



LION TIME
Zenina Masters

Running toward a better option in life, a lioness finds herself right in the tiger's clutches.

Lee was raised to be subservient, but her soul was screaming in agony with every moment in her household. Her mother helps her escape to the Crossroads the very night her father begins proceedings to sell Lee to one of his companions as third wife in a pride.

She was unprepared for the dating scene and shocked by the mating scene at the Crossroads, but the moment she sees something wrong, her shock turns into action and she does what she has to do.

James watched the lioness in his bar, but despite her body being exactly his type her shy demeanor is a turnoff. He wants a woman who can hold her own with him, a woman who can stand at his side, not behind him. He is convinced that she is too timid for him until she follows two thugs out into the night and claws them bloody before they can attack their vulnerable target.

Watching her go from timid to ferocious, he has to reassess his first impression, and he has to admit, the claws are a bit of a turn on.

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Lion Time

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Lion Time

Shifting Crossroads book 2

By

Zenina Masters

Chapter One

When she pulled up to the house, Lee knew something was up. The potted plants near the entryway of the pride house were turned ninety degrees to the right. It was a signal she and her mother had worked out when Lee first started her second life.

Lee left her car, got her bag and changed clothes right in the middle of the driveway. A strange car was parked nearby, and her mother's warning was taken seriously. When she was wearing the same clothing she had left in, she locked her uniform in her trunk and walked into the home that she had grown

up in.

“Leandiir, I am so glad you are home.”
Her mother rushed at her and quickly
scent-marked her.

“Hi, Mom. Well, it was a hectic day at
the card shop. I have my pay stub for this
week.” Lee handed the stub to her
mother and looked over her shoulder to
the living room.

Her father’s three other wives were
sitting and attending to her father and his
guest.

Lee tensed when her father called out,
“Leandiir, come in here.”

She straightened her blouse and slacks, removed her shoes and walked into the living room. “Hello, Father.”

The other man perked up and looked her over.

“Leandiir, this is my friend, Carloth. He is looking for a third wife, and I have offered you as his mate.”

Shock rippled through Lee, and she had to fight to keep her inner lioness from ripping his throat out. “I am flattered.” Her voice was flat.

Carloth came up to her, and it took every ounce of self-control she had to not claw him open.

He circled her and touched her shoulders, back, buttocks and breasts as if he had a right to. “A little more meat on you than I like, but since you are capable of working and bringing funds into my pride, I will overlook that. Yes, you will do fine.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips, and Lee jerked her head away from the slobbery contact.

Her father spoke up. “Not so fast, Carloth. You have to come up with the bride price, and my little Leandiir does not come cheap. Child, you may go to your room while we hash out the details.”

Trembling with suppressed rage, Leandiir passed her mother. Her mom grabbed her hand, and when she released her, there was a small card in Lee's palm.

She walked up the stairs to her room, past her siblings who were arranged in the hall with their leonine ears perked to hear every detail. Eleven half siblings, they all looked at her with sorrow in their features as she passed. They would be next, one by one.

Lee sighed. Well, the girls would be able to finish school at least. The boys would be thrown out when they were eighteen minus one day.

In her room, she looked at the scrap of paper in her hand. A phone number. She walked to her bed and slid her hand under the pillow that carried her mother's scent. Aha. The burner phone.

With calm deliberation, she dialed the number and waited while it rang. When a woman's voice answered, "Hello?" Lee spoke quickly and quietly.

"Hello, my name is Lee, and I need to find a mate...fast."

"My name is Kris, and is there somewhere we can meet?"

Lee thought about it for a moment and rattled off an address.

“Be there in two hours.” Kris hung up.

Lee stayed in her room until her mother came in an hour later. Ariil Aflai slipped a small packet into her hand, kissed her forehead and left the room.

Lee was used to the silent communication. It meant that her father was nearby and Rasson Aflai was not a man who would support her choice to run like hell.

She waited until the house was settling for the night and slipped out her window and onto the trellis that she and her mother had quietly reinforced when she was fifteen. Her first job had meant early mornings and bathing in an icy

stream before she went home again, but it was money in her pocket and that money had sent her to night school.

She had fought for her education, and when she managed her nursing degree, it took all of her skills at sneaking around and her mother's help to keep her from being found out by her father.

Lee slipped away from the house and engaged in a partial shift. She ran to the local vet's compound and slipped into the empty large-animal barn in the back.

A quick check of her watch showed that she was three minutes early. Lee paced, gradually letting her lion legs shift back into human. Her feet were bare, and she

was wearing only the slacks and blouse that she used to hide her nursing gear.

Lee sighed. She was not prepared for this.

A glowing doorway opened and two women walked through. One had all the hallmarks of an avian shifter, and to Lee's senses, she smelled an owl, with the musk of a bear. Feathers and the night were on the wind with the warmth of fur in the nuances. The other woman smelled of lightning, ozone and cookies.

“Hello?” Lee didn't know what she was supposed to do.

“Do you have something for me?” the

cookie woman smiled, and the voice was familiar to Lee.

“Yes, Kris. My mother handed me this.” Lee extended the small packet and waited while Kris examined the contents before handing it to her friend.

“Do you know why you are here?”

Lee blushed. “I need to find a mate... fast. My father is trying to sell me to one of his work buddies, and I just want to find a man who will want only me. My mom has told me about the Crossroads, and I want to try going there.”

Kris smiled but she asked, “What do you mean, only you? Does your father sleep

around?”

Lee shook her head. “No. My father is a fundamentalist lion. He believes that the women in the pride should take care of him, and he has four wives to make sure that it is a comfortable life for him.”

“I thought you said he worked.”

“He does, he has a job to keep up appearances in the human world, but all the homes, cars, vacations, land, were bought by my mother and the other women of the pride. He only owns the big screen television and beer.”

The owl was staring at Lee in surprise. “The women allow it?”

“He was young and strong once, and that is when the abuse was most prevalent. If I get married to my father’s choice, I will be starved and beaten to show me my place. I will fight back eventually, and then, things will go badly for everyone around.”

Kris nodded. “Let’s make sure that it doesn’t come to that. Now, you are heading to the shifters’ Crossroads. It is a dimensional bubble that can only be reached by folks with my sort of talent.

You will be safe there.”

Lee nodded and listened to the description of the entry gate, the Meditation Centre and the hostel where

she would be staying. An account was set up for her, and she need only use the icon that Kris handed to her to buy food and clothing.

She could stay as long as it took, but it would be best if she forced herself to socialize as much as possible to increase her chances.

Lee nodded and touched the wristband with the small icon on it. “Is that it? Don’t you need money from me?”

“Your mother provided us with hair from as many of your relatives as she could, claw trimmings, too. Those hairs will be used in spells for courage and valour.” Kris smiled. “Are you ready?”

“Now?”

“No time is better.” Kris closed her eyes and opened the gateway.

Steeling her nerves, Leandiir stepped through the energy and into the last chance for freedom.

Chapter Two

I have you. Relax and breathe.” The woman “with the pale eyes smiled at her. Lee could smell bird on her, but there was more of the scent of magic than usual in a shifter.

“I am sorry. My legs are numb.”

“It is a side effect of the transport for some.

Usually predators suffer numbness. I am Teal, and I will be your guide to the Crossroads.” Teal lifted her carefully. “Take a few steps, it will dissipate.”

Lee stumbled forward, and the feeling

returned to her legs. She sighed in relief when her feet came under her control once again. “I am Lee.”

“I am glad to greet you on behalf of the Crossroads. I believe that you need clothing, and from there, I will take you on a tour of the town.”

“That sounds good. I don’t have any shoes.”

Lee spoke quietly.

Teal’s face contorted in an expression of pity.

“Of course, this way.”

Lee stepped carefully over the rough paving until they entered the general store.

Teal cleared her throat, “Andy, we need everything from the skin out, please.”

A man with a medium build, brown hair and the scent of a beaver stepped forward. “Let me see. What are you in the mood for, Miss?”

“Um. I would like clothing appropriate for the bar or meeting someone. I really don’t know. This was all rather sudden.” Lee shifted from foot to foot but kept her movements small. Her father had never liked a woman to twitch in front of him, and it was his temper she kept in mind

every time she dealt with a man. Better safe than sorry.

Teal seemed to see her nervousness and swiftly rattled off what she thought Lee would need.

Lee let herself be shepherded into a change room and put on the clothing that her two associates flipped over the edge of the room.

“Come out, Lee, I need to see how the fit is.”

Teal’s voice was gentle, and Lee winced.

She took a subservient pose when

stressed because it was easier. Being here with new people around her, she was making a horrible impression, a lioness who acted like a sheep.

The jeans were a snug fit. The top was cut just to the centre of her bra, so she wasn't going to be bending over any time soon. Dragging in a deep breath, Lee left the change room. "How does it look?"

Teal paused and whistled. "Good. You need a bra that is a little more complimentary, but the outfit is good."

Andy came forward with some high-heeled cork wedges. "These should fit. Can you wear heels?"

Lee nodded. “Yes. I can.”

She took them and bent to slip the shoes on while Teal looked for a bra that she thought would fit.

Andy was staring at her when she stood, and she slammed her hand against her chest. She had forgotten the damned drape of the brilliant blue shirt.

She growled at Andy, and he broke his mesmerized stare. “Sorry, Miss. The shirt looks good on you.”

“Fine. Whatever. I am going to try on some of the other stuff.” She retreated back into the change room, slipping the bra on when it flipped over the door. It

was a balconette style, putting her breasts up and out on a shelf-like underwire. Surprisingly, it was comfortable.

The next shirt was a wrap in crystalline white.

“Show me.” Teal was insistent.

Lee came out, showed off the bra and the new shirt before she retreated back to put on the next round of clothing.

She had four tops, two bras, seven sets of panties, three pairs of jeans, some socks, shoes and the wedges. Her bracelet glowed briefly as she scanned it over the checkout at the counter. She

was wearing the white shirt and jeans with the flats and felt a lot better than she had when she arrived.

Teal was smiling with personal pride. “Now, we will drop your purchases off at the hostel and continue the tour. You are going to be in the large-predator hostel, is that all right?”

“It’s fine. It is what I am, after all.”

Teal chuckled, “You aren’t like most of the lionesses that have come through the Crossroads.”

Lee grimaced. “I was raised in a fundamentalist lion compound. We have many restrictions that keep the young

females under control.”

“And yet you are here.”

