoke. "If you refuse, we will both be miserable forever. There

will be no one else for either of us. Ever.”

“So, I’m bound to you, whether I want it or not.”

He nodded. “Do you think that is a bad thing?” He squeezed her thigh sending a jolt of erotic electricity through her system. Alice shook her head.

“The sex is great, but I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. I never thought, I mean I always thought I’d meet someone and eventually after many dates we’d fall in love, get married. You know, the usual.”

“I understand. We shifters like to cut to the chase. We are in a way animals, and human games are a waste of time. Nonetheless,” he said with a smile, “My intention was to court you, but things have turned out differently. I don’t regret it. Do you?”

Alice gazed into his eyes. They were the color of amber, she decided. They were full of kindness, and a fire deep within she could not escape. She gave a brief nod.

“No,” she finally said. “But I’m afraid.”

“That is normal, Baby Girl. Trust me when I tell you I won’t let anything bad happen to you.” Axel took a deep breath. “And you don’t need to mate with me yet. I want you to,” he added, “but I understand if you want to wait to get to know me a bit better.”

Alice let out a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” She bit her lip nervously and shifted on his lap. “Daddy.” Her eyes widened as she noticed the rise of his erection under her butt.

Axel grinned mischievously. “Of course, Baby Girl.” He slid his index fingertip

across her chest, over the rise of her breasts. Her breath caught. “Now, though, I’m not letting you out of this room until we’re both fully sated.”

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Alice woke up. She really needed to pee. She glanced at Axel and a smile flitted over her lips. He was sound asleep. How many times had she orgasmed? She shook her head, pushing the erotic thoughts aside, and slowly got out of bed.

After making use of the bathroom, she put on one of the robes behind the door and slowly headed downstairs, while rolling up the burgundy sleeves. Sunlight streamed from large floor-to-ceiling windows at the top of the staircase, illuminating the entire foyer. What time was it?

As soon as she reached the bottom floor, her feet landing on the cold marble, Alice regretted her decision.

What if Ariadna decided to chase after her again?

Or one of the others? Axel has said there were three lionesses in the house.

She'd met two. She glanced back the way she'd come.

There could also be other lions. He'd explained during the night the house was the place where the lions gathered.

Axel normally lived in the city, but his house was being renovated, and this is where they came to hang out and run in freedom.

Alice swallowed. She was thirsty and hungry.

She glanced through one of the arches. She could do this.

Axel had promised they wouldn't hurt her, and she believed him, right?

She made her way through one of the hallways.

Surely, the kitchen had to be this way, right? She could smell coffee being brewed.

The smell became stronger as she approached a set of wooden doors left open.

Whispers could be heard coming from within.

She froze, but it was too late, they had already seen her.

Three women stood around the kitchen island, chatting amiably in pajamas.

They looked at her, surprise also clear on their faces.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, backing up.

"No, wait," Ariadna spoke up. "Please, don't leave." She hurried forward, her hands steeped in a plea. "I want to apologize."

"You do?"

Alice hesitated.

"Yes. I acted out of ... well, I was ... I have always wanted—"

"To be queen," Scarlet piped in. She came around, stood behind Alice, draped an arm across her shoulders, and began to lead her back to the kitchen.

Ariadna scowled for an instant, then her features dropped.

“Yes.” She sighed. “I had been hoping maybe one day Axel’s lion would take me as its mate, and when I saw you, well, I could smell him on you, and I acted like an idiot.”

“You really don’t have to apologize.”

“Of course I do,” Ariadna said. She smiled slyly. “You have almost mated. Once you realize you have no escape, you will mate him, and you will become family. I don’t want us to hate each other, it would make family functions quite difficult to bear.” She chuckled, drily.

“We must respect you,” the third woman said.

She was also blonde, but unlike the other two, her eyes were green, and she had a piercing on her bottom lip and eyebrow.

“I’m Bea, by the way. I was out running when this whole fiasco happened.

” She moved toward Alice with her hand extended. Alice took it politely.

“I am a stranger,” Alice said. “I wouldn’t dare demand anything.”

