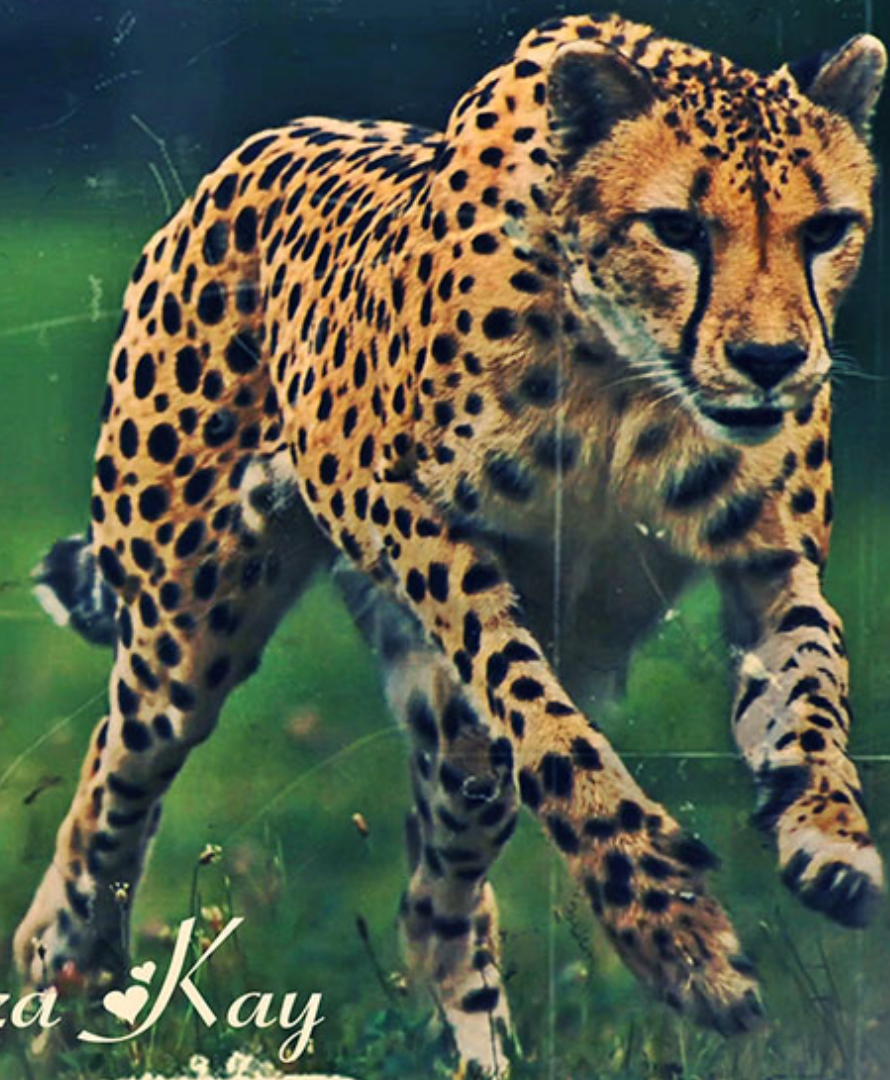


How to Catch a  
Cheetah



Liza Kay

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## HOW TO CATCH A CHEETAH

**By Liza Kay**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Oh, and our wonderful Mods, dedicating their time to make DRitC possible in the first place? You rock!

And last, Vera. Calling a friend when you're feeling down, and having that person know that something is wrong even if you don't say anything at all, is priceless.

# **HOW TO CATCH A CHEETAH**

**By Liza Kay**



## Chapter One

### *How a day turned to SHITSHITSHIT*

Djimon Akintola stretched his long neck and warily surveyed his surroundings. He wasn't overly concerned about predators roaming Nebraska's Great Plains. However, the region surely wasn't called Wildcat Hills for nothing. There were rumors about a pride living nearby.

As a shifter standing eight foot two and being just shy of three hundred pounds in his ostrich form, he was anything but helpless. With his powerful legs and clawed feet, he could defend himself against almost anything.

That didn't mean he was keen on stumbling across a hungry cat. Hell, he wasn't keen on stumbling across anybody, period. Dji just wanted to enjoy a quiet moment with his animal.

There was another problem that made it of utmost importance to keep his eyes peeled whenever he strolled in shifted form. With ostriches traditionally living in Africa, his main concern was humans.

Shit would hit the fan if a nosy human, armed with one of those fancy smart phones, happened to film him while he was happily munching away.

Hobby ornithologists were the worst. Dji had once been trapped and held captive by one of those khaki-vested, binocular swinging loons. He'd managed to break free—after several weeks of being forced to remain in his shifted form—by leaping over a fence.

It was just his luck the human had had no idea Dji was a shifter. Otherwise he probably would've ended in a secret research facility. Never again would he allow anybody, human or shifter, to catch and captivate him. Ever.

He didn't dislike humans in general. In fact, he'd met lots of humans he genuinely liked. However, the animal living inside him ruled a big part of his personality. They both cherished their freedom above all. That made for a very reclusive bird.

Since he'd left his family in Africa years ago, he'd never settled down anywhere permanently. He enjoyed traveling all over America way too much, working the odd job in construction whenever he needed money for food, clothes, or gas. He didn't have a special someone in his life who appealed to him to tie the knot and settle into monogamy either.

Maybe one day he'd find his mate. Or mates. Most ostrich shifters were polygamous, with one male living with a group of females. Dji, being one hundred percent gay, hoped his mate wouldn't turn out to be a woman. Or, God forbid, several women. He'd experimented with women in the past, mostly to appease his parents. After one hot, sweaty, and seriously life-altering night with another boy from his flock, that ship had sailed—without the hope of ever returning back to home port.

His parents' pragmatic solution to the problem had been to force him into mating with a hen so they could produce a bunch of fledglings. Dji had flat out refused, packed his meager belongings, and left Africa to travel parts of Europe. Later, he'd resettled for the simple reason that America was much bigger. The wide-open areas reduced the risk of being caught.

After another quick look to observe the surroundings and finding nothing out of the ordinary, he angled his head for another bite of the tasty blossoms scattered in between the tall grass. Choosing some wild herbs next, Dji mentally hummed at the taste.

Although no vegan, he was a veggie lover in animal and human form and had always liked feeding as an ostrich. It had its perks. Living in his car, or spending the nights in cheap motels, didn't lend itself to cooking elaborate, tasty meals. Someday, when he found his mate, they could settle down together and Dji would gladly introduce his man to the joys of cooking.

On the other hand, Dji wasn't sure if he wanted to find his fated spouse just yet. Any mate of his had to have the patience of a saint. Dji knew it was very hard to alienate one's mate, but he honestly wasn't an easy guy to get along with. People often bitched about his bristly attitude and snarky mouth. If it wasn't for his tall, fit body, his sparkling personality would've gotten him into trouble on more than one occasion. But hey, it wasn't his job to get others to like him.

To make matters worse, male ostriches had a weird ability. An ability most other shifters frowned upon—as if shifting into an animal wasn't weird enough. Dji wouldn't be able to hide it from a mate for very long.

Since he'd relocated to Nebraska, Dji found himself musing about his mate, even dreaming of the unknown man. He'd been a teen when he'd last experienced a wet dream. It was a bit unnerving to wake up sweaty and sticky from his own cum. Dji didn't want to think too hard about the reason behind his dreams, as it led to the implication his mate could be close.

Even if it was dumb—his mate wouldn't suddenly emerge from between the tall grass and jump him—Dji straightened his long, graceful neck and concentrated on the softly weeping blades. His sense of smell wasn't very good, but his eyes would detect any danger.

Although nothing seemed amiss, something wasn't quite right. Dji couldn't pinpoint it. He merely felt it in the way his heart rate picked up and his wings spread wide. Typical signs of an ostrich preparing for a fight or a run for the hills. The decision depended mostly on the enemy and the possibility of winning a fight without getting seriously injured. Dji wasn't one to take unnecessary risks.

He felt slightly paranoid as he stood—stiff as one of those pansy flamingos decorating the zoo—and flicked his head in every direction. The wind ruffled his black feathers, carrying no other noises but the tweet of birds and the distant chirp of a cricket. Then, to his right, a branch snapped and grass rustled. Not a good sign at all.

Searching for the noise's source, Dji turned his head and would've gasped if he'd been in human form. Thank God he wasn't in human form, he thought a second later, when he spotted the intruder who was likely to turn his peaceful, solitary day to shit.

Two whiskey-colored eyes peeked through the tall grass, staring at him with deadly precision. Cat eyes. *Shit*. Dji wasn't talking about some lame-ass house pussy, oh no. The low snarl reaching his ears told him those eyes were attached to a much bigger and possibly hungry cat. *Oh shit!*

The spotted animal's behind moved in the telltale cat-wriggle that signaled an impending attack. Dji flapped his wings and screeched, a last warning for the cat to better think twice before it attacked, but the dumb feline hissed and charged anyway.

*Oh shitshitshit! This is so not happening!*

Dji bolted and, at the same moment, cursed himself for his stupidity as he felt the cat giving chase. The decision to flee was not his brightest idea. He most likely could've knocked the cat out cold with a well-aimed kick of his powerful legs.

Now he worked his legs as fast as he could, flapping and angling his wings just so to keep his balance.