“I know. I hate that control, but I am afraid of what I will do if I let go and do what my instincts are screaming to.” Lee had never been this open with anyone before, certainly not a stranger.

After Leandiir checked in at the hostel, Teal was almost hopping with eagerness. Lee sensed that the enthusiasm was not Teal’s usual method of dealing with newcomers.

“You have seen the shop, there is the

café which is open around the clock. The bed and breakfasts are down that lane and the bar is up and on right.” Teal practically hauled her to the bar.

The scents and sounds overwhelmed Lee as they entered the building. Bodies writhed on the dance floor and many were huddling together in booths. Teal hauled her to the bar itself. “Chuck!

Chuck!”

The graceful, bald man covered in sinuous tattoos came toward them. “Teal, fancy seeing you in here.”

Lee blinked when she looked at his face—the serpentine eyes were

unmistakable.

“Chuck, this is a new arrival. Lee. Lee is a little shy, and I would appreciate it if you could keep an eye on her.” Teal’s voice was low and direct.

Chuck looked at Lee, and she returned his stare until she grew uncomfortable with the confrontation and looked away.

Chuck smiled, “I will keep an eye on her. No one will bother her.”

“Well, let some bother her, or her time here will be of extreme duration.” Teal grinned.

Lee turned to Teal, “Thanks for looking

out for me.”

“It was no trouble. Now, stay here, try and relax, and Chuck will take care of you. I have to get back to the centre before Tony comes looking for me.”

Teal gave her a gentle hug and left the bar.

Lee turned back to Chuck and sat warily on one of the barstools.

He smiled, showing sharp needle-like canines.

“What can I get for you?”

“I don’t really know. I don’t get out much.” Lee blinked as she realised that

it was the absolute truth. She didn't get out much. Friends were not allowed, nor were full-time jobs with any serious content.

“Long Island iced tea it is.” He collected a few bottles and began to mix the contents together in a glass.

The ice jingled gently as he passed the glass on a neat black coaster. “So, you are here to find a mate?”

“Yes. I have a time crunch. My father is trying to make a match with one of his work cronies, and the man is completely unsuitable.”

Chuck kept his hands busy cleaning and

tidying behind the bar, but his attention was completely on her.

“How is he unsuitable?”

“I have never wanted to be a plural wife. I don’t want to be part of his pride, working for him and bearing his young.”

Chuck frowned. “Plural wife?”

“Yes, I was raised in a small community where plural marriage is common. I have never wanted it for myself or my siblings.”

“So, tonight something came to a head, did it?”

Lee sipped at her drink and let the tension in her shoulders relax a little. “Yes, it did.”

Chuck nodded and kept working. It was the last personal question that he asked her. The rest of the conversation involved him pointing out likely males around the room and asking her opinions on them.

Jim Barnes watched the dark-haired woman with his bartender and took in her slumped shoulders, timid movements and lack of eye contact. She was passive, submissive and completely unsuitable for him as a mate.

Knowing that she was not the one for

him, he kicked himself for not being able to look away from her, in the gleaming white shirt that made her a beacon in the dimness of the bar.

It was coming up on Chuck's break, so he was going to take the opportunity to meet this mouse and find out what the draw was for him.

Hundreds of women made their way through his doors, but this was the only one who had had his inner tiger pacing behind his eyes. At first glance, she was attractive, she had curves that sent blood pooling in his groin, dark gold eyes and deep chestnut hair. It was unusual coloring for most prey species, but his human brain was him that this woman

was prey. His tiger disagreed.

Give him five minutes and he would find out.

Chapter Three

Lee narrowed her eyes at the clump of coyotes and the strange chemical tang that was coming from their table. She frowned as she ran through her mental catalogue of known street toxins and came up empty.

Two of the coyotes approached a table of young women, smiling and laughing, one of them told a joke that involved waving his arms around and everyone stepped away from the table. There. His friend slipped in and dosed the redhead's glass with whatever she was scenting.

“Chuck is on break, I am Jim.” A voice broke through her surveillance.

“Pleased to meet you, I am Leandiir, but call me Lee.” She absently extended her hand and was surprised when a large, warm masculine hand shook it.

It pulled her attention to him, and she blinked into a hot gold gaze.

They locked gazes and instead of her normal passivity, her lioness rose roaring to growl at him.

He blinked and smiled. “That was a surprise.”

She bit her lip and looked away. The

woman who had been dosed was being escorted out the door by the two coyotes. “Please excuse me.”

He opened his mouth and closed it in surprise, but she barely had a chance to register it before she was out the door after the trio.

She slipped out of her shoes and turned her legs into her lioness limbs. Walking silently down the streets after the trio, she increased speed as the young woman began to stumble.

The coyotes pulled their victim into the dark alley.

Lee broke into a silent run.

The coyotes pulled at the woman's clothing, and when the woman cried out softly in protest, it was all Lee needed.

She formed her claws and pulled the coyotes from her, clawing each across the face so she could find them later.

The men cried out in pain and scuttled backward.

Lee moved to their victim, a fox by the scent of her.

The woman's eyes were rolling in her head and a dark flush was moving across her chest.

“Miss, can you hear me?”

A thin whisper of sound came out, “Yes. So hot, everything is dark. Help me.”

Lee heard the crunch of feet on gravel behind her and whirled to defend the young woman.

Jim was standing and staring at her in surprise.

“Is she all right?”

“No, she has been dosed with something, and I don’t know what it is.”

Lee got to her feet with the young woman in her arms. “Is there a medical facility or a healer nearby?”

“Chuck can help. Come with me.” He started to walk back to the bar. “Can you carry her?”

“She doesn’t weigh anything, but can you carry my shoes?”

He hooked the strappy wedges on two fingers.

“This feels wrong.”

“Suck it up, buttercup. She is getting hotter.”

Jim blinked in shock and led the way back to the bar.

Lee watched her patient carefully. The

girl was flaring with color, and Lee was worried.

They entered the bar and the music stopped.

Jim called out, “Chuck, we need help.”

Chuck came running, and a crowd gathered around the woman with the torn clothing and erratic breathing.

Jim pushed two tables together.

Lee put her patient down but stayed nearby.

Chuck looked at her. “What did she get dosed with?”

“I don’t know. It was in her drink, smelled like a cross between pheromone and chemical.”

A girl who was with the young woman brought the glass forward. “This is the drink.”

Chuck sipped at it before Lee could stop him.

He swirled the drink around in his mouth and nodded before he spit the drink on the floor. “Got it.”

He opened his mouth, raised her arm and bit down.

The patient gasped and arched her back,

a low moan broke from her and a flexing shudder rippled over her skin.

Jim asked, “Do you know who it was?”

“Coyotes. I marked both their faces.”

Chuck winked, “How?”

“Claw marks. They should be fairly obvious.”

Chuck nodded. “I injected her with a flushing anti-toxin. She should be fine in a couple of hours.

Jim, I am going to warn Tony and Teal.”

Jim nodded. “We will take her to my

office.”

The woman whimpered and shifted away from Jim when he reached for her.

Lee raised her hand, scooped the woman up and nodded to him. “Lead the way, please.”

He led the way to his office. Lee deposited the woman on the couch and found a clean bar towel that she soaked in the office bathroom. She knelt at the woman’s side and sponged all abraded and lightly clawed areas while murmuring quietly.

“You have attended a woman in this condition before.” Jim crouched at her

side.

“Yes. The area I live in is notorious for abusive men. I am a nurse at a local women’s health centre. I have seen worse, far worse, unfortunately.” Lee kept her attention focused on the woman, but when she looked over to Jim, his face had a considering expression.

“You went after those men not knowing what they were. That is impressive.”

She shrugged. “Not really. I have seen coyotes before. They have their own way of moving, as do other species. I need to use that awareness in my work. If a husband comes in with a pregnant spouse, I need to know how he will

react to the birth before he does. It eases the way when they are crossbreeds.”

“So, you also act as midwife?”

“When I have to and never on the books.”

She got up to wring out the fabric, but Jim handed her a fresh wet cloth. “Thank you.”

The woman blinked, and Teal came through the door. “Oh, no. How is she, Lee?”

“Whatever Chuck did was effective. Her skin is coming back to normal, her breathing has eased and she should be

waking up in a few minutes.”

“You seem very sure, Lee.” Teal touched the woman’s hand, and the frown crease between her eyebrows relaxed. “And you are correct.”

“You have a healing ability?”

“No, just a grip on the status quo. I can simply feel if someone is well or not with a touch. It helps me with my work here.” Teal smiled.

“Do you know who she is?” Lee’s head came up as there was a knock on the door.

Jim leaned back and watched her,

gesturing for her to answer.

Lee opened the door, and a young wolf male was standing there. “Hello?”

“Is Sara all right?” He gave off all the hallmarks of a beta, but she could see the worry radiating from him.

“The young woman is Sara?”

He nodded.

“She will recover.” Testing a theory, Lee moved to close the door and the male went from beta to protective alpha in an instant. His arm came out to slam against the door, and Lee grabbed his arm, forcing him to his knees.

“I have to see her. We were supposed to meet here, but I had to file a report with my pack leader.” He winced and tried to free his arm, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“So, why are you here now?”

“I heard about what happened the moment I entered the bar. Chuck told me not to come up here, but I wanted to see her.” He grimaced and went silent.

Jim’s voice washed over her. “Let him go, Lee.

He will be fine. He needs to see her.”

Lee released him and backed away. Her

claws had come out to pin him, and she retracted them when he rushed past her.

Jim's hand gripped her arm and kept her from going to her patient. "Leave him. Teal will watch them. They need to be alone."

Lee hesitated as he hauled her out of the office and closed the door. He wrapped an arm around her waist and escorted her down the stairs to the bar. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Why are you being nice to me? When we first met, I saw contempt and pity in your eyes."

"Let's just say that while you are

stunning, you improve on further exposure. Now, shall we get that drink?”

Chapter Four

The first step off the stairs and into the bar had her greeted by a cacophony of applause and several whistles.

“It appears that I am not the only one to appreciate your worth, Lee.” Jim leaned down and whispered it in her ear, bringing her the scent of his hair and the musk of his skin.

She looked up and his hot gold eyes were glowing with interest. While Lee had hoped to get the attention of a large male to help protect her, she wasn't sure what to do now that she was eye to eye with one.

“Um. Thanks. Now, that drink?” She tried to shift away from him and looked down at her shirt.