“You don’t need to. We are in part animals and the laws by which we play are very strict. We respect those above us in the hierarchy, until the day we have our own pride, if ever,” Scarlet said.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “I didn’t ask for any of this. I’ll gladly—”

“Nonsense. It’s great to have another woman in the family. We are the true leaders,” Scarlet said, beckoning her closer to the table. “Would you like some coffee?”

Alice nodded.

“Why don’t you tell us a bit about yourself, Alice?” Bea asked.

Alice’s stomach knotted at the unexpected question. Her innards squeezed painfully as her mind aimed to find something to say. She was once more saved by Scarlet.

“Would you like some milk or sugar?”

“Both, please,” she said eagerly.

Bea and Ariadna both laughed.

“You must really need that java. Where are you from? What do you do? How long have you known Axel?”

Alice blanched.

“I’m from, em, New York, born and raised in the suburbs,” she managed to say.

Thick and oppressive silence crept around her as she didn’t offer any more information. What was she supposed to say? Was it her turn to ask questions? Weren’t they being too inquisitive? Alice’s knot tripled in size, becoming almost unbearable. Her heart pounded frantically.

“I’m not very good at small talk,” she blurted.

“Sometimes all you need is a bit of practice,” Scarlet said, handing her a steaming mug.

“That’s what my therapist says,” she mumbled.

Ariadna laughed.

“Scarlet is a therapist.”

“Oh.” Alice glanced at the woman, who winked at her. Was that why she was being so helpful? Did she realize her struggle?

“Let’s take it one step at a time. We don’t need to know everything right now.”

Alice took a sip of her coffee. She let out a long sigh. These women were just trying to be friendly. She recalled her own therapist’s words. You can’t assume everyone is out to get you, Alice.

“I work in finance right now, for PAM,” she said.

“Oh,” Bea said. Abruptly, she hastily began to fold the papers which had been strewn on the table. One of them slipped to the floor and Alice bent to pick it up. Her brow wrinkled as she recognized the image.

“Wait,” she said. “I know this office. It’s my boss’s office.”

“What?” all three women exclaimed in unison.

Scarlet carefully plucked the photograph from her hands. “Alice, has Axel told you what else we do here?” she asked, caution lacing her words.

“No,” Alice replied quietly, a sense of foreboding prickling her scalp unpleasantly.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A lice hurried back upstairs. The woman had refused to explain anything, so she'd left her coffee on the counter and headed to see Axel. In her mind a whirlwind of questions formed.

Why did they have a picture of her boss's office? What were the rest of the papers they had stowed away? What other job did Axel have besides the bar?

Lost in her thoughts, she crashed into Axel just as he left the bedroom.

"Hey, Baby Girl." His smile changed to a frown. "What's going on?"

"Why do you have a picture of my boss's office?" she asked without preamble.

"What?"

"I saw it now, downstairs. The girls say you must tell me what else you do for a living. What is it?"

Axel pressed his lips together. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"All right. Relax, Baby Girl. I can explain."

"Then do it. Do it now. Why the secretiveness?" She tugged the lapels of his robe. Fear slithered its ugly head around her neck. What was he hiding?

"I'm an art thief. We're art thieves," Axel said.

Her hands dropped. She took a step back.

“Excuse me?”

Axel sighed.

“That’s how I’ve made my fortune. I’m a stealthy cat. We steal art for rich people who want peculiar paintings.”

“And what does my boss’s office have to do with any of this?”

“The painting in your CEO’s office is the one my latest client wants.”

“So, you’re going to steal it? Have you ... is this—you and I—because you want to access the building? Am I just a pawn in this heist?”

She crossed her arms to her chest, fighting off the shivers which threatened to wrack her frame.

“God, no! No, Alice. You just happen to work in the same place, but it has nothing to do with us. We have a picture of all the offices with accessible windows. That’s all. Your boss’s office has a window, which would make it easier for us to enter, that’s it.”

“It’s on the second floor, how are you going to climb to the second floor? What you’re saying doesn’t make sense.”