He was sure he looked absolutely ridiculous in his panic and just hoped nobody saw him on the run or, even worse, snapped a picture. Humans tended

to always snap pictures of just about anything—from food to their own dicks—and post, twitter, or flickr the stuff. If he ever found a picture showing his humiliation, he'd peck out the dumbass's eyes.

Dji's ostrich was fucking fast, running about forty miles per hour, but the feline closed the distance anyway. Right at that moment, the seriousness of the situation really hit him and he let out a distressed screech.

Where he'd thought his attacker to be a leopard, he now realized it actually was a cheetah. *Shitshitshitshit!* Dji was so fucked, and not in the funny, sweaty *Oh my God, yes, right there* kind of way.

Cheetahs ran freakishly fast, albeit only for a very short time before they overheated and were forced to give up their prey. Dji's only chance to rescue his scrawny neck was to keep the distance long enough for the cheetah to run out of breath.

He so refused to end up as a snack for a tiny pussy that weighed less than half of him and had a much too big ego. What cheetah in their right mind attacked a grown ostrich anyway?

Fortunately, Dji had some tricks up his sleeve. Angling his wings once again, he sidestepped several times in quick succession to get rid of his annoying accessory.

The cat stumbled, but the little fucker quickly regained his balance. Dji screeched again, this time in abject horror, as he felt the feline running between his legs. He knew it was a cheetah's practiced move to down its prey. Dji was pissed as hell when the trick worked.

They went down in a heap of flapping wings, kicking legs, and spotted fur. Dji thanked every deity that he didn't have a flock anymore, otherwise his fellow ostriches would've laughed their feathery asses off about that stunt.

Given that he and the cat were totally tangled, his long legs weren't helpful in defending himself. Time for plan B. Dji pecked the cat's tender side with his hard beak. Kitty-cat hissed angrily but, surprisingly enough, neither swiped at him, nor aimed for his neck. Instead, the golden, black-spotted animal... purred? What the fuck?

Then the smell hit him. The little shit that had had the audacity to take down a fucking big ostrich, was a shifter. And not enough. He was Dji's mate. *Shit.* Dji shifted so fast he became woozy.

## Chapter Two

### *How to scare away your mate 101*

Kei Hirota purred up a storm, feeling like he'd bathed in catnip for several hours. He couldn't believe he was lying on top of his mate. His mate! How cool was that? Every shifter wanted to find their fated mate. Many searched for years but never found their one and only. With Kei being only twenty, this was an occasion not only Kei, but his whole pride, would totally go nuts about.

If anybody had told him this morning that his day would end with him finding his mate and ending in the man's arms, he would've laughed in their faces.

Kei had left his fellow pride members after a very unsatisfying hour of fiddling on one of his projects. Stuck with artists' block, he'd been in a foul mood. No matter how much he'd picked his brain, his hands just refused to cooperate. So he'd thought fuck it all and had gone for a run.

Giving his cheetah free rein, letting the cat dash across the wide, open landscape, always helped Kei to bring his head back on track. His animal craved a fast run, preferably a couple times a day. On most days, Kei didn't even manage a single run because he was a scatterbrain. His cat let him pay for the neglect every damn time though. It usually began with Kei becoming hungry as hell, then antsy and then bitchy like only a cat could bitch.

After he'd left the house, he'd only strolled at a leisurely pace, taking his time and enjoying being in his animal form. He'd even taken a catnap in the sun. Kei fucking loved napping in the sun till his fur crackled with electricity as soon as somebody touched and petted him. Not that he had guys breaking down his door for the pleasure of giving Kei a pet. Far from it, unfortunately.

Then a scent had tickled his sensitive nose, pulling him out of his lazy daydreams. Kei, too content with himself and the world, had merely twitched his nose and flicked his tiny, round ears. He hadn't been interested in chasing game today.

When the scent had gotten stronger and caused Kei's body to get excited, even in shifted form, he hadn't been able to contain his curiosity any longer. The strange scent had just smelled too good to be ignored, so he'd jumped up to survey and sniff the familiar surroundings.

At a stealthy gait, he'd moved his slender, sleek body through the tall grass on the search for the enticing odor. For the first time in his life he'd been glad for being such a good hunter. His experience gave him the necessary patience—and silence—to stalk who- or whatever smelled like pure kitty heaven.

To say he'd been shocked when the softly weeping grass had revealed a big as fuck, live ostrich, happily feeding in the middle of fucking Nebraska, would've been the understatement of the year. Kei had never seen an ostrich outside of the television. He had to admit the animal looked magnificent with its powerful, long legs, black and white feathers, and long, gracious neck. Only, the ostrich hadn't smelled like a true animal, but like a shifter. Not only that, he'd smelled like Kei's.

Maybe pouncing on his peaceful mate hadn't been his wisest decision. Like, ever. He couldn't imagine that being chased by a wild cat was on the top of any bird shifter's list of most favorite free time activities, no matter how big the bird was.

But trying to hold back his cat as soon as it'd smelled their mate had turned out as impossible as stopping the sunset. Kei vowed to make it up to the man though. As soon as they'd both shifted and had functioning hands again, he thought with an internal chuckle.

Right now, they lay in a tangled heap. Kei angled his head to rub against his mate and spread his scent in the wake. With his body still hot from the chase—and with adrenaline and mating hormones pumping through his system—it took some time for him to notice his mate's less than enthusiastic reaction to his marking.

Why the fuck his mate had found it necessary to peck him with his beak, he didn't know. It wasn't overly friendly and they'd have a serious talk about proper displays of affection as soon as possible. Kei might be the smaller one, but he wouldn't let his mate bully him.

But for now, Kei ignored the bird's fidgeting and marveled in his mate's scent. The man smelled like sun, dry grass, and a mixture of flowers. Absolutely intoxicating and way better than the catnip sack Kei hid under his pillows.

Oh, and those soft, black and white feathers tickling his nose? Heaven. Kei wondered how they'd feel against his naked skin. If only the guy would stop wriggling and screeching so damn annoyingly. Suddenly, his mate tensed and

shivered, initiating his shift. Kei growled in dismay as he was robbed of those feathers.

A second later, his growl turned into a deep, appreciative purr. Acres of black, smooth, sweaty skin stretched across delicious muscles that bulged when his mate moved underneath him. Yeah, Kei could feel his artists' block waving good-bye for good in the face of such muscled perfection.

“Dammit! Would you shift already and stop slobbering kitty drool all over me!”

Kei hissed, irritated with the annoyed tone his mate bestowed on him. The man's deep, smooth voice sounded really nice though.

Wasn't the guy happy that he'd found Kei? Or rather, that Kei had found him? Hell, he should sink to his knees and thank every deity out there. Quickly followed by scratching that wonderful spot behind Kei's fuzzy ear he loved so much and that always turned him into a pliant mass of purring ecstasy.

Instead, the big man—God, was he big—shoved and cursed till Kei slid off his big body and flopped down on his kitty ass. Crap. Graceful much? He was a damn cat! Gracefulness should be his middle name. But no, he had to act like a klutz in front of his man.

Oh, well. He had other tricks up his sleeve. As soon as his tall mate stood in all his naked glory, Kei pounced and rubbed first his head, then his whole body against the man's strong leg. Damn stubborn mate of his stepped back though and held out his hand, blocking further rubbing and marking. Bad mate.

“Okay, furball, stop that right now.”

Kei was a bit miffed about the pet name. Furball? Really? And why the hell should he stop? Marking one's mate with their scent was of paramount importance for cat shifters. However, he was gracious enough to give his guy some lenience. Maybe, as an ostrich, he wasn't accustomed to scent-marking. Hell, he hadn't tried to pee on the guy. It was only a bit of innocent rubbing.

Kei maneuvered around his mate's palm and, just for good measure, nudged his nose against the man's groin. Now it was the handsome stranger's turn to growl. He really hadn't thought the big bird had it in him. On the other hand, a man this size probably wasn't one to chirrup either.

“Shift!” His mate stemmed his hands on his narrow hips—damn, but did he sport a lickable v-muscle—and glowered down at him.

Kei huffed, sure his cat would've petulantly rolled its eyes if it had been possible. This was no fun. He hoped his mate was just surprised at finding him and hadn't been born with a permanent stick up his ass.

The man had a point though. They needed to talk with actual words instead of purrs and grunts, hence a shift was on the agenda.

Concentrating on his human half, Kei initiated the change. Like always, he thought it a strange sensation when his fur receded and limbs reshaped. He finished the process in under half a minute, but the sudden change left him a bit disoriented and he wobbled dangerously.

Aside from his tall mate, there was nothing else he could hold onto. Kei, who fiercely believed in using good opportunities when they presented themselves, especially when they turned up naked and gorgeous, let himself fall into strong, muscled arms. Where else if not into your intended's arms could you let yourself fall?

The most handsome specimen of manhood—he really had to ask his mate's name sometime soon—grunted at the impact, but otherwise remained polite. Unfortunately, his chivalrous behavior didn't last long. Before Kei could rub and, now that he had lips, kiss, Kei's arms were grabbed in a tight grip.

The next moment, he found himself an arm's length away from a chiseled, droolworthy chest he already considered his. Sure, the distance was great for admiring purposes, but not what Kei wanted. His cat still longed to snuggle and purr.

Kei let his gaze travel up, and up, and up, and for the first time took in his mate's face. He was devastatingly handsome with a strong, square jaw and a surprisingly sharp, straight nose. Although not at all like Kei had imagined it, the nose suited him just fine. The man's eyes were a deep, chocolatey brown Kei wanted to drown in. Maybe later, when his mate didn't look like he'd just opened the door to a tax inspector.