“Damn.”

“What?”

“I got blood on my new shirt. I just bought this.” She sighed. There were slashes of coyote blood and the darker press of red from Sara’s wounds.

“The color combination just looks abstract. No one would guess that you had held yourself back from gutting those twisted little buggers.” Jim escorted her past her adoring fans and back to her seat on the barstool.

He left her and took Chuck's place behind the bar. The serpent raised his hands and went to attend to other patrons.

“So, do you have any preferences?”

Lee jumped as Jim's words came to her.

“What?”

His lips quirked in a flirty smile. “Do you have any preferences for alcohol? Do you have any favorite drinks?”

“No. I enjoyed the Long Island iced tea earlier.

What else is there?”

He sighed, “Why don’t I just use my instincts?”

She blushed. “I have found that instincts usually cause more harm than good.”

“Then you haven’t been using them correctly.”

He winked and began to throw a collection of items into a blender. She watched him rim a glass with sugar and poured the content of the blender into the tall hurricane glass.

He put a sliced strawberry on the edge and slipped a straw into it. “There you go.”

She frowned. “What is in it?”

“A little of this, a little of that and a lot of tequila. Try it.”

She licked her lips and sipped gently at the straw, her eyes widened as the strawberry and citrus hit her with the warmth of alcohol following immediately. “That’s very nice.”

He chuckled, his wide chest emphasized by his crossed arms tightening his black t-shirt. “Thank you.”

She sipped daintily at the drink and watched the people in the bar. The music was more subdued now, but couples were getting together in every booth

available and talking softly as foreplay commenced.

“Do you have a medical facility here at all?”

Jim shook his head, his dark hair curling against his neck. “No, we have never had need of one. We usually just bring the wounded back through the portal.”

“That isn’t sensible. What if someone just cuts themselves and needs stitches? Even shifters need time to heal.” She frowned.

“Dira at the Open Heart B&B is a fairly good medic, but she keeps odd hours.” He shrugged.

The movement of his shoulders was fascinating to her. She didn't know if it was the drink or if she was getting used to him, but she could watch him for days. Blinking rapidly, she sipped at the drink again, surprised to find it empty.

“Would you care for another?”

Lee shook her head. “No. I think I will head back to the hostel. It has been a very long day.”

She got to her feet and had to clutch the stool for support. “Whoa. Where did my knees go?”

Jim came around the bar with a quick nod to Chuck and put an arm around her

waist. “Come on, tough stuff. We will get you to the hostel in one piece.”

“This feels weird.”

He smiled down at her with amusement. “I can’t believe you haven’t had a drink before.”

“It isn’t allowed. Pride rules...well, my father’s rules. No women can drink. It might impair their earning potential.”

His tone got soft. “Pride rules?”

“Yeah. Fundamentalist lion pride. The male is king, but he sits on his ass. It isn’t right. I have looked into natural lions, and while the females do the

majority of the hunting, the male protects the pride against other males. My father invites the idiots into the house.” She stumbled, and he held her more tightly.

“Does he? Like who?”

“Like that stupid wiener Carloth who grabbed my ass and called me fat.” She grimaced. “I hate him.”

“Who is he?”

“Supposed to be my husband. He already has two wives. I don’t want him, and so my mom helped me come here. He’s a stupid, fat lion. Lazy, too.”

The hostels loomed in the darkness, and

she smiled at the claw icon on the female predator hostel. “I think I have to go in alone.”

“Yes, they are gender blocked. Will you come by the bar tomorrow?”

She smiled up at him and went up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. There was a trace of stubble on his skin and a muscle jumped under her lips. “I will come back tomorrow...or later today.”

He turned his head before she could back away, and his lips caught hers in a light kiss.

Confused, she blinked, and he gently helped her into motion by turning her and

giving her a light pat on her ass. “Today then.”

Lee stumbled into the hostel and the bed that she had been assigned. She skinned out of her clothing and tucked herself between the sheets with a stunned smile on her lips.

She was out in seconds.

James Barnes strode back to the Crossed Star bar and found the man he wanted to speak to in a matter of moments.

Without asking permission, Jim grabbed the young lion by his collar and hauled him away from the female he had been courting. When they were in the relative

quiet of the hallway, Jim asked, “What the hell are fundamentalist lions?”

The young man looked confused and then understanding lit his features. “A few decades ago, there was a cult of unattached males who were tired of being shunned by the fathers of the women they wanted. The males started stealing the omegas and moved to the desert where they could train them to obey. The men kept stealing women, and eventually, they all had prides of their own. It’s considered a freakish off shoot of our society, but most who hear about it pretend that they haven’t.”

“What about the women, the children?”

“The women were convinced to comply and the children were raised to believe that this was the way things should be. Only a handful of offspring bothered to escape and none of them managed to enter a normal lion society. No one would have them.”

The young man quivered in his grip, and Jim felt the points of his teeth extend.

“So if one of these women were to break free?”

“They wouldn’t have a chance with a lion. No family would allow those weak genes to be carried on. Um...can I go now?”

Jim released him, and the younger male

ran for the bar where his female was still waiting with a concerned expression on her face.

What the male had said made sense, but Lee's frantic search for an alternate showed that she was not content to be handed off to another lazy lion.

She was a woman of spirit despite her upbringing and her medical education was obvious. *How had she managed to go to school when she was confined by a cult that wanted to control her every motion?*

He looked toward the door. She would return later today, and he would see if she was willing to answer his questions.

Chuck broke through his reverie. “Time for the supply run, Jim.”

Jim nodded and got the dolly to haul the supplies from the Meditation Centre to the bar. He had a business to run after all.

Chapter Five

Lee sat in the café wearing her new blue shirt, jeans and the flats from the night before.

She accepted the coffee and the pitcher of water gratefully. “Thank you, Nia.”

The beaver shifter nodded and quickly made her way to fetch the rest of Lee’s order.

A shadow fell across her table, and Lee looked up. “Hello, Jim.”

He grinned at the water and slid into the booth across from her. “Good morning, Lee. I wasn’t expecting to see you up

and around yet.”

She shrugged. “I have always been an early riser.”

He looked to Nia and raised his finger. A cup of coffee was in front of him in seconds. “Thank you, Nia.”

The server blushed and returned to her station behind the counter.

Lee grabbed the cream before Jim got his hand on it, and he raised his brow. She grimaced and used it first. It was a small rebellion, but she was forcing herself into exactly that kind of act now that she was away from home.

She handed him the cream and cleared her throat. “I would think that a bar owner would sleep in a bit later than this.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. Sara is fine, the claw marks have healed and her suitor has accompanied her home.”

“What about the coyotes?”

“They are facing the punishment of their pack.

Their actions have banned the pack from the Crossroads for the next five years. They also have been sentenced to pay reparation to Sara for the poisoning.”

Lee leaned back as a plate of ham, eggs and toast was slid in front of her. “Do you know what the substance was? It wasn’t strictly chemical, there was an herbal and magical component in it.”

Jim nodded and sipped at his coffee. “I would agree on the magical aspect. It made it easier for Chuck to make an antidote. He has written a report that should get the transporters to engage in some screens for this kind of thing. It is the equivalent of human date-rape drugs but stronger and designed to block the shifting ability of the victim.”

Lee nodded and dug into her food, eating before he had his, another taboo down the tubes.

His stack of pancakes with a separate plate of bacon made her smile, cats needed protein and they tended to be direct about getting it.

“I see you have an appetite.” He admired her huge platter of food.

“I do. It is my one constant.” She didn’t add that she normally had to wait until her father and brothers ate their fill. The rarity of hot food was not lost on her, and she quickly ate everything on her plate.

She had barely finished her coffee when Nia was at her side grabbing her cup and filling it with a wink.

Jim's pancakes seemed to evaporate, but his bacon was tempting. Taking her courage in her hands, she snuck a piece of bacon off his plate and received nothing more than raised eyebrows in response. Her grin of triumph as she nibbled at the crispy treat was unmistakable.

She stared at him with unabashed interest. In the light of day, his cheekbones were not as harshly cut as the shadows had made it seem.

He flicked her a look. "Most lions are tawny, your hair is dark."

Lee smiled. "It is a recessive gene. Not a lot of my family have it. Thankfully, it

has caused a delay in my father finding me a mate. One of my younger sisters is already married.”

“So, no one wanted you because of your hair color?”

She shrugged. “More or less. I stood out, and in a pride, no one but the male is to stand out.”

“Bastards.” He finished off his pancakes and bit through the bacon viciously.

“You won’t find me arguing. My brothers are beginning to show attitude, and it hurts me to think that they will turn into their father if they survive to adulthood.” She shuddered at the mental

image of the two oldest fighting and stopping when they sensed their father approaching in lion form. Both of her oldest brothers now wore the scars that their father had imprinted them with, just like Lee's.

The price of being noticed was pain. It was something that her father drummed into them from the time they were cubs. The bits of affection that her mother had been able to provide her with had made Lee what she was today, hiding in a pocket dimension and trying to find a man.

Lee exhaled sharply. "Well, I suppose I should resume my hunt. Where do you think likely men are going to be at this

time of day?”

He jerked as if he was struck. Jim paused and smiled slowly.

Lee knew that smile. It was the smile of a hunter. She could even see a little bit of fang.

“I will show you where they are likely to be hiding at this time of day. Most won’t be up, but there is an area where you can shift and have a run if you like.”

Lee fought tears. “Really? Could we do that first?”

Jim got to his feet and nodded to Nia. “Yes, Lee, we definitely could.”

Lee slid from the booth, her icon clicking on the surface. “I think I have to pay.”

“Breakfast is on me. It is the least I can do for what you did for Sara.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and steered her out of the café.

“I wanted to do it. I am rarely allowed to offer help unless I am at work. When she said no, it was all I needed.”

She could tell that Jim was altering his stride to match hers. It sent a warm spiral down her spine.

His arm around her waist increased the sense of warmth.

“Where are we going?”

He chuckled. “There is a field behind the bed and breakfasts that borders on the forest. We can run there and enjoy the sunlight.”

“I can’t remember the last time I shifted.” She sighed and tried to remember, but the memories struck pain and humiliation, so she receded.

“You do a remarkable partial shift if I may say so. I have rarely seen a woman who can stay upright with claws and paws.” Jim waved at two men who were busy at work building a structure using nothing but hand tools.

“What are they building?”