“Alice, there’s a fire escape ladder. Trust me. We’ve done this before.”

“How often? Never mind, don’t answer. Your fortune is dirty money.”

“Alice, please, we steal from the rich for the rich. We’re not taking anything from people like you or your friends.”

“No.” She put her hands up, staving him away.

“No. I’m sorry, Axel. This is too much. Lion shifters and now this.

Thieves. You’re all freaking thieves. I thought I could deal with the shifting aspect, if it’s even real.

At this point, I’m not sure if this is some kind of drug-induced dream, but thievery?

You’re like the mob. No. I’m done. I’m leaving. ”

She marched past him to grab her clothes. She quickly began to get dressed in jerky movements.

“Alice.”

“Don’t touch me.” She snatched her arm from Axel’s soft grip.

“I understand. I’ve pushed you too far, Baby Girl, in too short a time. I’ll drive you home.”

“No. I’ll call an Uber or a cab. I want you, no, scratch that, I need you to stay away from me.” She shook her head. “I can’t think clearly when you’re around, Axel.”

“No Uber will take you into the city from here. This isn’t easy to find, and besides, it’s expensive. Let me drive you.”

“No.”

“Fine,” he growled. “Then, I’ll ask one of the girls to take you. Please, Alice.”

Alice clenched her jaw to hide the tremble within her.

She didn’t think he was lying when he said an Uber wouldn’t take her back into the city.

She couldn’t recall how long it had taken them to drive out here.

Yesterday, it had all been a sweet dream.

Today, reality came crashing all around her, breaking perfection into tiny shards of glass which cut deeply.

She didn’t know where she was, and she clearly didn’t know who this man was.

She needed to leave before she got hurt more.

“Fine. Just get me out of here,” she said.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

Alice glanced out the window. The countryside rolled by ablaze in red, orange, and yellow woodlands. Absently, she wondered how Axel managed to maintain his place, looking like a savannah when all around him were pines, maples, and oaks.

Axel .

Her insides twisted painfully. This time, though, it wasn't the knot in her stomach, a new one had formed in her heart, and she couldn't push it away. It squeezed with every breath, stealing her focus and forcing a keening sadness to the forefront. She would never see him again.

Daddy. Axel.

Frustrated, she wiped away a tear. How could she be crying over something which had never come to be? This had all been a mistake, a dream brought on by her own tendencies to make a mountain out of an anthill. She was weak. A mess of a person.

"Are you okay?" Scarlet asked, startling her.

"What do you think?" she snapped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so rude. Thank you for driving me."

"No need to apologize, Alice. It's a lot to take in, in such a short amount of time. I would be freaking out as well if I were you."

"But you're not me."

“Of course not.” Scarlet glanced at her then focused on the road once more. “I was brought up in this world. I know what it’s like and how hard it is to survive. Being a shifter is not something we choose.”

“I can imagine.”

“Axel didn’t ask—”

“I’m not leaving because he’s a shifter,” she explained.

Scarlet sucked in her cheeks before speaking up again.

“Why then?” she asked.

“You’re thieves. Robbers. It’s immoral. I should probably call the police on you, if I had any proof.” Alice dug her fingers into her knees. For some reason, calling the woman who was driving her home and being incredibly kind to her a thief, made her sick to her stomach.

“We do what we have to do to maintain our lifestyle. We’re not hurting anyone.”

“What about the people you’re stealing from?”

“Alice, we’re not stealing from people like you.

We’re not stealing from the average worker.

We’re robbing artwork from people who have too much money to begin with.

They are people who don’t know what to do with their fortune, and we’re being paid by the same people.

It's a game for them, see who has the best art piece regardless of the price. "

"It's still not an excuse."

"It's not," Scarlet agreed. "I'm just trying to make you see where we come from.

You know," she said. "Axel and I were college buddies. He got into the business way before I did. He'll tell you himself, but his first jobs weren't art, they were university exams and such.

Then books, and eventually art. Word spread around campus.

I also needed money, so I sought him out and joined him.