As far as Kei was concerned, the man's hair was his most stunning feature. The black curls, streaked with pure white highlights, were very tight and tumbled in wild disarray over his wide shoulders down to his... dark nipples. *Crappity crap.*

Kei licked his lips, barely refraining from leaning forward and tasting the little nub. Wouldn't be a hardship at all, given that Kei was a wee on the short side and his mate was fucking huge. Really, the guy had to stand at least six



foot five, and that put Kei's lips on the perfect height for some serious sucking and licking. But first things first.

"Hi," he said breathily.

It occurred to him that the guy hadn't said a single word since demanding Kei should shift. The silence started to make him a tiny bit nervous. Just like Kei's big alpha, Xander, when the guy gave him the silent treatment.

"Uh... it's about time we introduce each other properly, right? I'm Kei. Kei Hirota. Your mate." Mentally patting his shoulder for managing a whole sentence with just a slight wobble in his voice, Kei stuck out his hand. He gifted the taller man with his most charming smile and waited.

Obviously, Kei had to work on his charm as well as on his smile, because his mate's frown deepened considerably. With his black, thick eyebrows, every frown must leave quite an impression on the recipient.

"Dji."

Kei blinked in confusion. "Huh?" Not very eloquent, sure. Following an, admittedly, almost nonexistent conversation with a man who obviously wasn't a master converser, while battling raging mating hormones, would ruin even a genius's concentration.

"My name. It's Djimon Akintola. Everybody calls me Dji," his mate grumbled in this wickedly sexy voice of his. Allowing that wonderful name to worm its way through his lust-addled brain, Kei thought he could listen to Dji for hours. And probably come from the sound alone.

Too bad his mate's next words felt like a bucket of cold water, not only to his libido, but to his heart as well. "Look, kitty, I understand you're all happy and shit with the way you're practically wriggling out of your skin with excitement. But there's no way I'll mate a damn cat."

What? Kei snorted at Dji's statement. "Ha, nice one. You're trying to yank my tail, right?" he asked, hoping against hope this was just his mate's bad attempt at acting funny. Who didn't want a mate?

The serious scowl he received told him in no uncertain terms that humor, obviously, wasn't Dji's strong feature. In fact, Kei was sure there were some guys in Dji's past who'd pissed their panties in response to that fierce scowl.

"Yank your tail, huh? Not sure if I should make a cat joke or a dick joke now." When Dji's dark, glittering eyes moved up and down his painfully aroused body, Kei's cheeks pinked.

At least after that smoldering look, he felt certain about his mate's attraction toward him. *Well, duh.* Nobody would be able to hide or deny arousal while standing bare-ass naked in the countryside.

Usually, it was considered bad behavior to ogle naked shifters when they were excited. But, damn, *Dji* was Kei's man. He really was a looker with that thick, hard, long...

Strong, long fingers snapping in front of his face forced his mind out of the gutter, and his eyes back up to look at his mate's face.

"You're not really thinking about denying me, *Dji*, are you?" he tried to reason as he looked into chocolatey eyes. "We're mates! I mean... you can't just tell me to fuck off. That's both rude and insane." Kei raked a hand through his black, wavy hair.

There was a certain expression in *Dji*'s deep, brown eyes. Something akin to longing, maybe? The longer they gazed at each other, the more Kei felt like a love-sick teenager. The gorgeous *Dji* puffed out his cheeks, looking more like a frog than a bird. Not that Kei cared, really. Even if *Dji* had turned out to be a night crawler, he'd still mate with him.

*Dji* tangled his hand in his stunning curls. He seemed to get more and more agitated the longer they talked. Another good point why talking was highly overrated, especially between mates. From what his pride members had told him, *Dji* and he should already be all over each other. Was it different for ostriches? Were they cautious when it came to mating?

"Look, Nippon-Boy—"

The rest of the man's insult drowned in Kei's shocked gasp. Honestly, now he was getting pissed at his mate's attitude. Gorgeous or not, Kei couldn't shake the feeling his mate was a douche. Otherwise he would've taken Kei in his arms, or kissed him silly, or proposed or something.

Kei crossed his arms in front of his chest. "No reason to insult me. My family may originate from Japan, but I'm from Hawaii, thank you very much, you overgrown rooster!" Okay, so now he'd insulted his mate, too. But what the heck?

*Dji* merely rolled his eyes. Yup, douche. "Whatever. But... this mating thing, it's complicated."

Kei's patience snapped. "What? Mating me? Yeah, complicated as hell. It's downright nuclear physics," he spat. "Is it just because I'm a cat? Come on,

there's no way in hell I'd ever be able to eat you. Not even accidentally. You're fucking huge and intimidating. So what is it? Are you straight?"

His mate sighed, a deep, suffering sound, and pinched the bridge of his nose. The gesture, as well as the sigh, reminded Kei of his old headmaster, but not in the kinky, *Come into my office in a tiny uniform* kind of way.

"No, I'm gay. But we just met, okay? And you're a damn predator with sharp teeth and claws. Plus, you just chased me! Fucking hell, cut me some slack," Dji all but yelled.

Huh, the guy had a temper. Together they could totally bust up Xander's house—where Kei lived on a permanent basis—if they got in a fight. Unfortunately, Kei saw many fights in their sparkling future.

"Is that all? You just need time?" Kei probed. His shoulders slumped when Dji didn't answer right away, but instead averted his gaze and began to fidget. On a guy his size, nervous fidgeting looked... like serious trouble. Crap.

Suppressing a snivel, Kei asked, "You're already in a relationship, right?" The fine hair on his nape rose and his skin prickled at the prospect of his mate being already taken. It was an altogether unpleasant feeling of foreboding doom. If his mate was in a relationship, the situation could become ugly. Very, very ugly.

Dji groaned and once again tugged on his hair. It seemed to be a gesture that always appeared whenever the man felt uncomfortable or nervous. If he continued like that, the shifter would be bald at the end of their frustrating conversation.

"No relationship," Dji eventually confessed, but otherwise refrained from offering further explanations for his erratic behavior.

His mate was nuts, no other way around it. "Maybe you've been in the sun for too long," Kei concluded. "Let me feel your forehead and—" As Kei reached out a hand, his mate stepped back as if he had the plague. Kei, that was, not Dji.

"No."

"Cat allergy?"

"Dammit, furball, I'm a fuck and run kind of guy!"

Oh. Well, what a nice punch to the gut. "In true ratite form, huh? You planning to run from me, too?" So what if Kei sounded bitter? His involuntary joke seemed to set Dji off even more.

His nostrils flared as he stabbed his finger toward Kei and said, “Don’t you dare make any roadrunner jokes or I’m going to kill you. Slowly.”

*Aww, hell, no. Don’t do it, Kei. Don’t—“Meep meep.” Crap.*

And there it was again, the mafia killer’s scowl. With a dash of the frown of a vegan who’d just been served a medium-rare rib eye steak at a veggie convention. Damn, and now Kei was hungry again because his cat always got hungry in stressful situations. And unstressful situations, for that matter.

Before Kei could unscramble his brain and stammer an apology to the man who held his future happiness in his very big hands, the man in question shifted. It happened so damn fast Kei had to blink several times.

When his mate screeched, turned, and ran, Kei and his cat were way too stunned, and too exhausted, to follow him.

*Shitshitshitshit.*

\*\*\*\*

Back on pride land later that day, Kei sat under a huge tree with wide, shadowing branches. It was his favorite spot, the one he loved taking his work to and letting inspiration strike. Today though, inspiration was a conniving bitch. All he could think about was his mate’s gorgeous body. He’d be damned if he devoted his time, skill, and clay to a man who was a total jerk.

Kei huffed, leaned back in his chair, and took a look around instead. His tree was in the center of a village-like homestead, the heart of the pride land. Several cabins rested scattered around the alpha’s bigger mansion. Since he’d joined the pride seven years ago at the age of thirteen, Kei had always lived in Alpha Xander’s house. It was a good life.

Kei’s shifter genes had been passed to him by his Hawaiian father. After his dad and his Californian mother had divorced, Kei had stayed on Hawaii with the man. Then his dad had died in an accident while sailing, leaving Kei in desperate need for another pride.

Living with his mother hadn’t been an option. Cheetahs shifted for the first time at the age of twelve to fourteen. L.A. wasn’t by any stretch the right environment to change from a perfectly normal boy—as far as one could call Kei normal—to a big cat with very intimidating teeth and claws.

A friend of his father’s had contacted Xander and that was all she wrote, so to say. Kei loved the white lion shifter like a second father.

“Hey, Kei. What’s wrong?” Oh, speak of the devil. Kei looked up just as Xander dragged a chair over to his makeshift workplace and took a seat opposite him.

Eyeing the man suspiciously, he grabbed a damp cloth to clean the clay stains off his hands. He so didn’t want to talk about his day, not even with Xander. “Nothing. Why do you think something is wrong?”

The alpha raised one bushy white-blond brow and smirked. “Well, you’ve been staring at this glob of clay for an hour now. And this morning you left the house after throwing a hissy fit down in the basement. Don’t know. These two things aren’t randomly connected, are they?”

Damn cats were way too observant for their own good. *Curiosity killed the cat* wasn’t just an adage, far from it. Kei just wished he had nine lives, too. Maybe in the next one he’d get a mate he didn’t need to track down, knock out, and kidnap to lead a happy life.