“It’s an adjunct to the Meditation Centre. You have to keep the beavers busy or they start ripping down the older buildings and starting all over again.” He smiled brightly.

“How many beavers are here?”

“Four family groups. There are a few of us that do not fit into the human world anymore, like Chuck. His eyes are fixed, and he has embraced his Naga heritage. He still manages an active creative life, but his future is here.”

“The serpent eyes. Can’t he just use contacts?”

“His second lids pop them off.”

They were on a charming walk through morning at the Crossroads. A few wobbly couples were making their way to the Meditation Centre and others were heading for the café.

An open path behind the Victorian B&B's led to a strange structure. “What is this?”

“It's a change room, literally. You can leave your clothing and shoes here in complete safety.

The charm that you use for purchases will shift with you so keep it on.”

She broke free of his grip and lunged for the first open kiosk. A shimmering veil dropped into place the moment she was inside. Curious, she stepped toward it and the veil lifted. “Cool.”

Her clothing came off in seconds, and she folded them, putting them on a shelf at the back of the kiosk. Lee breathed deeply and reached inward for her lioness. There was no need to reach, she came roaring to the surface and wrapped herself around Lee in a way she had never been allowed to before.

Lee bounded out of the change room and bounced into the meadow. She shook her fur out and twitched her tail.

Jim streaked out of the change room next to hers, and as he cleared the doorway, the gauzy film closed it. The enormous tiger ran to her and stroked his head against hers. She returned the greeting, scent marking him as he had her.

His eyes were closed for a moment before he opened them and jerked his head. She followed his lead, and before she knew it, she was running.

Her muscles extended and bunched as she felt the green of the grasses collapsing under her paws. It was glorious.

She jumped at the butterfly that passed her and followed it through the meadow.

The huff came a moment before Jim tumbled her through the grasses. She rolled free and shook her head. She crouched, her head and shoulders low while her hind legs prepared to spring.

When Jim turned toward her, she lunged and caught him in the centre of his ribs, knocking him to his back. She didn't stop. She kept moving past him and turned to crouch in attack posture again.

A very human giggle was rippling through her thoughts. This was fun, plain old fun with no other purpose than enjoyment. She was getting ready to pounce again when another butterfly passed her nose. She batted at it and snapped. It was wily.

Across the meadow, another butterfly flitted, and she took off after it, seeing the huge bulk of Jim's furred form where she had just been sitting.

She chased butterflies around the meadow for an hour. Jim lazed on a warm rock in the sun, and she occasionally brought him flowers or grasses that she found interesting.

He covered his eyes when she carefully dragged a beaver over to him and it shifted form when she let it go. She sat and watched the man stalk back to the forest where she had caught him, and he returned to his beaver form.

Lee settled in the grass and sighed. The sun was warm, her body was tingling with the ability to run free, and Jim was watching over her.

She blinked and sat up when that thought occurred to her. She shook her head and looked warily at Jim.

He merely gave her a lazy glance and got to his feet. He left the warm rock, settled on the grass and curled around her.

She put her chin on his back and closed her eyes. There was time enough to examine her peculiar feelings for him later.

Chapter Six

“What the hell is this?” Jim was awake under her, his human body was pressed to hers and his hand was on her lower back.

“A scar. Well scars. It was my father’s favorite strike zone when I was shifted.” Lee blushed and then yelped as he sat up, flipped her so that she was lying across his lap and examining her back.

“He scarred you. Why?”

“To make us aware that we were his. All of my siblings are marked this way when we start to change. If we survive

the infection, we know better than to show teeth around him. Come to think of it, that was the last time that I shifted fully.”

“There are three layers of claw marks here.”

She shrugged. “I suppose I was a slow learner.”

His fingers delicately traced her spine. “Your father does not deserve to be one.”

“I know, but at the same time, I am glad to be here.”

Jim sighed and continued to stroke her

back, idly running his fingertips to her buttocks and back. She squirmed a bit and tried to leave. “Well, I think you have seen all there is to see.”

He sighed. “No, I haven’t, but it is enough for now.”

His erection was pressing against her belly, so she gingerly moved away from it before rolling in the grass to face him.

Jim was lovely as a tiger, but he was breathtaking as a naked male. Every inch was sculpted, honed and taut. She blinked, blushed and moved her gaze upward with a jerk when his cock flexed.

Embarrassed, she shifted back into her lioness and bounded across the meadow to the change rooms. Her bra fought her, the panties fought her, and by the time she had slithered into her jeans and shirt, there was a shadow waiting for her on the other side of the veil. Muttering under her breath, she stomped into her shoes and stalked toward the glittering expanse of the veil.

Jim was dressed and leaning casually against the wall. “Shall we continue the tour?”

Lee blushed. “Yes. That would be nice.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist again and pointed out the large houses.

“Those are the homes where the majority of the staff at the Crossroads live. The B&B staff do the housekeeping. Since our hours fluctuate with the amount of clients here, we need someone to tidy up after us.”

Lee chuckled. “Men usually do.”

He shrugged. “Well, sleeping in the meadow and bathing myself with my tongue was considered gauche.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining his rough tongue on her skin. She blinked and shook her head. “I can see their point.”

He chuckled. “We never did formal

introductions. My full name is James Aloicious Barnes.”

She laughed. “Leandiir Aflai. The name was chosen so that I could not run and try to get a bank account on my own. It made it impossible to get any funding if I approached a bank.”

“Pleased to meet you, Leandiir. How did you manage to get an education if you couldn’t get a loan?”

Lee sighed. “It was a plan generations in the making. My great-great grandmother went to a seer and asked who would be able to break free of the prides, the name was produced, Leandiir Aflai. My great-great grandmother’s father set up the

account. He set it up as a trust that would exist with that name on it.”

“He wasn’t a fundamentalist?”

“No. Great-great gran was stolen while her family was passing through on their way west.

They looked for her, but her husband held her until she was pregnant, by which point, her family could no longer legally claim her.”

A low growl came out of Jim’s throat. “How can you live in that situation?”

She stopped and forced him to a halt. “I can’t live in that situation. If Carloth

touches me again, I will rip his throat out and my own people will put me to death.”

“I am sorry. My words were thoughtless.”

She nodded. “Yes, they were, but you have to understand that I have been taking every opportunity presented to me and making a few of my own in an effort to live my own life. In another six months, I would have had enough saved up to take myself and three of my sisters to a city, and in doing so, I would have given three more lionesses a chance at a normal life.”

“Why three of your sisters?”

“They are already adults. It will only take one of my father’s friends to ask for one or all of them and they will be trapped.” She sighed, turned away from him and walked back toward the café.

“May I ask you more questions?”

She blinked back tears of frustration.

“Why?”

He grabbed her arm and turned her to face him.

He cupped her jaw and wove his fingers through her hair. “I want to know what I am getting in to.”

Lee leaned up to meet him halfway,

holding onto his shoulders as his lips tasted hers. She felt safe, warm and cherished as his lips stroked over hers slowly. She shivered and leaned into him, wrapping her in his scent.

He released her head, wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet. Polite applause broke out, and it made Lee back her head away with a jerk.

The person applauding was Chuck, and he gave her a salute before he turned and walked off toward the bar.

Jim was staring at her, his eyes hot and the erection confined by his jeans pressed against her thigh. Her feet were dangling about a foot off the ground, and

his height was far more obvious when he overlapped her on all sides. He licked her taste off his lips, and she felt a hot surge of something in her belly.

She mimicked him and watched his skin tighten over his cheekbones and his jaw flex. His cock tapped gently against her through the separation of their clothing.

He swallowed and sighed. “I think we need to get some lunch.”

Lee’s hands didn’t want to let him go as he slowly lowered her to the ground. The friction between them warmed her, and the gleam in his eyes told her it was not one-sided.

He held her tightly against him as they made their way back to the café and the lioness within her roared in triumph. He was hers now. They only needed to finalize the details.

“So, you like chasing butterflies?” Jim smiled as Nia bustled away with their order. His feet bracketed hers under the table.

“They are just so fascinating. I am going to have to find that beaver and apologize.” She winced and fidgeted with her cutlery until Jim grabbed her

hand.

“Don’t worry about it. You were exceptionally careful with him. He was more inconvenienced than anything. Why did you grab him?”

She shrugged at him through her lashes. “It seemed like the thing to do.”

He stared at her before he chuckled. “I think you were bringing your kills to your alpha.”

Lee blushed. “I think I was, too. At this particular point and time, though, I will settle for a cheeseburger.”

His smile showed a bit of fang, and she

suddenly realized that his lack of control over his physical appearance was probably his reason for being at the Crossroads. “That we can manage. So, where do you want to live? There are several homes here for staff members but not many of us are mated.”

Lee blinked. “Um. I hadn’t given it that much thought. What would I do here?”

He grinned, showing her that his fangs were growing exponentially. “Funny you should mention that...”

Chapter Seven

“A nursing station? You want me to run a nursing station at the Crossroads?” Lee couldn’t stop the laughter ripping through her.

Nia slid her food in front of her and Lee went about the mundane tasks of putting ketchup in a puddle next to her fries and putting mustard on her cheeseburger.

“Yes. You are perfect for it, and it is the project that the beavers were working on this morning.”

He smirked.

“You discussed this with someone.”

“Several someones. We have a ruling body here at the Crossroads. One representative from every establishment is on it, as well as one rep from the hostels and the other lodgings. We usually make do with medical treatment, but it would be much easier for all of us if there was a first aid station available that the patrons and locals could make use of for stitches and such.”

“You are serious.” She frowned and nibbled at a fry.

Nia paused on her rounds. “He is deadly serious. Last year, Tomas burned himself, and it was hours before he was able to get through the portal to a healer.

Having a medic on hand that we would be able to locate in a hurry would be a very handy thing.”

Lee paused with her next fry halfway to her mouth as the beaver shifter continued her busy work as the café was filling for lunch.

“Does everyone here know?”

Jim was tearing through his burger with his teeth back to human. “About the medical outlet?”

Yes. About me and you? Yes, again.” He waggled his eyebrows and continued eating.

Lee exhaled and answered her stomach's growl.

Shifting took a lot of energy, and it was part of a shifter's life to keep her inner creature ready to emerge.

She watched the lithe form of an elegant woman as she entered the café. The woman came directly toward them with a smile. She stopped next to their table. "James, please introduce me."

Lee's senses were going wild. She had no idea what this woman was aside from a very powerful shifter.