We were two lion shifters who had to pay our way through school. "

"What about your parents?"

Scarlet scoffed. "He comes from a line of purist shifters. They set him free and on his feet, as soon as he turned eighteen. He had to find his own way in life."

"And you? As soon as my parents discovered I'd met a lion who was starting their own pride, they cut the cord."

"That's harsh."

"It is the way of the lion." Scarlet shrugged.

"It shouldn't be. You're telling me that if I were to have children with Axel, I'd have to give them up when they turned eighteen? Are you crazy? You're a mother for life."

“I couldn’t agree more, but this is something you’d have to bring up with Axel.

Mixed couples are different. Ariadna’s parents are mixed.

She is a shifter, but her brother is not.

Her parents are loving and doting on both children.

They do not, however, belong to a pride.

They decided to focus on their more human side.

So, as you see, it depends on what you choose to do with your mate.”

“I see.” Alice looked out the window once more.

What future would she have with Axel when they had children?

She wouldn’t be willing to give them up because of some stupid pride rule.

Alice grimaced. Why on earth was she entertaining these thoughts?

Children? She was leaving Axel forever. He was a stranger.

There was no future if there’d never even been a present.

Her heart seemed to disagree, clutching painfully and leaving her almost breathless.

“In any case,” Alice said. “I was taught stealing is wrong, so I’ll stick to that. Besides, this whole mating thing is too complicated. I am anxious, you know? I can’t deal with any of it. It’s too much. I need peace and calm, and a slow, measured

approach to things.”

Scarlet nodded.

“I understand. Don’t worry.” She gave her a soft smile. “Although, life has a habit of biting us in the ass.”

“That’s not very encouraging coming from a psychologist,” Alice retorted. For some reason, Scarlet’s words angered her, just as when her therapist had pointed out some of her flaws were her own doing.

She laughed heartily.

“That was a piece of friendly advice, not coming from a therapist.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A xel watched Alice get in the car and leave.

He hoped with all his heart she'd look back, but she didn't.

Desperation clawed within him. His lion dug its claws into his chest, and he grimaced.

Pain unlike anything he'd known before twisted his innards.

He didn't realize he was shifting until it was too late.

His clothes ripped and tumbled to the floor. He set after them at a run.

Alice.

He picked up his pace, roaring her name in a frantic plea. " Alice !"

His heart hammered her name in his chest and mind. She couldn't leave him. She was his mate. His one and only. After forty years he'd finally found her and now she was driving away, leaving him forever. She couldn't.

Scarlet must have spotted him because she stepped on the accelerator and the car sped forward. His paws hit the asphalt, the hard cold ground burning them as he sped up. He would run all the way to the city. He would catch up with them and drag Alice back home with him. Baby Girl.

The car turned a bend, and he lost them from his sight for an instant.

It was enough to bring him back to his wits.

He slowed down, easing into a softer gait.

His breath came out in short spurts. Tension ebbed from his shoulders.

His limbs turned heavy. Grief embraced him in a heavy hug, and he shifted back into his human form. He fell to his knees.

Come back, please.

Throughout his life he'd made many mistakes, but he'd never messed up so badly as he had now. Somehow, he had managed to conquer and lose his mate in less than twenty-four hours.

He covered his face in desperation. Reality struck him across his back like a belt whipped at him. He yelled out his frustration. He knew even if he had caught up with the vehicle, he'd never be able to bring Alice back with him forcefully. She'd hate him and they'd be miserable forever.

No. Even though the animal within him was whimpering in despair, he had to think reasonably.

It was time for the human to take charge.

Slowly, he got to his feet. Alice needed time.

They would both benefit from a few days away from each other.

He would come up with a new plan to win her over.

After all, he was a hunter, and he would not so easily give up on his prey.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

Alice sat down at her desk with a sigh. Her boss walked by, his face clouded with disapproval as he glanced in her direction. She lowered her head, pretending to work at her computer but once again her mind was elsewhere.

Ever since she'd left Axel, her life had been miserable. At the office, her boss gave her an evil stare every other day, as if he knew she was planning something against him, and she ran behind in her work.