“Come on, kid, spit it out,” Xander said and nudged his knee under the table. Then he winked. “Before you explode. We both know only one of us would survive it.”

Well, hell. “I found my mate,” he mumbled.

“But that’s great! Congratulations.” Xander’s steel grey eyes lit up with joy so apparent Kei felt bad for what he needed to say next.

“Yeah, great. Wheee.” He twirled his finger in the air. “Xander, my mate is a bird!” With a loud thud, Kei let his head fall on the table and bumped it a few times. Maybe that would erase all his memories of his mate’s handsome face when he, with a few nonchalant words, had stabbed a knife through Kei’s heart and turned it with a lovely smile.

“And what’s the problem?” Xander inquired.

Kei lifted his face and gazed at his foster father. “Aside from the fact that my cat gave chase as soon as it smelled our mate? And that my mate thought I wanted to eat him?”

Xander chuckled, interlacing his fingers in front of his mouth. “Uh. Yes. And aside from the fact that you have clay all over your face now.”

Growling, Kei rubbed the cloth over his skin. “Yeah. Or maybe the real problem is that my mate rejected me because he’s not interested in tying himself to a predator?”

Xander looked thoughtful for a moment. It was his *I need to choose my words wisely* face. “Okay, so... are you really afraid of accidentally eating him? What kind of shifter is he that he’s not able to handle you? A singing bird? Or some kind of duck?”

Kei growled again. “Don’t ever again imply that my mate can’t handle me, that’s insulting.” Xander held up his hands, but the grin on his face attested to his lack of remorse. “And no, he’s not a fucking duck. He’s... an ostrich. A fricking big, black ostrich with an even bigger ego.”

His alpha blinked, dumbfounded for the first time since Kei had known him. Then he snorted and chortled, yet another premiere. But when the bigger male finally succumbed to his mirth and guffawed, Kei had had enough.

“What?” he asked, throwing his arms in the air. “What’s so funny about my mate being an ostrich?”

“Oh, well, don’t take this the wrong way but, even if your cat wanted to chase your mate in shifted form, you’re a cheetah. That’s no match for an ostrich at all, given that you’re one hundred thirty pounds soaking wet and he’s, what? One hundred seventy pounds heavier than you in animal form? He’ll kick your ass,” his annoying alpha pressed between bursts of laughter, his wide shoulders shaking.

Kei snapped his fingers to get the guy’s attention. “Hey, insulting again. Cut it out.”

Xander shook his head and gave him this soft, indulging look you bestowed on petulant kids. “Just wanted to say that you’re not in any danger of eating your mate. That’s a plus, right?”

“My, aren’t you a *the glass is always half full* kind of guy?” Kei deadpanned, his face slack. “The downside is, unfortunately, that my mate is on the proverbial run. From me! To make things worse, I have absolutely no idea where he lives. Hell, the big lug didn’t even tell me if he’s living nearby or just passing through before he shifted and used his insanely long legs to hightail it out of the fucked up situation. Xander, this is a major debacle.”

With a grin and a nod, the alpha said, “So, let me recap. Your mate is MIA and now you’re going to give up?”

Kei shot him an offended look. “Of course not! The man’s a dumb, presumptuous, annoying ass.”

Xander eyed him, confusion clearly etched on his handsome face. “I don’t understand.”

Rolling his eyes because, really, as an alpha, Xander should know how important and life-altering finding your mate was for a shifter, he said, “Because he’s *my* dumb, presumptuous, annoying ass. My fated mate. Just because he’s stubborn and conveniently forgot to tell me where he lives, doesn’t mean he’ll get away from me.”

“Uh, I hate bursting your happy bubble, but he *did* get away from you,” the alpha carefully reminded him.

“Details,” Kei appeased with a flick of his hand. “Details never stopped me in the past if I set my sight on something I want.”

An amused smile played around Xander’s lips. “And how do you plan to track down your mate, Mr. Determined Mastermind?”

Kei took a deep breath and let it out in small puffs. “You know what, Xander? I’m so going to torture you as soon as you find your own mate.”

Xander threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, I expect nothing less, kid. So, your plans? Surely you can’t physically force him to come back to you.”

“Hey! Just because I’m small and most people think I’m too pretty for a man, doesn’t mean I’m a docile kitty. I don’t have a Napoleon complex by any stretch, but always being the short and delicate one in a group of mostly big men sucks. So, don’t act as if I’m not able to lure back my own damn mate.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest and practiced his mate’s scowl.

Given that Xander didn’t wet his panties, he must be doing something wrong. Or maybe it was a combination of the fact that Xan was a big, burly alpha who saw Kei as his son, and that he didn’t wear any panties. Maybe.

“Kei,” Xander said, leaning forward to pet his shoulder. “You know I didn’t mean it that way. And I’m well aware of both your temper and your persistence. But you still need a plan. Surely you’re not planning to permanently plant your little bum under this tree and just wait for the miraculous arrival of your worshipping mate.”

“Of course not!” Kei scoffed, puffing out his slim chest. Then he deflated and peered at his alpha from underneath his lashes. “Do you have a better idea? I’m way too hungry for creativity.”

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## Chapter Three

### *How to unsuccessfully get drunk*

Three days later, Dji sat slumped on a barstool in the local, shady watering hole. The beer resting in front of him was untouched and had gone stale a long time ago. Every time he'd picked up his glass during the past one and a half hours, he'd placed it back without taking a sip.

Which was counterproductive, given that he'd come here to get plastered and forget the encounter with his mate. Dji struggled with the decision if he wanted to get shitfaced, hook up with someone, or just return to his car for the night.

The last option would be best, the first was doable if he stopped chickening out, and the middle one caused his stomach to cramp to the point where he wanted to throw up.

As fucked up as the situation was, he had the feeling he'd never hook up with anybody ever again. At least, not without tossing his cookies all over the other guy and feeling like the world's biggest ass for cheating on his mate.

Battling an annoying, completely odd, wave of desperation, he peered into his glass and gripped a strand of his long hair. A little bit of sting always helped him focus, so he gave his messy curls a forceful tug and winced.

The hefty bartender came by, giving Dji the kind of sympathetic half smile one reserved for successful men at the end of their careers. Or deserted spouses.

Dji, obviously belonging to the latter, shook his head when the guy offered him a bowl of bar peanuts. Desperate he might be, but he didn't nurse a death wish. Although shifters were immune to most human diseases, he wasn't sure if that applied to bar peanuts, an acknowledged lethal weapon. After he declined a fresh beer, too, the barkeeper sauntered off, leaving him to his gloomy musing.

Maybe he'd overreacted a tiny bit. Dji groaned and put his forehead in his hand. Okay, he'd fucked up, royally.

Damn traitor of an ostrich wanted to hunt down their wayward mate and... well... mate him. Which was dumb, given that he was a fucking bird with no innate desire to go on a hunt whatsoever, and that his tiny mate occupied the role of the predator in their nonexistent relationship.



Yes, he'd fucked up, Dji wanted to kick his ass for the childish way he'd handled the situation the other day. He'd just been so... confused.

Not enough, he'd been mad as hell when he'd seen the tiny slip of a kitty that had taken down his big ostrich. Dji's male pride was bruised and if that didn't make him feel even worse. In human form, the top of Kei's head hadn't even reached his shoulders. He'd looked so fragile and slim.

Instead of pouting and feeling like a lesser man, he should be proud of his mate's skills. But, his brain remained enamored with the fact that his mate was a predator. A fucking feline, who'd probably pounce and chase him as soon as they were in their shifted forms, and who'd be a whole lot faster, too.

He wasn't sure if he could live with a feline predator and the sharp teeth and claws as a consequence thereof. Sighing deeply, Dji turned the beer glass round and round on its little paper slip.

Oh, who was he kidding? The only part struggling to accept his mate was his damn human brain. His body and his ostrich knew what they longed for. Their cat. The bossy bird screeched and ruffled its feathers, trying to force him to leave the bar and its temptations, and make things right with their mate. Meaning, he should fall on his knees and grovel.

But could he? Even more important, would his tiny cheetah, who had quite a big temper for such a little thing, forgive him his initial reaction and give them a chance?

The kitty was cute, hands down. Not Dji's usual type because he'd preferred bigger, muscular guys in the past, but pretty nonetheless. His tanned, golden skin had looked smooth. Despite his small, thin body, Dji had noticed the wiry muscles traveling the man's legs and arms. Then there was his face...

Dji hated stereotyping, but his mate was one of those effeminate guys who could pull off eyeliner, mascara, and stuff like that. Kei's oval face was dominated by a set of typical, slightly slanted, Asian eyes that still managed to look big and round. Instead of deep-brown, they were a light, amber color though. A man could get lost in those eyes.

But the last nail in his coffin was Kei's straight little nose that spoke of a mixed heritage. Or, more precisely, the lovely, upturned end of his nose that Dji wanted to kiss.

If Kei hadn't been his mate, Dji was fairly sure he'd have run from so much saccharine cuteness in such a small package. Which was exactly what he'd done. After insulting his mate and yelling at him.

The hurt, crestfallen expression on Kei's pretty face still haunted him and had granted him sleepless nights. What's more, just the thought of nibbling, licking, and kissing his way all over his mate's tight little body, and exploring all the spots that made him pant and moan, made him incredibly hard. Every damn time. Shit.