"Of course. Dira, this is Lee, my mate. Leandiir, this is Dira the proprietor of

the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast.” He was very formal when he said it, but Dira seemed to call for older formalities.

Dira extended her hand, so Lee quickly wiped cheeseburger off her hand and clasped it. “Pleased to meet you.”

“May I join you for a few minutes? I have an offer to make.” Dira smiled politely.

Jim shrugged and scooted over.

Dira sat next to him, but it was as if there was a wall of energy between her and everyone around her. Lee didn’t even feel a frisson of jealousy now that

the woman was closer.

“What is it, Dira?”

“Well, the beavers have been after me for an expansion, and since you are soon to be the Crossroads most recently mated couple in residence, there is a need for you to be close to the new medical outlet. My plot is the closest, so I was wondering if you would like to move in after it is completed.”

Lee cocked her head. “Does it connect to the meadow?”

Dira smiled. “It does. The meadow will never be developed, it is too important to our society.

Everyone needs a place to stretch out now and then.”

James chuckled and sipped at his lemonade.

“Be quiet, James.” Dira dismissed him like she would a naughty kitten. “Now, Lee, would you like to live in a new home with your mate?”

Lee blinked. “Yes, I would. This is all happening rather fast, I mean, we haven’t even...”

Dira grinned. “Something tells me that James will not let that state of affairs continue for very long. We are in the business of making matches after all.

This is not the time for a slow courtship.”

Lee remembered the reason she was there.

“You are absolutely correct.”

Jim perked up at that. “Really? I didn’t want to rush you.”

She remembered the feel of his body under hers as she woke in his lap. “Part of you did.”

He shrugged and finished his burger. “Don’t begrudge me my instincts. They turned you from prey to predator in an instant.”

“I think mine are doing the reverse.” She licked her lips and watched his pupils dilate.

Dira chuckled. “I will tell the beavers to get the house underway. They will get on it right after the medical structure is built. If you like, you can spend time at the Open Heart. The rooms are sound proofed and larger than your bachelor quarters, James.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. We will be there the moment we have some spare time.”

Dira stood gracefully and moved through the café without speaking to anyone else.

Lee leaned forward and asked the question burning in her thoughts. “What is she?”

Jim chuckled and leaned back. “She is one of the great shifters, but that is all you need to know until she shows you herself. We don’t tell on our neighbors here when it comes to hidden talents.

Simply know that she is a good person to count on, whatever she is.”

“She radiates power.”

“That she does.”

Lee shrugged and finished her meal. She was stuffed, but her belly was happy.

“That was good.”

“The food here is all good, and the beavers even cheat by grinding vegetables in with the meat.

They will make sure that us carnivores eat an omnivorous diet whether we want to or not.” He sighed happily and patted his flat belly.

“If they are prey species, it is in their best interest to keep us in instinct-neutral position. The fundamentalist lions control the females in the same way, limiting their access to meat. It keeps the females from becoming aggressive enough to fight their place in the pride. It also drives me fucking nuts.”

He nodded as if her words made sense. “It has that effect. The lack of protein makes you slower, dulls you. Since you have been able to eat what you wanted here, you have perked up tremendously.”

She laughed. “It’s the company.”

He grinned and preened, sticking his chest out and lifting his chin.

She laughed again. “Shall we see if I can walk this off, or will you just roll me down the street?”

“I think you could put on several dozen pounds and still look like the delicious lioness I see when I look at you.” His voice was low and he reached out and

took her hand, kissing her knuckles before turning it over and kissing her palm. “Whatever your body shifts to, it is you that I want.”

She sucked in her breath and answered the question in his eyes. “Let’s see if we can beat Dira back to the Open Heart.”

“Thank the First Tiger.” He didn’t say another word but got up from the booth and hauled her with him out of the café.

“First Tiger?”

“It is a bit of ancestor worship that usually begins at first shift. We ask for the First Tiger to watch over us during the first shift. It becomes a mantra for the

first time for anything.”

She giggled, and he pulled her to his side once again.

The medical structure was going up rapidly.

There was a swarm of beavers on the wood and the sounds of sawing and hammering with wooden mallets was a surprisingly gentle sound considering the fervour with which they worked.

“When do you have to be at the bar?”
She whispered it quietly.

“When I show up. Chuck can handle anything that comes up, or he can call on

one of the other residents for help if he needs it. Today is a special occasion.”

Dira was walking toward her business ahead of them, and she paused at the door to open it wide for them. A key was slapped into Jim’s hand. “The Clawed Room. I readied it this morning.”

Jim pulled Lee up the stairs, and she followed, enjoying the snug feel of the building. It was well constructed, sturdy and could withstand anything that shifters could dish out.

As Jim paused in front of the door marked by a slash of claws, Lee hesitated. If she went to bed with him,

she would be mated and they would be linked in ways that no one could separate.

The door swung open, and before she could think again, Jim swung her off her feet and carried her across the threshold in a charmingly human custom. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He closed and locked the door behind him. “I didn’t want you to run.”

Lee whipped her shirt off over her head and reached back to unclasp her bra. “I have no intention of being anywhere but here.”

Chapter Eight

He watched her remove her clothes one piece at a time.

Lee swallowed her nerves and took off everything until she was wearing her hair down her back and nothing else. She clenched and unclenched her hands as he stared at her. Finally, she blurted out, “Well?”

Jim’s grin was slow and very appreciative. “I didn’t want to startle you. Will you turn for me?”

She pivoted slowly in place. When she completed her turn, he was next to her and his clothing was lying in shreds on the floor.

Jim wrapped his arms around her and kissed her while his hands ran up and down her spine.

Soft noises of approval came from him when she pressed her hands to his chest and stroked the silken hair that narrowed until her hands were caressing the smooth skin of his shaft.

His cock was hot and hard in her hands, and as she slowly stroked him up and down, it twitched and pulsed in her grip.

She could feel her body responding to the musk that was thickening the air between them. Her nipples pebbled and her breasts felt hot and heavy. The slick moisture began to gather in her channel,

and she shifted as her inner thighs felt the slick heat.

Jim's hands caressed her belly and moved up to cup her breasts.

Lee looked up at him and his hot gold eyes glowed bright enough to illuminate his face.

Before she could change her mind, she released his cock and snaked her arms around his neck, pulling him down to kiss her.

He cupped her ass and lifted her against him.

She took the hint and wrapped her legs

around him as he walked over to his bed.

Lee clung tightly to him as he shifted onto all fours on the mattress.

He chuckled. “You can let go now.”

“I don’t want to. I think I am safer up here.” She pressed her forehead to his chest, rocking the head of his shaft between her folds.

In a flash, he gripped her thighs and broke her grip.

She let her arms drop so that she was lying beneath him with a wicked smile on her lips.

He grinned, “Not safe anymore.”

He growled and buried his face against her neck, sending her instincts spinning as she fought the domination of the move. With all her strength, she pushed at his shoulders and flipped him, straddling him in a smooth move while pressing her teeth to his neck.

It became a tumble of naked skin and bedding as they each fought for supremacy. Lee growled, Jim snarled and they rocked back and forth until she was on all fours and he had her neck firmly in his jaws, his teeth a deadly threat.

Submission didn't come easily, but she

eventually relaxed into his grip, and he growled low in approval. His cock eased into the folds of her sex, and she held her breath while he worked inch by inch into her wet heat.

She hissed when he struck the barrier inside her, but he simply flexed his jaw until she winced and gasped as he thrust home inside her.

Lee whimpered as the burn inside her drove out the heady feelings that had led up to this point.

He released her neck and licked at her skin with his rough tongue. His cock remained still inside her. His pulse came through his skin, and the heat warmed

her from within.

He stroked her spine, reached under her and cupped her breasts, taking their weight and caressing the peaks of her nipples.

Lee shivered, and her hips jerked against him, pushing back to pull him further inside. He held still within her, pinching her nipples lightly before shifting his hands and drawing his claws across her skin.

A low moan came from her throat. She undulated her hips again, this time following up with another shift of her pelvis until she was rocking on him with a steady motion.

He groaned and gripped her hips, thrusting into her while pulling her tightly to him.

A building tension caught Lee in its grip, and she gasped and moaned as they moved together, the coil of sensation within her finally snapped.

Lee shuddered and rocked as her body felt like it was turning inward to grip the length and girth inside.

A long, low groan escaped her lips as he continued plunging into her over and over. His hands tightened on her hips and he roared his triumph, Jim's cock jerking deep inside with a steady pulse.

He held her against him until he slumped over, his weight bearing her to the bed.

Lee lay under him, waiting for her heartbeat to resume a normal pace.

Jim stroked her ribs and the curve of her hip in a slow caress that made her smile. As first times went, it was one for the books.

“Dira is going to have to change the bedding. I am afraid we shredded it.”

“We?” Lee flexed her fingers and was shocked to see tattered strips of the lovely bed spread in her grip. “Oops.”

“Yeah, I am glad that your skin is more

resilient than the fabric or you would be wearing more than light claw marks.” He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “I am glad I was the first.”

Part of her went cold. “Why?”

“Because given the society you grew up in, it was far better for you to have someone who loves you for your first time, rather than the man you were given to. You chose me.”

She turned, wincing as he dislodged from within her. Lee looked into his eyes, and she caressed his face. “You are right. I chose you, and I will never regret this moment or the start we have made here.”

He kissed her palm. “What will you regret?”

“Leaving the few friends I have, not knowing if my siblings are safe, that sort of thing. I had a life before I met you. It wasn’t a happy one, but it was mine. Now, I have to start thinking of being part of a *we* and no longer an *I*. It will take getting used to. I think we will both need patience.”

“We are hunters, Lee. Patience is not only a virtue, it is bred in our blood.” He chuckled. “As long as no butterfly crosses your path.”

She shrugged and nipped at his jaw. “Just be sure that it doesn’t get too close

to you, or you will be wearing me on your head.”

He let out a happy sigh. “That sounds like a fun way to spend an afternoon.”

It took her a moment to catch his reference, but when the image of his dark head between her thighs finally coalesced in her mind her cheeks flushed crimson.

He chuckled and stroked his hand down her thigh. “I think we should get cleaned up and then make our way over to the Crossed Star. I have some calls I need to make so that we can finalize our mating in both worlds and return here.”

“So, a wedding of sorts?”

“A civil ceremony if you don’t mind. I am not that interested in having your family present.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead to soften his statement.

She sighed. “Me neither. Do you have family?”