At home, Nessa kept pestering her for information on what had happened to the hunk. Once she'd told him they'd stopped seeing each other after a night of passion, she'd turned to praise her for leaving him and scolding her for going to his house without telling anyone where she was.

She'd tried to see her therapist, but her next appointment wasn't until next week, so she was left alone with her thoughts, which had been a nightmare.

One whole week. Alice wasn't even sure how she'd managed to survive.

Whenever she wasn't working or pretending to do so, she was thinking about Axel.

She forgot mealtimes, shower times, and bedtime.

All she could manage was to conjure Axel's picture.

She masturbated to him, the need to do so every night becoming imperative, then she would cry herself to sleep, recalling and missing his warmth and loving embrace.

It was insanity. Ridiculous. She tried to convince herself it had only been a one-night stand.

Tons of people had one every day and they didn't become obsessed with each other.

Had she had the best sex in her life? Yes.

But that was it. She didn't know Axel. He was not a bar owner, he was a gangster, a thief.

She was certain when she told her therapist, they'd laugh about it. Right?

"Alice?"

She lifted her gaze, surprised to find her boss standing in front of her desk, grinning at her unpleasantly.

For some reason, Kenneth had always reminded her of a hyena.

His smile was too wide and toothy. He was tall and lean, with angular features, a strong jawline and a flat wide nose, upturned at the tip.

His dark hair was constantly tousled, as if he couldn't stop running his fingers through it.

"Yes?" she said.

"Before you leave today, please come into my office. I'd like to have a word with you."

Dread wound its way into her, coiling into a lead ball.

“Of course,” she managed to say.

Shit.

It was just what she needed. Her love life was in shambles, and now she was surely going to get fired. It was true that her work hadn't been the best this week. She'd almost turned in a report late, but she'd stayed up all night finishing it and had successfully sent it.

Alice forced herself to focus on her work. She had to make it through the rest of the afternoon. She glanced at the clock. One more hour.

Finally, people began to leave. She waved goodbye to a few coworkers and stood up.

Her legs shook. Taking a deep breath, she made her way to Kenneth's office.

Unable to help it, her gaze landed on the window Axel had told her about.

They were on the second floor. Sure, he could access through that window, but then what?

They had to make it all the way to the top to the CEO's office on the twelfth floor.

There was security throughout the building.

It was suicidal no matter what he'd said.

“Alice.” Kenneth greeted her with another one of his characteristic smiles, sending a shiver down her back. “Close the door and have a seat.”

Nervously, she obeyed. As soon as she sat down, Kenneth leaned forward, folding his

hands atop his desk and creating a steeple. His dark gaze met hers.

“Alice, your work this week hasn’t been up to standards. You were hired after your one-year internship because we thought you were promising.”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a rough week. I promise I’ll do better.”

“Let me finish.” Alice stared at her lap, cheeks burning. “I’m afraid you will not continue to work here, Alice.”

“Why? Surely, you’re not firing me because of a bad week.”

“No. I’m firing you because you reek of lion.”

“What?” Her jaw dropped in shock.

“You heard me. Did you think we wouldn’t notice? You’ve been with the lions. You smell of them, and unfortunately, we are not on the best terms with those sneaky cats.”

“We? Who are we ? You’re firing me because I smell like a lion? I’m not a shifter,” she cried. “This is madness.” She held her head, overwhelmed with despair.

“It doesn’t matter. You’ve been too close to them. Our alliances here at PAM lie with other shifters. Please gather your things and don’t come back tomorrow.”

Alice stared at Kenneth. His eyes were devoid of emotion. In a dreamlike state, she stood up and crossed the room. She glanced back one last time, wishing for all of this to be a joke, but Kenneth was already back at work.

Fighting the onset of tears, she collected her few belongings and headed outside. As

soon as the cool air slapped her in the face, the tears rolled. Almost blindly, she made her way across the street. It wasn't until she realized where she was that she stopped.

She took in THE GIN ROOM sign. The gold lettering and the soft yellow glow beckoned to her. Why had she made her way here of all places?