One thing was for sure, he'd never find answers in the bottom of a glass. If he wanted a future with his mate, he had to—for once in his life—back down, rein in his own temper, and apologize.

Gah. Dji grimaced. He hated apologizing. He eyed his beer with disgust, as if the brew was responsible for his bad mood. The foam had long vanished and now the stuff looked more like a urine sample than a beer.

Okay, enough was enough. He'd go home, or back to his car, more precisely, and pack up his stuff. Then he'd search for that damn pride he'd heard about. How hard could that be?

Fanged or not, the little kitty was Dji's mate and he'd never find another man who'd measure up. Plus, he wasn't keen on spending the rest of his life with his pissed off ostrich just because he was too stubborn to pull his head out of his ass.

Just as he pushed the glass away and proceeded to peel a bill out of his wallet, a strong, tanned, long-fingered hand curled around his forearm. Dji's whole body tensed when a muscled chest pressed against his shoulder. *No. Wrong hand, wrong chest, wrong person.*

Turning on his barstool, he came face-to-face with one hell of a handsome guy. He was tall, albeit not as tall as Dji, with broad shoulders, black, tousled hair, and piercing blue eyes. Speak of bad timing. Two days ago, Dji would've been all over the guy.

"Hi, stranger. You're new here, huh?" the guy rumbled in a tone that was probably meant to be seductive. On Dji, it hadn't quite the desired effect though. In fact, it gave him the heebie-jeebies. The man wasn't repulsive or anything, but Dji was, irrevocably and completely, off the market.

"I'm taken and not interested," he snapped, trying to dislodge the hand holding him.

A low chuckle vibrated against his back as the guy pressed closer. "But you're alone right now and the bulge in your jeans looks very lonely, too. I could suck you in the restroom and your guy or girl won't ever find out. I'm Alan, by the way."

Well, Alan-by-the-way had guts, coming on to a man who was bigger and heavier than him. Or who could be straight, with a very nervous fist.

“You better hope my guy won’t find out you’re touching me right now. He’d rip out your throat.” Okay, so he didn’t know that. However, shifters were possessive bastards when it came to their mates, so it was a safe bet.

As he struggled to get rid of the man’s unpleasant grip on his arm, Dji smelled something under the heavy cologne the guy had donned, and a light went on over his head. Shifter.

All fight left Dji’s body as he regarded his unlucky admirer with a cool stare. “Please remove your hand. My mate would highly appreciate it.”

Alan’s blue eyes popped wide and, raising his hands, he backed away as if he’d burned himself. “Shit, sorry. I thought that was just a line to rile me up.”

Dji rolled his eyes. “What if it was a line to get rid of you?”

His question merely earned him a shrug. “Oh, that usually has the same effect on me. I just love a challenge.”

The guy grinned, showing a row of very white teeth and two cute, deep dimples. He really was a sexy fucker with the kind of fit, hard body that could give a guy many hours of hot, sweaty fun. Dji remained completely unfazed and just wanted to wrap himself around a small, feisty cat. Oh! Now, there was an idea.

Leaning closer to Alan, he hoped the guy would be clever enough not to see it as an invitation. “Are you a cat?” Dji asked his bar companion.

Alan nodded, but regarded him with a wary expression. “Yeah, black panther. Why do you want to know?” Then he tilted his head and sniffed subtly. “I can’t place your scent. However, you’re not a feline.”

Dji took a deep breath. Alan could very well be one of Kei’s fellow pride members. Should he just come clean with the guy and tell him that he’d lost his mate due to his own stupidity and had no idea where to find him? Was there a better chance to get a hold of his little guy?

Maybe Alan already knew what Dji had done the other day and would be all too happy to pay him back for hurting the kitty. As talkative as his mate was, Dji didn’t think he’d be able to not spread the news about finding his mate.

Only one way to find out. “Well, look, this mate I told you about? He’s... kinda... missing.” Dji waved his hand around, as if he’d lost his mate

somewhere between the parking lot and his current place at the bar, not in the wilds of Nebraska.

“Missing?” Alan lifted one black eyebrow and gave a one-sided smirk. “Let me guess. He couldn’t live with your approachable personality any longer. And those wickedly romantic locations you always pick for your dates weren’t his thing either,” he said and flicked his hand through the air, indicating the shady, run-down bar.

Dji groaned. Great. Was cockiness a requirement for joining a cat pride? Balls, obviously, were mandatory, because just like Kei, Alan didn’t even flinch under his practiced scowl.

“Not quite,” he replied in a sharp voice. “We had a... misunderstanding. Three days ago, I might have left him under the false impression that I’m not too excited about—”

“Oh my God!” Alan interrupted him and slapped the bar so hard Dji’s neglected beer rattled on the scarred wood. Dji watched with a mix of anger and defeat when the other man’s chuckles quickly progressed from *You’re funny* to *You’re so fucked*. “You’re the rooster!” he pressed between wheezing laughs, placing his forehead on the arm resting on top of the bar while curling the other around his belly.

“The *what?*” Oh boy, this pride looked more and more like an assembly of loons. Then again, what had he expected from a wild rabble of shifters who were mood challenged and acted unpredictable? They were cats, after all.

Alan, still immune to Dji’s wrath, was busy brushing tears out of his eyes. “Sorry, man. But Xander mentioned Kei’s jerk of a mate and that he’s some kind of bird.”

Just the mention of another man in his mate’s life was enough to snap Dji’s highly stung nerves. “Who the fuck is Xander?” he snapped and grabbed the front of Alan’s plaid shirt in his fist. A little tug brought them nose to nose.

His opponent’s blue eyes widened, showing a fleeting glimmer of fear. Dji didn’t care if this guy was part of his mate’s family. He wanted to know about this unknown guy and in what relation he stood to Kei.

The black-haired man swallowed audibly and patted Dji’s strong arms in a supposedly soothing motion. “Calm down, hey? Xander is our alpha. Kei lives with him. Ah, I mean, Kei is living in alpha’s house!” he hurriedly added when Dji’s eyes turned to tiny slits. “There’s nothing going on between them, honestly. Xander acts as some kind of foster father for the little guy.”

Dji tightened his grip, utterly pleased when Alan gasped for air due to the collar's pressure to his neck. "You better not lie to me."

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Dji. He had no right to bitch about his mate's past relationships. Hell, he didn't even have the right to act all jealous about recent relationships and take his anger out on poor Alan. If anybody was to blame for Kei taking another man as a lover after their first meeting, it was Dji.

"Let me guess, you want me to give you a ride to pride lands?" Alan coughed and cleared his throat. Aside from that, he didn't seem to be too pissed about Dji's show of possessiveness.

Anyway, Dji's evening had just taken a turn for the better. He knew a way to find his mate. So what if he'd bullied somebody to get the information. Alan was a big guy, he'd live.

"I'll follow you in my own car," he said and slapped the bills for his beer on the bar.

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## Chapter Four

### *How to force your haughty mate to grovel*

The smell of clay was quite unique. An earthy, heavy, clean odor that always grounded Kei. Unless his muse annoyed the crap out of him, of course, and either forced him to start the same project over and over again, or abandoned him altogether.

For the past three days, his muse had chosen the abandoning strategy. Kei had the feeling the little rascal spent its time running around naked with a cocktail glass in hand instead of doing its job.

It wasn't enough that his mate had up and left, now his sole companion throughout the years had left, too. Was this some kind of conspiracy? A big scheme to drive him crazy?

If so, it worked pretty darn well. No wonder he'd been twitchy and ill-tempered for the last week or so. His cat had probably felt their mate's nearness and had longed to find him. Dumb cat. Acted as if Dji was a big bowl of cream.

Right on cue, Kei's stomach let out an angry, loud grumbling sound. He grabbed the glass of fresh milk he'd placed beside his worktable, and enjoyed several big gulps before he let out a long, satisfied sigh. Yeah, he loved milk, so what? To tame the insatiable beast living in his belly, he stuffed his mouth with three chocolate chip cookies.

"Wow, that's amazing," Xander's breathy voice came from somewhere behind him, scaring the bejesus out of him. Kei squeaked, unfortunately sucking a crumb down his windpipe in the wake, and jumped in his chair. Goddamn! He hated it when the big lion snuck up on him.

"No, it's not," he shot back, coughing up a lung. "You tryin' to off me?"

The alpha sauntered over. His awed gaze remained pinned to Kei's newest work as he gave Kei's back a hearty pat, and shook his head.

"I disagree. I've never seen such an artfully crafted animal, Kei. All your work is exceptional, but the attention to detail that's displayed in this piece is... marvelous."

Stopping beside the table, Xander hunched down so he was eye level with the glob of clay he was fawning over, and that had cost Kei yesterday and most of today, too.

Oh, and that was solely responsible for the tight knots torturing his nape and shoulders. He could really use a massage, preferably delivered by a tall, dark, and hot man. Kei snorted at his own stupidity; it came out as another cookie crumb-induced cough.

Xander shot him an amused look and asked, “Will you live? Do you need another pat?”

“Nah.”

Repeatedly clearing his throat, Kei only stared daggers at his work. From an unattached viewpoint, he could see where Xan was coming from. But he wasn't unattached, far from it.

The fragile ostrich he'd crafted was in full run—ha, the irony! One claw-footed, long leg touched the ground, the other was carefully angled in preparation for the next wide step. Its wings were spread for balance purposes, just like Kei remembered, the neck upright. It was an oddly proud posture and so very fitting for Kei's stubborn mate.