He chuckled. “You ask me that now that you have had your way with me?”

She slapped her hand against his arm. “Funny man.”

“I have one sister and my father is still alive.

My mother died when I was fourteen.” His face grew serious for a moment, and then, he pasted his usual slight smile on his features.

“You will tell me about that one day. Won’t you?”

“When we are settled, you will know anything that you want to know. For now, shower and then the Crossed Star. We have some plotting and scheming to do. This is going to get complicated.”

She felt a little embarrassed. “Is that a problem?”

He grinned. “I always enjoy a challenge.”

Chapter Nine

Lee sat gingerly on one of the barstools and watched Chuck get ready for sundown. He had been chattering at her non-stop since she got in.

“I still can’t believe that Jim found a mate. I have to tell you, it gives me hope. If you can find something to love in his ugly mug, then there might just be a brave lady willing to take me for a test drive.” He winked as he did a quick inventory of the beer stores.

“I don’t think it will take bravery, I just think you will need to hold still long enough for her to catch you.” Lee sipped

at the coffee that Chuck had brewed for her when Jim dropped her off at the bar and disappeared to make arrangements.

It was too early for many patrons, but a few amorous couples were ensconced in the booths and gentle music was playing in the background.

“Ah, my kind rarely holds still. We like the feel of motion around us. It is why I enjoy the Crossed Star so much. It gives me the relief of knowing that no one here is going to call the police or put me up on a social network. I am among my people and I like it.”

“You are referring to shifters in general?”

“I am. I was raised around humans, and they tended to have a violent reaction to my appearance when I slipped with my self-control.

Even Naga can't stand being in carnival side shows all the time.”

“You were in a carnival?”

“Yup. The Snake-Boy. I spent so much time half-shifted that my human form never quite bounced back.” He shrugged.

“Where were your parents?” As appalling as her own childhood had been, this was giving her a new yardstick to do her measuring.

“Naga females have live births, but they don’t stay with their offspring. I was left behind in the desert, and from there, I made my way into the foster care system where I survived until I bit my first rat. I was booted out at the age of five, and the carnival found me shortly after that.”

“And I thought my life sucked.”

He looked at her and cocked his head. “What do you mean? I had friends, employment and when I went through puberty, I had all the tail I could handle.”

She snickered. “When speaking to a shifter, watch the use of the word tail.”

He started to chuckle, and it broke into a full laugh.

Jim came in through the front door, and Lee turned to watch him walk toward her. It was a lovely view. His big cat came through even though he was walking in his human body. His legs moved gracefully, his hips shifted imperceptibly and to Lee's astonishment, she realised that he was stalking her like a deer in the forest.

“I am not going to run, Jim.” She grinned and pivoted on the stool, elbows resting on the bar.

He cruised up to her and stepped between her parted knees, turning her,

leaning against the bar, her lying on the bar. His kiss was savage, direct.

He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her up so that her chest was flattened against his.

She moaned and surrendered to his kiss. If he wanted to be alpha, he could play alpha.

When he leaned back, he said softly, “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, but Chuck has been very entertaining. He thinks you are far too ugly to have gained a mate of my grace and beauty, so it gives him hope for his own chances.”

Chuck shrugged. It was fairly accurate.

Jim smiled. “Teal and Tony are ready to see us if you will walk with me?”

He stood straight and her feet dangled far from the floor.

“I would love to walk with you. Put me down.”

“I like you here.”

“I know, put me down, so we can formalize this union and you can have me anywhere you like.”

Her weight struck the ground with a thud.

Shaking her head, she took his arm and gestured for him to lead the way.

She turned and gave Chuck a wave as they passed the threshold. Light was reddening around them as sunset wrapped itself around the Crossroads.

Instead of heading to the Meditation Centre, he escorted her to the clothing shop. “I will wait out here. Andy has something for you.”

Curious, she gave him a kiss on the cheek before she entered the store.

Andy whisked her to the back and into a dressing room. “Here. I have been saving it for a special occasion.”

“Oh, my.” The gown was glowing white in Grecian style, including elegant cross wrapping in gold rope.

“The gown can shift with you. It is one of nineteen gowns crafted by a fabric enchanter.

They are highly prized.” He smiled.

“Since you are joining our happy little family here at the Crossroads, I thought there could be no one here who needs it more than you do.”

“That is a funny turn of phrase.”

Andy smiled and placed his hand gently on her arm. “I know what you are walking into. You need to be able to

shift at will for your safety and for Jim's."

She squinted. "How do you know what we are walking into?"

"My brother-in-law is a lion who grew up near your home, Acteus Carloth. When I asked him about the situation, he filled me in on the details."

Lee hugged Andy tightly. "Thank you. Now, let me get changed. I have a wedding to get to."

Andy was flustered by the contact, and he closed the door to the change room.

Snickering, Lee removed her clothing

and slipped the gown over her head. She stifled a shout as the fabric began to move, but after some tightening around her ribs and a flutter of the jagged hemline, the gown settled. The cord snaked around her and crossed under her breasts before wrapping behind her neck.

“Andy, how do I get out of this dress afterward?”

“Untie the cord and the enchantment will release you.” His voice was near the door. “It wasn’t designed to be worn with shoes, but I have some sandals here if you want them.”

“No. I am good. This feels proper.” She

from side to side, admiring the flare of the gown in the mirror.

“If you are good, you had better get out to Jim.

He is wearing a hole in my sidewalk.”
Andy chuckled.

When she opened the change room, Andy stared at her for a moment. “Wait right here.”

He darted into the depths of the store and came back with a hairbrush and a jeweled spike. “Sit still for a moment, and I will fix your hair.”

Shrugging, she sat on the small chair in

the change room and watched as Andy twisted her hair up into an elaborate twist held in place with that single jeweled spike. Her neck was bare and the mating marks were highly visible. Jim was going to love it.

“If you need to shift, just pull the spike and your hair will come tumbling down. Easy as that.”

Andy looked so proud of himself that she laughed. “Well done and thank you, Andy.”

The front door opened, and Lee got to her feet.

She pressed a kiss to Andy’s cheek and

walked out of the dressing room toward her mate.

Jim's expression was shocked, and he swallowed twice as she approached.

She held out her hand. "I think we have business to attend to."

To her astonishment, he dropped to his knees in front of her and took her hands in his. "Leandiir Aflai, will you marry me?"

A lump in her throat made it hard to speak.

"James Barnes, I will."

He lifted her hand and slid a ring onto the third finger of her left hand. It was a butterfly of diamonds in the colors of a tiger. “It’s beautiful.”

“It won’t shift with you, so take it off before you change or your front paw will swell.” He pressed a kiss to her knuckle.

She giggled and ran her hand over his hair.

“Are you ready?”

He smiled and got to his feet. “If you don’t mind me like this?”

She looked over his tight black tee

outlining all of the muscles she enjoyed watching with or without clothing on him. The low-slung jeans fit in all the right places and his boots completed the outfit. “I want you just the way you are.”

His eyes glowed, and he reached for her but stopped himself before he grabbed her.

She chuckled. “First the wedding, then the bedding...again.”

He grinned and offered her his arm. By the time they made it out of the general store, the sun had fully set and the moon was out.

A crowd was gathering outside the

Meditation Centre, and outside, Teal and the man who must be Tony waited for them with wreathes in their hands.

Tony put one wreath on Lee's head and Teal did the same with Jim before inviting them inside the Meditation Centre.

The caretakers of the centre walked them through the building and out back into a huge ornamental garden. Two couples were waiting for them on either side of an ivy-covered archway.

Teal stepped to Lee's side and pulled her away from Jim. Tony was doing the same with Jim.

“Leandiir Aflai, this is Lion Pride Master Alpha Norman Exeter and his mate Ystine. He has agreed to act as your family in this situation.”

Lee stepped forward and knelt at the man’s feet, but she kept her head up.

He chuckled and touched her cheek.
“Rise, cub.

You have done very well with what our world gave you.”

Lee got to her feet and took the hands of Ystine, bowing and touching her forehead to the woman’s fingers.

“Stand, child. You should not bow to

anyone.”

The woman’s voice was calm and held a self-control that Lee envied.

Lee stood straight and looked at the man who would be acting as family. He was six inches taller than she was, had thick gold hair that was just being touched by silver. His features were definitely handsome, and he was the perfect foil for the golden perfection at his side. Ystine was barely touched by time, but the knowledge in her gaze had been earned.

“You know all about the fundamentalists, don’t you, Ystine?” The suspicion was confirmed when the

woman smiled.

“I was able to make it to the Crossroads and met Norman. He helped me escape from my past, and together, we built a new future. I am very happy that I have lived long enough to see another woman do the same.”

The glowing pride that showed when Ystine looked at her husband was almost blinding. There was love there, not love for someone who had rescued her but someone who had let her find herself. Seeing that expression on someone else's face brought tears to Lee's eyes.

On the other side of the archway, the tigers finished their quiet conversation.

A figure appeared in the archway and everyone turned to watch the official raise his hands for silence.

Lee's palms started sweating. She was about to get married.

Chapter Ten

Guild Master Tobias Orcross acted as the official, and he worked his way through the ceremony with style. They had signed all documents and witnesses had put their marks to the paper. If they were human, they would have been already wed.

“When different species meet each other and find their match outside their own traditions, the world rejoices. Knowledge, tradition and bloodlines mix and mingle to spur on magic in our world.”

He paused and cleared his throat. “Now,

I normally do not officiate at shifter nuptials, but my wife informs me that in special cases, I will be called upon, and she is not a woman to be gainsaid.”

A few of the gathered crowd giggled, but Lee caught Tobias’s look. Kris was his wife, and she was pushing matters into place and using him to do it.

“James, will you walk the worlds with Leandiir, stand at her side and guard her back when necessary?”

James smiled. “I will.”

“Leandiir, will you walk the worlds with James, stand at his side and guard his back when necessary?”

Lee took in a deep breath. “I will.”

“James, you take on not only Leandiir’s health and well being, but also her past. Do you take this gladly and with good heart?”

“I do.”

“Leandiir, you take on not only James’s health and well being, but also his past. Do you take this on gladly and with good heart?”

“I do.”

Tobias raised his head. “The past makes us what we are and gives us the tools to shape our future. In these two, I see the

brightness of lessons learned and power gained.”

He turned to the Alphas standing next to them.

“Alphas, do you give full support of this union for the life of this couple?”