Axel might be in there. He would comfort her. Except, he was just as twisted as her boss. No, she had to find her own way in life. Wiping away the tears, she bowed her head and continued to the subway.

She never made it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:02 am

A xel hung up. Panic threatened to consume him, but he pushed it down with a hard shove. Right now, he had to act. There was no time for misery. They had Alice. He had to get her back no matter what.

He glanced at his phone. He didn't want to get the rest of the pride involved. They were after him, he had no doubt, or they wouldn't have taken Alice. No, he knew exactly what he had to do.

An hour later, as they'd instructed, he arrived at Alice's office.

He pushed through the building doors, finding them open, just as they'd told him they'd be.

In one glance, he took in the space around him.

A reception desk to one side, empty. Entrance turnstiles for employees to clock in, and after them a set of elevators which would take them to their place of work.

He took one of them and pressed the button for the top floor. The CEO's office.

The doors opened into the office. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched along the back, giving an impressive view of the city skyline.

The desk, situated in front of the windows, commanded attention with its sleek glass surface and polished edges.

Behind it, a man sat motionless, flanked by two large, muscular men dressed in dark

suits.

To the sides of the room, several paintings adorned the walls—the one they had been planning to steal back in its place.

Diplomas and certificates framed in gold added an air of authority, while shelves filled with trophies and books showcased the owner's knowledge. Next to one of these, a closed door.

None of the figures caught his attention. The only thing that mattered was the woman sitting on the brown leather couch. Alice. Her hands and feet were bound, and her posture was rigid with fear. Red-rimmed eyes locked onto his. Her bottom lip trembled as she mouthed his name.

He went to her, kneeled, and undid her bonds.

“You okay, Baby Girl?” He cupped her chin, brushing the stray tear aside with the pad of his thumb.

“Yes, but Axel—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt this tender scene, but Axel, I believe we have business to discuss.”

Axel stood up and turned his attention to the man at the desk. CEO Alastair Jubatus saluted him with a nod and sly smile. Even though he was not tall, Alastair had a muscular build, though his most striking feature were his piercing green eyes and high cheekbones.

“Alastair Jubatus. I would say it is a pleasure to see you again, but since your father’s death and our brief meeting then, I haven’t had the pleasure.”

The cheetah shifter's gaze narrowed.

"How is the coalition?" Axel asked. "Last I heard, you were struggling to maintain the cheetahs together, but I see now you've allied with the hyenas. A bold move."

"Not as bold as you attempting to steal from me," Alastair said.

Axel chuckled.

"Thank you. I do relish a challenge."

Alastair clasped his hands over his desk.

"At the cost of your mate?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"She came along for the ride after I'd accepted the job."

"Yes, which is why you made a set of mistakes which have brought you here tonight. You see, Axel, there never really was a painting for you to steal."

Alastair stood up and began making his way throughout the room to the empty spot on the wall.

"Let me explain myself. Initially, there was a painting. My good friend, your new client, C.C., wanted this masterpiece, but when I learned I could completely eradicate you and your pride from my turf, things changed. I decided to gift C.C. the painting so he wouldn't have to steal it, and paid for his silence. "

"So, you want to get rid of my pride? You realize there are other lion shifters in New York, right?"

“Of course, but you’re the ones in my area, my neighborhood, so to speak.

Everyone knew about the Collector’s Pride.

You are well known for your work, Axel, that was not an issue.

The problem came when you opened that bar, The Gin Room.

Your presence became too close for comfort.

One moment you’re dealing with art, and the next you’re getting under my nose, you know what I mean? ”

Axel looked at Alastair with incredulity.

“You’re telling me that instead of coming to talk to me personally, you decided to kidnap my mate and force me to come here. I have my own business, I would never meddle in yours. This jealousy and cock show is unnecessary. For fuck’s sake, Alastair, your father would never approve.”

“Stop bringing up my father, Alastair snapped. “He’s dead.”