Xan was right. The details—from the tightly coiled muscles running along the ostrich's powerful legs, down to the structure of the feathers—were stunning. It was a wonderful piece. Too bad the captured scene would always remind him of the day Dji had run from him.

If that was the way he'd spend his life, constantly creating models of his wayward mate, he'd go insane. Kei wasn't one to give up easily, and he sure as hell wouldn't give up his mate. Till now, he hadn't come up with a plan to track him down though. Aside from shifting and sniffing out the neighborhood.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Kei munched the next cookie, aka deadly weapon. Take a walk on the wild side, and all.

“Xan, we need to act,” he finally said when he couldn't bear looking at the model any longer. And sprayed cookie crumbs all over his alpha. *Oops.*

A few well-placed pats on Kei's side took care of most of the damage. “Really. Those fucking mating hormones are driving me crazy. They're not only affecting my cat, but my art as well. My art, Xan!

“I can't model ostriches for the rest of my long life. I'm sure the market for that kind of stuff is fairly limited, you know? As soon as all the ostrich-lovers are satisfied, all that's left are those restaurants specializing in fancy meat. Although my mate is a jerk, and I'd like to kick his feathery ass from here till

Sunday, it wouldn't feel right to sell his likeness to a trade that celebrates the tastiness of ostrich steaks. Big, major relationship no-no! Not that we have a relationship, yet, but—”

“Kei.” The white lion leaned his hip against Kei's heavy work table, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Was there a smug little smile playing around his lips? If so, Kei wasn't amused. He was trying to have a serious conversation about his nonexistent love life and his not-present mate with his pride leader and foster father.

Moving his hand through the air and waving his cookie like the weapon it was, he said, “No, let me get this out of my system, Xan. My mate is—”

“Upstairs.”

Open mouth frozen in mid rant, Kei blinked several times. An eloquent, “Huh?” was all he managed as a reply. Had he heard that right? His mate was here? But... how? Even more important, why?

Xander's smug smile now morphed to a wide, toothy grin as he pushed away from the table. “He's upstairs. Alan brought him in. Met him at the bar in town. Clean up,” he said, handing Kei a damp rag.

Although Kei's brain struggled to keep up with the sudden turn of events, his body worked pretty well. His cock jumped at the idea of his mate being under the same roof. The rest of his excited body jumped off the stool, dodged the cloth, and fisted the front of Xander's shirt.

“Upstairs? As in in this house? Hey,” he snapped and frowned. “What do you mean they met at the bar?”

Xander sighed while he peeled Kei's fingers off his shirt. “Thanks, that was a new shirt. Kids...” Brownish clay stains now marred the previously white fabric.

Kei growled, not caring in the least for his alpha's attire. All he cared about was his mate and the man's questionable decisions concerning his free time activities. His upper canines elongated, peeking over his bottom lip, and his eyes shifted to their cat equivalent so fast he had to blink rapidly to regain focus.

“What the fuck is my mate doing at a bar? With flirty Alan, to top it off? I'm going to shred him!” He wasn't sure who he wanted to shred—Alan, Dji, or both of them. That was a decision for later and depended on his mate's behavior. Maybe, if he was a nice little birdy, Kei would be gracious.



Rolling his eyes, Xan slapped him upside the head. Kei snarled. “Behave, kitten. Alan was just out hunting for fun, you know him. He’s not responsible for your mate’s choices. Come on up and talk with him.”

Kei tensed and, suddenly afraid of the confrontation, shook his head.

While the aroused part of his body and his cat were urging him to run upstairs and tackle their guy, his stubborn brain refused to give in to the very reasonable demand. Kei’s hand, predictably listening to his stomach, reached into his already plundered box and snagged more cookies.

“Nope,” he mumbled around the first one. “Not a good idea. We’ll only fight and yell. Then he’ll leave me again.”

Xander sighed and rubbed at the stains on his shirt. He’d done that a whole lot more than usual over the last days. Sighing, not the rubbing thing. Kei didn’t think his alpha’s increased need to slowly let out long puffs of air had anything to do with him.

“Well, you can’t *not* talk with the man. You want him, go get him.”

Nervously brushing one of his dirty hands over the leg of his magenta overalls, Kei said, “Of course I want him. But do I need to talk with him, too? Can’t I just, dunno, take him to my room and keep him there?”

Giving him a somewhat dirty smirk, Xander shrugged one broad shoulder and tilted his head. “You planning to make him your sex slave?”

Kei snorted, carefully eating the next cookie to avoid another near-death experience. “And how would I know what to do with a sex slave?”

With the last sweet goodness gone, he finally grabbed the rag and proceeded to clean the drying, flaky clay off his fingers. Then he covered his model with another damp cloth.

He could tell his alpha was quickly losing his patience, saw it in the fine lines around his tight mouth and the stiff posture of his shoulders. Xander might love Kei like a son, but he wasn’t one to tolerate bullshit.

The man’s next, clipped words confirmed Kei’s suspicion. “Go! Now! I’m sick of your whining and moping.” Then he did this thing where he stretched out his arm and pointed his index finger toward the stairs, all the while wearing a thunderous expression. Great, now he really felt like a scolded kid.

Kei groaned in defeat. “It’s going to be a disaster,” he grumbled, dragging his feet all the way over to the stairs. “Talking with that man is like walking on a slippery, icy balancing beam. In roller skates.”

Trudging upstairs, he gave himself a last pep talk. Although he wanted to dance like a loon because his mate had come to see him, it surely wouldn't do him any good to jump his mate as soon as he saw him.

Hell, Kei didn't even know if the man was here to stay, or if he'd just come by to say good-bye for good, and turn the knife in Kei's chest some more.

No. He'd act all cool and composed. He'd push his needy, whiny cat as far into the back of his mind as possible, so he could calmly listen to his mate's words. If he revealed how much he'd missed the big chicken so soon in their relationship, Dji would only get the upper hand and, wrongly, think he could do as he pleased.

His mate was the first thing he zeroed in on as he rounded the corner to the wide foyer. Dji looked even better than he had a few days ago—the fucker. He stood tall and proud, an unreadable expression on his face. An instant later, Kei found himself clinging to the big man like a leech.

Crap. Yeah, he was so cool and composed. How the hell had he ended up with his arms and legs wrapped around Dji? Not only had he revealed his weakness, his mate, but there was no way the man wouldn't notice Kei's boner pressing against his belly. Damn mating hormones.

His cat didn't seem interested in a petty discussion about his limbs' whereabouts or hormones though. Instead, it forced Kei to let out a deep, rumbling purr and to rub his face against their mate's shirt-covered, muscled chest.

Okay, so he didn't put up much resistance against his cat. Why should he? His mate was where he belonged. Finally. Dji didn't seem to see it quite like that. He struggled against the stranglehold and eventually bumped into the wall behind them.

“Uh... kitty?” his mate uttered, sounding somewhat breathless. Why was he breathless? Kei wasn't a heavy guy and if Dji claimed differently, they'd slip right into the next fight.

One big hand moved underneath Kei's butt to hold him up—very nice!—but the other tugged at the arm Kei had slung around Dji's neck. “Damn! I thought you were a cat, not a snake. Stop strangling me, would ya?”

Oh! Crappity crap! “Oops! Sorry. Didn't think a hug from your tiny mate would knock you out,” he teased as he slid down his mate's front till his feet touched the floor.

He did it provokingly slowly so Dji would feel the hard length trapped inside Kei's overalls. The cat was out of the bag anyway. Pun intended.

Kei upped the stakes even more and met Dji's expected scowl with a bashful smile and fluttering lashes.

Damn, but his mate looked edible in his green plaid shirt, scuffed jeans, and heavy work boots. The man wore his hair in a messy, long ponytail Kei wanted to wrap around himself. Physically not possible, unless he picked a small part of his body. Oh, now there was a kinky idea...

Before Kei fully succumbed to his raging hormones and his mind could walk down the slippery path of tangled sheets, loud moans, and sweat-covered skin, Dji grabbed his chin between two fingers. He forced Kei's gaze up, away from the bulge in his jeans.

Kei felt the biggest of embarrassed blushes bloom on his cheeks. In fact, he was sure it rose from his little toes all the way up to the tips of his ears.

"Sorry. Again," he whispered as their gazes locked, mesmerized by the fire burning in his mate's eyes. If his fast, shallow breathing was anything to go by, the man wasn't unaffected by their sudden meeting either. Excellent! "My brain tends to get lost sometimes. Typical artists' quirk, ya know?"

At this point of their relationship, it seemed wiser to blame his scatterbrain for his awkward behavior. Otherwise he'd be forced to admit he could only think about licking his mate from top to bottom, and every delicious inch in between, every time he set eyes on the tall man. Or thought about him.

Dji's amused laugh, the first friendly noise coming from the man, felt like a hot, soothing bubble bath to Kei's tightly stung nerves. "What do you do for it?"

It took him a moment to find his way back into the conversation. "Ah... I go for a run. Usually. Cheetahs get restless very fast and then we need to burn the excess energy."

The admission got him another smooth, deep chuckle. Kei's skin goose bumped and he surreptitiously pressed closer to his mate's front. Hmm. He was so tall and strong. An absolute—

"Want me to throw a ball of yarn for you?"

—bastard. Weren't they capable of having just one decent conversation without ribbing each other?

“I’m so going to kick your ass,” Kei hissed, delivering a hard punch to Dji’s chest. Then he cursed, pushed away from his mate, and cradled his hand against his belly. “Aww, fuck! What are you hiding underneath your shirt? Cement? Titanium?”