The lion and the tiger spoke in confident tones.

“We do.”

Tobias exhaled as if the responses from the Alphas were more important than the responses from the couple.

Lee fought a smile, but the gasp of

astonishment from the crowd told her that something important had just happened.

James took her hand and Tobias smiled. “With the agreement in place, I now pronounce you a formal match.”

Ystine brought them a goblet, and James held it while Lee drank and Lee held it while James drank.

Lee’s hands and arms tingled with the spread of the wine through her system.

Tobias spoke again. “Marriage should be a meeting of equals, and the drink you have just consumed will make it so. As your bodies become one, your beasts

shall do the same.”

Lee looked in Jim's eyes, and the amazement in his gaze matched her own. They kissed and the crowd hooted in approval.

Through the roaring in her ears, Lee heard, “And with that, the seal is made, the bond is forged and the vows are taken. Predator to predator, shifter to shifter and body to body, you are bound.”

A rush of power surrounded them, and when Lee broke their kiss, Jim's eyes were glowing with the same energy she was sure she felt running through every inch of her.

“Well, it’s official now. You can’t run.”

Jim smiled at her words. “I have no intention of running.”

She laughed and hugged him tight.

The tiger alpha cleared his throat.

“James, I believe an introduction is in order?”

“Of course. Emerson Barnes, this is my wife, Leandiir Barnes. Lee, this is my father Emerson and my sister Emaline Barnes.”

Emerson extended his hand. “I am happy to meet the woman who managed to get my son’s head out of his ass. He needs to

be pulled into reality now and then.”

Lee took his hand and was pulled into a hug against a chest nearly as wide as his son's. She squeaked a little and Emaline laughed at her.

Wrapped in the tiger's embrace, she extended her hand to her sister-in-law. “Pleased to meet you, Emaline.”

“And you as well, Leandiir.”

“Call me Lee.”

“Lee then. Call me Emma.”

“Um, Emaline, is he going to stop hugging me soon?”

Emma laughed. “He is memorizing your scent in case he sees you in another form. He doesn’t want to hit on you if we do a hunt together.”

“Enough, Dad.” Jim pried his father’s arms away from her and replaced his father’s embrace with his own.

He stood behind her with his arms around her waist.

“It is our turn, I believe.” Alpha Norman came up, and Lee swiftly made the introductions.

Norman made eye contact with Jim above her head. “Are you ready?”

She felt Jim nod. “We are. Are they waiting?”

Norman nodded grimly. “They are standing by with Tobias’s wife. We just need the signal and we can go in.”

Lee looked up at Jim. “What is going on?”

He sighed. “It is time to meet your family.”

Tobias nodded, and before Lee could do anything, Teal and Tony flanked them on either side, and in a bright flash, they had gone from the Crossroads to the courtyard in the centre of the Aflai pride house.

Floodlights came on and the family came running. Lee stiffened her spine and faced her father and his wives as they approached to confront her.

“Well, well. You have come back with your tail between your legs. Kneel and beg my forgiveness, and I might just allow you to complete the contract with Carloth.”

Lee’s brow furrowed, and Jim leaned in, “He can’t see us yet. You appear to be alone, but you are not.”

Understanding struck her. “Father, I have not come to beg forgiveness, I have come to collect my things and leave this place forever.”

Rasson blinked and shook his head as if he couldn't believe his ears. "What? You forget your place. Perhaps I should remind you."

Lee stepped forward to meet her father as he walked out to strike her. When the first swipe occurred, she ducked and struck him across the cheek with her claws extended.

He staggered back, blood pouring from his face.

"You dared to strike me!"

"You dared to strike me." She was calm, composed, but she remained ready.

He lunged at her again, but the result was the same on the other side of his face. He sat heavily on the ground with his face bleeding and stared up at her in shock.

Lee looked across at her family and saw the confusion in all faces except one. Ariil Aflai's face was blazing with pride.

Rasson spluttered. "What are you waiting for?"

Defend me!"

Her brothers stepped forward, but Lee raised a hand. "What is the rule when Rasson is disciplining one of the family?"

You are not to interfere in any way, shape or form.”

Her brothers grinned and returned to the line of children.

Rasson roared, ripping his clothing and transforming into his lion. Lee removed the spike from her hair, took off her wedding ring and spiked them into the ground as she took her lioness for a ride.

She met her father fang for fang, claw for claw.

They tumbled across the green grass of the inner yard. When she finally latched her jaws on his neck, he went limp immediately.

She released him and backed away, watching for him to rise again. She knew what he was going to do. It was what he always did. The moment she turned to walk toward her mother, she heard the rush of feet across the grass.

Her lion switched to a tiger, and he was unprepared for the tigress who turned and grabbed him in her jaws before she slammed him to the ground. The crunch of his ribs and pelvis breaking was sickening and satisfying.

Lee shifted back into a lioness and roared so loudly, her siblings covered their ears.

She cleaned her fur and claws before

changing back into her human form. “Hi, Mom.”

Ariil ran to her and embraced her. “Oh, Leandir. I didn’t think I would ever see you again.”

Lee smelled blood on her mother. “What did he do?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. You are alive, and you are finally the woman I always saw in you.”

Ariil grinned. “Did you find anyone at the Crossroads?”

“You could say that. Is Carloth around?”

Ariil gave her a calculating look and scented her. “He is usually snaking around nearby. Why?”

“I think we need to speak with him.”

“Who is *we*?” Ariil looked around, but her eyes didn’t see the dozen shifters standing silently in their garden.

Lee grinned. “You will see when it is time.”

Chapter Eleven

Carloth didn't come alone.

Representatives of four other prides came with him. Based on the set of his shoulders, Lee knew he was coming with the intent of taking a bride home.

Rasson was lying in the yard, groaning and moaning. He drifted in and out of consciousness, but his family was ignoring him.

Carloth began bellowing the moment he realized that Rasson was in no condition to control his family. "What is going on here?"

Lee was sipping some lemonade that her mother had provided, and she stood to greet her would-be suitor. "Rasson had a

discipline problem, but the Aflais are fine.”

Carloth scowled. “You! What is your name again?”

She smiled. “It does not matter. You won’t use it again.”

“The hell I won’t. I paid for you fair and square.”

The women flinched, but Lee smiled. “There is no such thing as slavery in this country, Carloth.

You have no right to me.”

Carloth snarled and came toward her,

the four men he brought as back up followed him, and Lee knew their intent was not going to be to take her quietly.

Apparently, that was what Jim and the others had been waiting for.

While three tigers, two lions and a number of other shifters were tackling the men, Lee calmly retrieved her hair spike and her wedding ring.

The pride leaders were held on their knees while Norman gave them the facts of life. As lions, they fell under his auspices. He objected to their behavior, and while he was speaking to them, his men were currently removing their wives and children to safe homes in the

lion-shifter community.

Jim grinned as three lion males entered the garden area and nodded to their Pride Master.

Lee walked up to her husband and stroked his chest. “I get the feeling that Norman has had this planned for a while.”

“Since Ystine and he were in a position of power. He couldn’t save her siblings, but he can save some of her cousins from the life they cannot escape from.” He wrapped his arms around her waist. “I have to say, watching you fight was quite a turn on.”

“Oh, Jim. My breathing is a turn on for you.”

She patted his arms but shifted her ass against the erection that was pressing against her.

“Yes, it is, but seeing you in action made it hard for me to watch. I wanted to help, but I wanted to watch you destroy him. Does that make me a bad person?”

She turned in his arms to face him. “It makes you James Barnes, my husband. I take him as he comes.”

He chuckled and pressed his lips to her neck.

She sighed and tilted her head in surrender.

A feminine voice spoke next to them. “I am assuming that this is the *we*.”

Lee blushed and slid her hand into Jim’s hair to pull his head from her neck.

“James, this is my mother, Ariil Aflai. Mom, this is my husband.”

Ariil squealed and hugged them both before she did a little happy dance in place.

Lee snickered. She knew that dance. She did that dance when no one was looking.

Norman and Ystine came toward them,

both unashamedly naked. “Thank you for this opportunity, Leandiir.”

“You are welcome, Pride Master.” She smiled.

“This is my mother, Ariil Aflai. Mom, this is—”

“Norman, and this is my wife, Ystine. We have a placement for you, but we were out of lion families and the only volunteers were tigers. Is that an issue?”

Ariil smiled. “No. Anywhere different is good. I have gathered all the documents that the children and the sister wives will need. We are good to leave this place.”

Ystine smiled and took her by the arm.

“Emerson Barnes is a good man, and his daughter Emma lives with him. They will be hosting you while you get back on your feet.”

Ariil was escorted over to Emerson, and as they shook hands, Lee could see the electricity between them. She looked up at Jim, “If they get married, that will make us brother and sister.”

He shook his head. “Nope. We were married first. It would have been creepy if we hadn’t, but we did, so whatever they do doesn’t count.”

She chuckled. “Is that your idea of

putting your fingers in your ears and closing your eyes?”

“Yes.”

“Well done.” She laughed as he pinched her butt through the gown.

The Pride Master’s men hauled off her father, and in two hours from the moment that they were transported, the garden was empty with the exception of Tobias.

“Are you two ready to return to the Crossroads?”

Lee nodded. “I am. I never want to see this place again.”

Jim agreed. “I am eager to get home.”

Tobias closed his eyes, and when he opened them, there was a bright flash and Lee and Jim were standing in the Meditation Centre.

“Did we just do what I think we just did?”

“We handed your father over to the Pride Master after you clawed the hell out of him. You freed your family, and they are being given new starts with more conventional lion families. What happens next is up to them.”

Tony walked up and handed Jim a piece of fabric.

Without saying a word, Jim put the fabric around his hips.

Lee laughed. “Does that happen often?”

Teal peeked from around the corner, and she smiled in relief that Jim was dressed. “Often enough. We keep wraps standing by for both men and women, just in case. It keeps the streaking through the main street to a minimum.”

Lee walked up and gave Teal a hug. “Thank you.”

“For covering up Jim’s junk? Not much of a favor. It was a nice view.”

Lee snorted, “No, for showing me that

you can meet someone without suspicion and make friends. I haven't had any friends who could offer me the help you did and still look me in the the next day.”

Teal quickly hugged her back. “Jim is waiting.

Go on, I will see you tomorrow. You have to give me a list of supplies you need for the new first aid station.”

“It's ready?”