“Yes, and he was my friend, and he agreed to me opening that bar. What do you think, kid? I just waltzed in here and decided to set up a business? I know my stuff.”

“Well, Axel, I don’t think you do because if you did, you would have realized you were walking right into a trap, and when my mate found out who yours was, well, it was as if destiny was handing me your head on a silver platter.”

“Your mate?”

“Nessa, come out.”

At that moment, a woman peeked her head through the adjacent door.

“Come, darling, time to reveal your face.”

Axel gaped and started to laugh.

“Nessa?” Alice cried.

“Sorry, Alice. I tried to warn you, but you wouldn’t listen,” Nessa said. She took Alastair’s hand. “This was the guy I was telling you about the other night.”

Axel growled low. He could hear Alice’s heartbeat and labored breathing. She was not doing well. It was time to cut to the chase.

“All right, Alastair, so what do you want? For us to close the bar and leave?”

“Initially, yes, but now that I have you here, I want your head, Axel. If we get rid of you, not only will the bar be closed but your little pride will come down like a pack of dominoes. It would be one less thing to worry about, one less rival to watch out for. The hyenas could dominate the art industry with the cheetahs at their side.”

Axel rubbed his temples.

“Alastair, I couldn’t care less about your little gang war, but I’ll tell you what. Let me help my mate. Give me your word she’ll get out of here safely and we’ll fight, though your father is probably stirring in his grave, but you need a lesson.”

“No!” Alice screamed.

He shot her a warning glance. Alastair chuckled and rubbed his hands together.

“Fair enough. I wouldn’t want you to harm mine anyway.” He winked at Nessa, who blushed. “The two of them can leave. Nessa, honey, get out of here.”

“No,” Alice wept running into his arms. Axel embraced her. He clasped her chin and forced her gaze to his.

“Trust me,” he said. “Everything is going to be okay.” He clasped her right hand. “Do you feel the strength of my fingers? Every joint, every callous. Stay grounded, Baby Girl. You’ll be holding it again in no time. I promise.”

“Axel, please.”

Nessa grabbed Alice’s forearm and pulled her away from him. Axel turned his attention back to Alastair. As soon as he heard the elevator ping shut, he grinned and stripped off his jacket.

“All right, kitty cat, let’s teach you a lesson in diplomacy.”

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Alice pulled out of Nessa's grasp as soon as they reached the bottom. Pushing her out the doors, she hit the button for the last floor.

"Alice!" Nessa screamed. She tried to fight her way back in, but the elevator was already closing.

Alice gave her another hard shove, sending her sprawling onto the polished floor.

"I thought we were friends," she cried.

"Alice, please, don't be silly. Don't go back up there," Nessa yelled.

But it was too late, the box was moving steadily up. Her heart hammered in her ears and her breath came out in spurts, and black spots danced in her vision, but she fought against the panic. She had to do something. She had to help somehow. Axel was in danger.

The doors slid open with a chime. A scream caught in her throat at the ghastly sight, and she rushed forward. The two bodyguards which had kidnapped her saw her and hurried to restrain her. She fought against them, but it was useless. Wide-eyed, she watched the scene unfold.

Two wild animals clashed violently in the middle of the office. They broke apart, crashing into bookcases and sending the contents tumbling to the floor.

Clearly heavier and larger, the lion approached the cheetah in large strides, but the smaller animal darted to one side and then the other, its speed unsurpassable. Alastair

evaded every move from Axel with an agility which was difficult to follow with the naked eye.

Without warning, it lashed out, cutting through the lion's flank with its claws.

The lion roared in pain and pounced in retaliation, seizing the cheetah between its mid-stride.

The cheetah struggled to get up, but the lion was too powerful, keeping it pinned down on the floor.

It was over in minutes. The lion's superior weight and strength evident.

Eventually, the two men shifted back. Axel had Alastair pinned down, the younger man bleeding profusely from claw marks on his shoulders where he'd been held.

"This is why cheetahs don't mess with lions," Axel said with a growl. "I will not get in your way, Alastair. Don't you get in mine. Do the smart thing, build alliances, not enemies. When you're ready to talk, come see me."