It was only now that he became aware of the other people littering the foyer. It took some effort, but Kei managed to ignore his fellow pride members’ amused snickers. Damn peanut gallery.

There was Alan—who would die a cruel death for chatting up his mate at a bar in the first place, and whose body would miraculously vanish without a trace. Aside from the black panther and beta of their pride, there were Xander, Thony, and Viggo, Thony’s brother. When it came to quarrels, cats were worse than a bunch of blue-haired ladies in a quilting circle. They just loved to ogle and gossip.

Dji surprised the hell out of him when he carefully cradled Kei’s bruised hand in both his bigger ones and kissed his knuckles. “You want to kick my ass? All five feet of you?” he teased with a big grin. Handsome devil.

“I’m five five, just so you know,” Kei grumbled without heat. He was a wee bit distracted by the feel of Dji’s dark, calloused fingers touching his fair skin. They looked so good together. “Why are you here?” he asked. “You sounded rather resolute when you told me you weren’t interested in me.”

“Yeah, well. I came to... apologize.”

Apologize? After the show Dji had put on three days ago, Kei was more than wary when it came to his mate’s reliability.

When he peeked up at the tall man, Dji wore an expression like he’d been forced to chew a handful of nails. Apologizing, it seemed, came next to charm on his list of disabilities.

The seconds ticked by as Kei waited for his mate to do what he’d announced he was going to do. Opening and closing his mouth several times, all Dji managed was to look like a fish. The silence was only interrupted by the occasional shuffle of feet on the floor, and the not-so-subtle whispers of his friends.

Eventually, Alan’s voice broke through the stifling atmosphere.

“You know, usually an apology contains some standard phrases like ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘Please forgive me for being a dumbass.’ I’m sure that saying nothing at all is counterproductive.”

Kei turned and shot his friend a warning glare. For a second he wondered why Alan actually took a step back. His pride members liked and respected him, but none of them had ever been afraid of tiny Kei, even if he'd had a fit. Then he felt the deep growl vibrating against his side, Djì's growl, and just knew his mate used his killer scowl.

As pleased as he was that Djì had come to see him, his mate's actions irritated him. He'd yet to tell Kei if he wanted to give their relationship a chance or if he'd leave again. It was time for the truth, as well as a kick to Djì's ass in case that truth didn't please Kei.

He faced his man and stabbed Djì's chest with his index finger. "Although Alan will suffer repercussions for chatting you up," Kei snapped and shot a quick look over his shoulder, pleased to see Alan swallowing. He trained his gaze back on his mate. "You're not allowed to threaten my friends. Especially not if this friend is right. You hurt me, badly. Shifters are not supposed to hurt their mates. Apologize or fuck off till you're ready to admit you fucked up our first meeting. I'm busy and my clay's waiting in my basement studio."

Djì's chocolate-brown eyes widened, then they thinned to slits. With a shove, the stronger man put several inches between them and pointed the way Kei had come from. "Who the fuck is Clay? Do you have a lover?"

Kei groaned and threw his arms in the air. That man was unbelievable. First he didn't want him, now he threw a jealous fit because of a nonexistent lover?

"What is it with you birds?" he asked around a sigh. "Are all of you hysterical and erratic? Clay is not a person but the material I work with, okay? I'm an artist and I model... stuff."

Observing his mate's reaction, he noticed the tightening in his jaw and the slight tick underneath his left eye. He did that nervous hair-tugging thing, too.

This time, he got tangled because of the rubber band holding it together though. Djì let out a garbled sound, probably due to annoyance, or anger, or the fact that he was forced to have this conversation in front of a nosy bunch of strangers.

With a sharp tug, his mate yanked the rubber band free and ruffled through the wild curls. Djì huffed and as the air left his lungs, so did the tension in his shoulders.

Brown eyes met Kei's. The different feelings swirling in those chocolatey depths were hard to interpret given that they knew nearly nothing about each

other. If Dji's feelings were anywhere near his own, Kei guessed he saw a mix of lust and desperation.

It was only now that Kei noticed the fatigue etched on his mate's face. His dark skin made it hard to see the shadows under his eyes, but they were there. As well as the lines around his mouth and on his forehead. He still looked sexy, but like shit, too. Like he hadn't slept well over the last few days. Well, that made two of them.

"This won't get us anywhere," Dji finally said. "You know—hell, we both know perfectly well why I'm here. I'm not very good with words, as you probably already noticed. What do you want to hear me saying, little kitty?" Dji asked, his voice oddly quiet. "Would you like me to go down on my knees and beg your forgiveness? Would that please you?"

Aww. His mate didn't really think Kei would relent so easily, did he? Not after the other day's display of arrogance. Yes, Kei wanted his mate, and he knew keeping Dji at arm's length would only serve to torment them both. But the man had to understand that Kei wasn't a pushover just because he was small and a wee bit effeminate.

Furthermore, he really wanted to know if Dji was capable of apologizing. And groveling. And kneeling. The position would come in handy later when they were alone.

So, with his dick throbbing at the mental picture he'd just conjured, he fisted his hands on his hips. "Yes. Seeing you on your knees would please me very much. Don't forget the apology. A heartfelt one, please."

Kei didn't think his mate would go through with it when he saw the rolling eyes and heard the exasperated sigh.

Then, to his utter surprise and accompanied by his friend's gasps, Dji slowly lowered to his knees. With a big smirk on his face, he knee-walked across the hardwood floor till he reached Kei. His twinkling gaze never once strayed from Kei's. Although the teasing smirk didn't bode well in the apology-department, words deserted Kei at seeing his tall, proud man crawling at his feet.

He let out a surprised squeak when two strong arms wrapped around his slim waist and pressed them together. Kei couldn't help but place his hands on Dji's muscular shoulders.

In their current position, Dji's head came to rest at Kei's sternum. And, *Oh my God*, his cock leaked into his tight-fitting, skimpy boxers when it encountered hard muscles.

Two hands moved up and down his back, kneading Kei's tense muscles. His purring starting anew at the strong caress, Kei prayed he wouldn't embarrass himself and come in his pants from a simple press against his shaft. At least, not in front of his friends!

Catcalls resounded behind them when one big hand cupped Kei's overalls-clad ass cheek and squeezed. Crap. He'd so embarrass himself in one... two...

Kei, helpless against the sensual onslaught on his body, bit his lip and closed his shifting eyes. He wasn't used to being so close to men who weren't pride members and friends. The fact that it was his mate touching him in such an intimate way, set his whole body on fire.

His cat mewed and wriggled inside of him, urging him to strip and allow their mate to ravish him. He felt his skin goose bump and tingle, like it always did when Kei prepared for a shift. Just... this time he'd shift into jello instead of a cat.

Looking down, he found Dji's smoldering gaze meeting his. His eyes were fixed on Kei's mouth. Damn sexy bird knew exactly that his touch caused havoc on Kei's system. Kei didn't have it in him to be mad at his mate and his devious move. Far from it.

Although the guy was a jerk and an ass, and as romantic as a concrete wall, Kei loved the man's attention and soaked it up like a dry sponge.

Dji suddenly reached up with one hand and brushed the pad of his thumb across his bottom lip. Oh, Kei's fangs had descended and he'd bit himself. Dji brought his thumb to his own mouth and licked the blood away. The man's nostrils flared and the heat in his eyes seemed to increase even more now that he'd tasted Kei for the first time. That look! Fucking. Aphrodisiac.

"Kei," Dji rasped, placing his hand above his heart. His voice dripping with false solemnity, he even had the audacity to flutter his lashes. "Attention, everybody! Extensive use of tolerated apology phrases following."

Kei opened his mouth, but his snarky reply got cut off by another hearty squeeze to his ass and a smirk.

"Shhh, kitty. I'm sorry. Really sorry. For both insulting you and running from you. Yes, I acted like an ass when I noticed we were mates. Running was a shitty way to go, but I was taken by surprise.

“Plus, throughout the chase I thought you wanted to hunt me down for real and hurt me. It was only when you were lying on top of me and trying to mark me that I realized you were a shifter and my mate.” Somebody, probably Alan, interrupted the speech with a wolf whistle at the mention of marking.

Kei’s focus was solely trained on his mate though, and Dji just continued. “Being a bird, I never once entertained the possibility of having a predator as a mate. Now that I’ve had some time to cool down and gather my thoughts, I know what I want. And I want you. Honestly.”

“Awww,” Alan crooned at Kei’s side and nudged his shoulder.

Kei hissed and whacked the annoying cat’s stomach. When had he come so close? Before he could tell Alan to either keep his distance from Dji or lose an important part of his male anatomy, Alan continued. “If you don’t want him, he can bunk with me.” Then he proceeded to undress Kei’s mate with his way too pretty blue eyes.

Kei snarled. He shuffled himself between Alan, whom his cat saw as a threat to claiming their mate, and Dji. Then he gripped his mate’s wild mane and peered, with a hopefully fierce and determined gaze, into the man’s eyes.

“You abandoned me. You caused me heartache and pissed off my cat. You want me? Then it’s *your* turn to catch *me*. Show me that you really want me. Woo me,” he said, his eyes roaming Dji’s handsome face which gave nothing away. “I hope you brought your clothes with you. Take your stuff and your overgrown body upstairs, birdy. Second door on the left is mine.