“The beavers work fast. So, think about an equipment list and come back after you have enjoyed a good night's sleep. You look exhausted.”

“A fine thing to tell a bride on her wedding day.”

“I call it like I see it.” Teal winked, “It’s what friends do.”

With warmth swelling in her heart, Lee returned to Jim’s side and took his hand. “Time to go.”

Jim laughed, “Yes, Mrs. Barnes.”

She blinked. “Oh wow. I never considered that.

Leandier Barnes. I heard you before but it didn’t register.”

They were walking down the street and

the Crossroads were alive with people running from the café to the bar and back again.

“What would you say to some dinner?”
Jim’s stomach rumbled alarmingly.

“Yes, please. I wouldn’t want you to mistake me for your next meal.”

“That could be fun.”

“Consider me dessert, but for now, I want some fries and gravy, maybe a steak.”

“A salad?”

“Under duress, perhaps. For now,

steak.”

They walked into the café and conversation stopped. Nia bustled toward a table where two males were eating, and she shooed them away.

The men took one look at Lee and Jim before they got to their feet and evacuated the booth.

Lee looked at Jim and giggled. She hadn't noticed the blood streaking his body. *Wait a minute.* She looked down and groaned. “Aw, I got blood on me.”

They passed the two males who took their plates to seats at the counter, and the men gave them polite nods.

Nia came forward with a pitcher of hot water and two white towels. “Clean up, and I will get you some water and coffee.”

“Thanks, Nia.” Lee took a towel, dipped it in the water and scrubbed at her face. Blood came off in streaks and she sighed. “I thought I got it all.”

He took the towel once she was done and started to scrub at himself. By the time Nia returned with the coffee, they were both clean and neat from the neck up.

“Congratulations, you two. It is so nice that you have made it official in both worlds. Your gown is lovely, by the

way.” Nia chattered at them.

They ordered, and while they waited, several of the beavers came up to offer their congratulations, including the one that she had captured earlier. “I am sorry that I...uh...did that while you were working.”

He grinned. “It was fine. You were careful, though it did scare the crap out of me at the time.”

She smiled at his acceptance of her nature.

She looked around the café and saw the smiling faces and open natures of the majority of the occupants. She was

welcome here as a lion and she was welcome as Lee. When she came to that conclusion, she started to snifle.

Jim was at her side in an instant. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking that most of the people here have been nice, welcoming and made me feel at home in my own skin. I don’t remember having felt that before.”

He held her under his arm until their food arrived. At that point, they ate in silence with only the bottles of condiments passing between them.

Nia brought them more coffee and two

huge slices of cake. One had a lion made of candy, the other had a tiger.

Lee rescued the candy tiger from Jim before he got it. “I am keeping it. We can eat it later.”

Nia passed by and slid a box with one of each inside it. “I figured he would eat them now.”

Lee laughed, and when she looked at Jim, he had the tiger sticking out of his mouth. He mumbled, “What? She brought us a spare. It’s good.”

She snickered and delicately licked the head of the lion. It was white chocolate with a hint of milk chocolate mixed in.

Jim groaned. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” She licked again.

“Lick a piece of candy in a room with thirty-five men in it. Every male is watching you, and I have had enough fighting for the day.”

“If you have had enough fighting, what do you want to do for the rest of the night?”

She licked delicately one more time before he grabbed her and hauled her out of the café and carried her toward the Open Heart.

Some things could go beyond words.

Chapter Twelve

Dira smiled from the front desk as they passed. Lee waved as Jim carried her up and back to the room they had roughed up earlier.

Pristine sheets and bedding were in place.

There was no trace of the claws and blood that had marked their first time together.

“Wow, she’s good.” Lee admired the pristine nature of the room.

“She is the best and those who come and stay here pay for it.” Jim let her legs

slide down his body, but he kept her held to him with one arm.

“I thought I was the best.” She draped her arms around his neck.

“I have no idea what your housekeeping skills are, but at putting yourself between the innocent and danger, you are definitely the best I have ever known.” He kissed her and the kiss deepened.

His tongue stroked along her lips and the rough texture sent shivers through her. Lee moaned and used one hand to release the cord that held her gown in place.

Once she felt the fabric of her gown loosen, she slid her hand along the edge of his wrap and tugged it loose until it dropped to the floor.

“You are getting ahead of me.”

“Girls need to start first or so I have been told.”

She squealed as he lifted her and swung her onto the bed.

“It doesn’t mean to get me naked. It means I have some licking to do.” He laid her back and slid his hands up her legs until the white fabric was bunched around her waist.

She knew about oral sex but wasn't sure what the fuss was about until he licked her. The first stroke tensed her thighs and raised her knees.

When he continued, her mind cried out, *Hot, wet, ohgodohgodohgod* and a scream built in her throat.

His teeth grazed her folds, and his tongue scraped at her clit, causing her orgasm to spiral out of her in a wave of sound and power.

James moved up her body, and his cock nudged at the folds he had just teased into hypersensitivity.

Lee wrapped her leg around his back

and pulled him into her. “My favorite part of being a shifter. One change and any wounds on the human body will be fixed.”

“What wounds?”

She tugged at him, trying to get him to thrust into her, and recognition ran through his features.

“Oh, those wounds. Are you sure? We can take it slow.”

He moved into her with deliberate lack speed.

Lee panted, tugged and hauled at him, trying to get him to come completely

inside her.

“No hurries, we have the rest of our lives.”

“Your life will be very short if you don’t finish what you started.” She leaned up and nipped at his neck.

Her teeth sharpened when he pulled out and thrust in a little faster.

“More.”

He nuzzled at her neck and moved faster, harder, plunging and sliding into her until she was rocking with every thrust.

She licked at every inch of skin she

could reach.

Lee caressed his chest, dragged her nails across his nipples and down his abdomen before dragging them up his back and pulling him close.

He growled, groaned and ground his hips against her until she whimpered and gasped, her climax striking her and shaking her around him.

He pounded into her, and the friction heated her channel into another round of palpitations around his cock. James grunted, and his neck flexed as he held himself to her, his shaft jetting its contents deep within.

James sighed happily and collapsed on her, rolling so that they were side by side with his hand holding her hips to let him stay inside her.

She smiled and caressed his skin as a dreamy lassitude took her over. Her lids were heavy, and she snuggled against him, pulling his body heat into her until it rocked her into sleep.

James looked down at his lioness and smiled, so much for myths of men falling asleep after sex.

She had been through so much in her life, and yet, she trusted almost everyone she met. It was a rare quality and one that he intended to preserve.

The first aid centre would be done by the end of the week, and Lee's three eligible half-sisters had been given a free pass to the Crossroads. If they wanted a mate, they would find one. It had taken a lot of negotiation on his part, but the Pride Master had agreed. The Aflai sisters might do better with another species to break the cycle of subservience to a male lion.

The rest of the females that had been taken from the lion compounds were to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Some might thrive in their sheltering homes and some might not. It was a wait-and-see situation.

Lee murmured and shifted closer. James closed his eyes briefly as his cock swelled inside the silken embrace of her body. None of the women he had had in his life felt this right, this perfect.

How could he have thought she was timid? He remembered the light of battle in her eyes, it was a peculiar counterpoint to the lioness that chased butterflies. She was a complicated female, and she was all his.

He caressed the dark hair that translated into dark fur on an otherwise golden

lioness and smiled. If he was honest with himself, he had been hers the moment that she had followed those two thugs out of the bar.

Give him a woman who could handle herself in an alley fight but was afraid of eye contact, and he was doomed to worship at her feet. What a way to go.

Two weeks later

“Okay, Chuck. You only have one... what is the drink of the day?” Lee rubbed her hands together and watched as Chuck mixed, blended and twirled his way behind the bar.

“It’s a surprise. A little of this, a little of that and a lot of that.” He winked and produced a martini glass rimmed with graham cracker crumbs and the glass appeared to be filled with cream.

Lee was suspicious after the sour cherry debacle. On the other hand, she now knew that her spitting distance was twelve feet.

She licked daintily at the graham crumbs and found them sweet. A sip of the

concoction and she smiled. “It tastes like cheesecake.”

Chuck grinned with triumph. “Good?”

She sipped and sighed. “Very good. What’s in it?”

“Two parts sweet and sour, one part limoncello, one part vanilla vodka and three parts cream.”

A young woman came to the bar and looked at it with longing in her eyes. “May I have one of those?”

Chuck chuckled. “Cheesecake in a glass. Yes, you may.”

He got to work, and in twenty minutes, all fifteen women in the bar were enjoying his concoction.

“It must be nice to have skills that are needed.”

Chuck paused. “In the last week, you have found more of that drug, set two broken limbs and engaged in twelve sets of stitches.”

Lee sighed, “Yeah, but I am not needed right now.”

He flicked his tongue out as he did when he was exasperated. “Go up to the office then. I am fairly sure that Jim needs whatever you have to offer.”

Lee haughtily lifted her glass and soared toward the stairs after throwing a wink at Chuck.

Her husband would pretend to be exasperated by her appearance, but the moment she walked up and sat in his lap, he would take a well-deserved break.

She had her first foot on the stair when she heard someone call her. “Lee, a tree fell on Mark’s leg. We need help.”

She looked up at the stairway and the office door, sighing, she turned and passed the bar, depositing her glass near Chuck.

Nia’s brother Bronson was standing in

the doorway. They broke into a run as Mark was being carried into the First Aide Centre. Lee knew that her equipment was waiting—drugs, x-ray machine and all the bandages that the shifters could handle. It was a tiny medical paradise, and it was all hers.

When she saw the mess that Mark had made of his leg, she slipped on her black scrub shirt and got to work.

Life was good at the Crossroads, and if she could help the inhabitants in any way, she would.

They were her family now, and she was going to protect them from harm by any means necessary.

Author's Note

We will see Lee and Jim in the next book, *Deer Heart* in spring 2013. A reindeer out of season heads to the Crossroads and falls for a wolf who can't come to grips with what she is.

Reindeer are rare enough, but albino reindeer shapeshifters are one in a million. Will the wolf come to his senses before she stomps reason into his head?

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About the Author

Zenina Masters was born in Canada and lives in Canada. She has a regular job and does nothing particularly exciting with her life. She enjoys fishing, silence and the ability to pick and choose friends she can trust. Life is too short to

watch your back all the time.

Her writing life is a teeny bit of escapism, she would probably chicken out if confronted by three naked men and looks forward to one day finding out.