Alastair nodded. Fear was etched on his face.

Axel released him and turned to her with a victorious smile. The bodyguards released her, and she ran to his arms, snuggling her face into his chest. She fought back the tears of relief.

"Thanks for waiting, Baby Girl." He grasped her hand and squeezed. "I told you you'd feel it again," he whispered in her ear.

She nodded.

“Are you okay?” he asked, twisting so he could look at her face.

“I’m fine. I was scared for you.”

“You were brave. You are brave, Alice.”

“Not enough. I—”

Axel smiled kindly.

“Let’s get out of here and talk, Baby Girl.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Alice shifted nervously in her seat. She tried to keep herself from fidgeting in the black dress she wore. It had been the only thing she'd found in her closet that wasn't jeans and hoodies and nice enough to go out to one of the most expensive restaurants in the cities. The soft warm glow of the lights created an intimate ambience. The tables were placed so each diner had a sense of privacy, while the rich purple velvet chairs, a staple of the restaurant, combined perfectly with the rest of the high-end décor.

She took a sip of the wine they'd ordered, relishing the taste. She recalled the last hour of her life with a smile. As soon as they had stepped out of her workplace, Axel had crushed her in his arms and kissed her until she couldn't breathe. Then, he'd taken her hand and led her to his car. She'd tried to say something, to explain, but he'd told her to save it for later.

"I get extremely hungry after a fight, Baby Girl. We're going to your place to get you something nice to wear, as well as some essentials for the weekend, and then we're going out to dinner to The Velvet Parlor."

"But Axel."

"No, buts, Baby Girl. I need to eat so I can think and properly woo you."

"Axel, you don't need to woo me."

"Silence, or I'll spank your ass raw."

Too shocked to say much else, she'd kept quiet while he made some work calls. Back at her place, he'd helped her pack some things and waited while she showered and changed. Then they'd taken the car back here, and now he'd gone to the bathroom and left her alone with her thoughts.

The truth was, she was all over the place. On the one hand, the fight and the fear of losing him had made her see she couldn't live without him. She loved him, as crazy as that was. Being with Axel felt right. On the other hand, she was still terrified of the future. Now she was jobless, and thieving wasn't something she ever wanted to get into. Besides, her whole world had suddenly opened to an array of shifters which might not want her in it if they mated.

"A penny for your thoughts," Axel whispered in her ear, his warm breath and voice like a caress in her most intimate places.

"You'll get them for free, I'm afraid." She smiled nervously. Alice clenched and unclenched her hands, then clasped them together. Axel sat and covered them with his much larger ones. "Axel," she started.

"Tell me, Baby Girl."

She cocked her head in awe. How could his gaze devour her and at the same time peel back the layers of endless fear she covered herself with? She was naked under him, yet she was also safe. He wouldn't judge her.

"I love you," she blurted.

His pupils dilated with undeniable pleasure and a smile which melted her heart formed on his lips.

"And I love you, Baby Girl."

Alice breathed deeply, the knowledge of his feelings fueling her next words.

“But I’m scared about the mating. I don’t think I can do it. Not yet. I need time,” she said, the torrent of words spilling without pause.

“Alice, I will give you all the time you need. You have already gifted me with your love. What more could a man ask for?”

“You will?”

“As long as you’re with me, Baby Girl, as long as you love me, that is all that matters. We don’t need to complete the mating ritual right now. The animal can wait. I am certain of our bond. We can wait until you’re ready.”

Tears gathered at the corner of her eye. She sniffed. Axel stood and kneeled in front of her.

“Ignore the rest of the people, Baby Girl. This is about you and me,” he said soothingly, as if he understood the embarrassment the public display caused her. “I want you to know I will take care of you, Baby Girl. No matter what. I love you.”

Alice focused on his eyes and his face. This was her mate. Her man. She wasn’t ready to mate officially yet, but deep down she knew she’d take the step soon. She leaned forward and found Axel’s lips. His small gasp of surprise making her giggle.

“I am yours, Daddy. Forever.”

The End