“And if you think I’ll just forget the fact you spent your evening in a bar, chatting with Alan here, you have another thing coming.”

Okay, so the snicker and cheeky grin he earned for his effort were a subtle hint that he’d been neither fierce, nor determined. Or that his mate just wasn’t one to be lightly impressed. Kei didn’t really care all that much when he took in Dji’s mischievous grin.

“Is this your twisted way of asking me to move in with you?” Dji asked. He ducked his head when Kei growled. “Fine. I’ll find a way to catch my cheetah. Just wait and see.”

Kei had to smile against his will. Despite his threatening words concerning the bar visit, he only wanted to curl up in his man’s embrace and enjoy a very thorough snuggle.



Oh, and explain to his mate that he wasn't into exhibitionism. Because Dji curved his hand around Kei's ass cheek, till his fingers brushed his crease and balls through the fabric of his overalls. Busy with trying not to swallow his tongue, or melting into a puddle on the floor, his only reply remained an undignified shriek.

“Oh, watching those two molding their lives and personalities together will be hilarious!” Alan gushed. Damn cat had a date with Kei and a big fucking bucket of water.

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## Chapter Five

### *How to overlook your mate's quirks*

Dji followed his mate's tight, flexing ass up the stairs. The fact that the two globes were encased in the most flamboyant overalls was circumstantial.

After feeling Kei's prick pressed against his stomach while kneeling in the downstairs foyer, his main concern was peeling his tiny mate out of his, admittedly, weird attire. The slim man was wickedly sexy. Dji wondered if the temper he displayed during their arguments would carry over to their lovemaking. If so, Dji was one lucky SOB.

They reached the landing and Kei continued down a hallway.

The little spring to his mate's steps caused an oddly warm and fuzzy feeling to spread inside Dji's chest. He'd caused this palpable happiness and that made him ridiculously happy, too. A foreign feeling. Not being happy, but feeling good about bringing another person joy.

He was once again thankful for meeting Alan at the bar and getting a chance to make amends. Alan, and the other guys he'd quickly been introduced to downstairs, seemed like a nice enough bunch.

"That's my room," Kei said and pushed through a bright-green door. Stopping inside, he held the door open and invited Dji in with a big grin and a flourish of his hand.

Dji smiled, crossed the threshold and came to a sudden halt. Holy. Fucking. Shit. The room was, mildly put, a mess. A wild collection of colors and... stuff.

He gaped as he took in the tall shelves covering two walls. They were stuffed to the brim with a myriad of books and the things Kei had probably crafted himself.

Dji saw everything from multicolored, glazed bowls, candle holders and cups, to very realistic animals and humans.

The other two walls were littered with sketches, mostly in coal, that Kei had pinned directly to the wallpaper. At first glance, they looked very professional.

Clothes in different colors, and different states of dirtiness, were strewn all over the floor and the furniture. Already building piles in several places, they

gave the room the overall impression of a teenager's cave. A teenager whose parents had gone on a month-long cruise. At least Dji couldn't see any crusted plates and glasses.

A big window with a deep, padded windowsill overlooked a tidy backyard. Not Kei's responsibility then. Pillows covered most of the seat and the floor in front of the window. And pillows covered the big four-poster bed, too.

"What's with all the pillows?" Dji asked, for the time being unable to address any of the other things he saw. He had the faint suspicion Kei would be hurt if he declared his room to be the love child of an exploded rainbow and a compulsive hoarder.

Kei looked around, a frown tugging at his black brows. He was either worried because somehow somebody had broken into his room and turned it into a dump, or Dji's question had simply confused him.

"I'm a cat," he finally said, as if that would explain everything. Maybe it did, if you were a cat as well. Then he fixed on Dji's surely dazed expression and added, "Cats sleep a lot and we like to rest comfortably. Hence the pillows and blankets. I guess we could order some more, now that you'll be staying here as well," Kei mused, tapping the pad of his index finger against his pouty bottom lip.

More? Once again Dji let his gaze roam the bed that, although a king-size, already looked like it held barely enough space for Kei. Let alone Dji's tall, six-foot-five body.

Kei sidled over till they were chest to chest, or rather chest to face, and waved his hand in front of his face. "Hey! Are you okay? You have this weird tic going on again."

"Tic?"

"Yeah, tic," he said and pointed his finger in Dji's face. *Note to self—the kitty has space issues.* "There's this little twitch in your cheek, right under your eye."

"That's not a tic, it's an allergic reaction to mess and clutter," he deadpanned.

At Kei's shocked gasp, Dji wanted to kick himself. His mate had been right earlier. Every conversation between them, no matter how innocent it started, plummeted sooner or later. Maybe they shouldn't talk at all, like every other happily married couple.

“Clutter? It’s called décor!” Kei stated, indignation ringing in his voice, and started pacing. It looked more like a slalom though, with the way he had to move around the crap on the floor. “You know, the thing that sets a room apart from a prison cell.”

Feeling deep in his gut that now was not the proper time to ask if there were any free cells down in the basement, Dji smoothly changed the subject.

“What’s behind those doors?” he asked, gesturing toward one red and one purple door. What was it with his mate and weird colors?

Kei scratched his head, messing up the black strands some more. One thing was for sure, he pulled off the scatterbrained artist look like a pro.

“Oh! Red is the bathroom, and purple is the room for my clothes.”

Clothes? Dji turned in a circle, taking in—and unsuccessfully trying to count—all the garments on the floor. “What are you searching for?” Kei asked with an exasperated sigh.

“The guy with the camera who’ll jump out from underneath one of those piles, telling me this isn’t really your room but just a housewarming joke.” For Dji, a joke was the only possible explanation why somebody would willingly turn one’s room into a hazardous zone.

Kei’s punch to his shoulder and the answering glare were more on the adorable side than actually threatening. However, one could never be sure. Maybe his mate had a vindictive streak. Dji had to sleep eventually, and that would be the perfect time for the cutie to strike back.

His mate juttied his hip to the right and placed a hand in the crook of his waist. “This *is* my room. Why would you think such a ridiculous thing?”

“Really? You just said you have a room for your clothes. I mean... look around! No chance there are any clothes left to fill a dressing room,” he said and gestured wildly. “The stuff on the floor is more than I owned in the last ten years!”

Kei fell silent, which was creepy in itself, and regarded him with an expression between annoyance and boredom. Eventually, he shrugged one slim shoulder and gave him a blinding smile. God only knew what was going on in that bohemian brain of his.

“You’ll find out eventually. I love clothes. Anyway, feel free to add your stuff. Let me just...” Kei trailed off and moved through the room, randomly picking up clothes as he went.

Dji's brain, which had been occupied by the chaos surrounding them, chose that exact moment to shut down in favor of his small brain. He watched Kei bend at his waist again and again, the magenta overalls pulling tight across his delicious butt. Oh, yes. Now there was a pretty sight.

Although the prospect of moving in with a messy stranger, and settling down in the wake, scared the shit out of him, Kei's attempt to tidy up was torture of the best possible kind.

So what if his mate was a slob? Dji would make sure to add his clothes to the mess on the floor if it meant his kitty would pick them up and offer a prime view of his ass. Maybe he could even convince him to do it naked.

"Did you listen to me or were you busy ogling my bum?" His mate's question sliced through the fog of lust clouding his head. Kei's cheeks were suspiciously rosy when Dji looked at him, his eyes pinned to the floor. Cute as fuck.

Seemed like the little guy had already given up on cleaning. Right now, he sighed and threw the clothes he'd collected on an existing pile in a corner. They had to work on that technique, but he thought it better to keep those thoughts to himself till he'd settled in. Maybe even till he'd bought a protective, padded jockstrap to keep the family jewels safe.

And no, Dji hadn't heard a word since...

"Ah, sure. My stuff. I can add it. Wait a sec..." Dji dumped his bag in a corner beside a guitar, and met Kei's confused gaze. "Finished," he said.

Kei's expression, changing from confused to utterly scandalized, caused him to chuckle. The smaller man's eyes rounded and his mouth sagged open before he asked, "That's all? Oh my God! But how... why..." He eyed the huge bag, probably trying to figure out how Dji managed to cram all his belongings inside the battered thing.

Dji just shrugged and parked his ass on the bed. He wasn't ashamed of his vagrant lifestyle. "I'm always on the move, don't need much. The bag contains my clothes, my shaving kit, and some knickknacks. When I'm not staying at a motel, I sleep in my truck."

"Right," Kei replied, dragging out the one-word answer. Furthermore, he looked for all the world like he'd just agreed to marry a homeless, flea-infested hobo without a second change of clothes. Such a reaction, from a guy who wore girly overalls and probably hadn't cleaned his room since the age of fifteen, smarted.

“Birds travel light, unlike cats,” he snapped. “At least I’m not in danger of sinking into total chaos.”

“My, thank you! You sure know how to woo a guy. *Not.*” Kei scrunched up his cute, freckled nose and fiddled with the metal clips of his overalls. “Well, having a cat as a mate has its advantages, too.”

“What advantages?” Dji snorted but watched with rapt attention how his mate wriggled his pants down his slim body. He really hoped that new development meant the conversation would be cut short in favor of some carnal action. “Fur in my bed and on my clothes? Dead mice on the front step?” he asked, the last word merely a squeak.

Kei’s dropping overalls had revealed tight, red boxers that left nothing to the imagination. Dji’s eyes zeroed in on the big, wet spot dampening the front of the illegally tiny shorts, a proof of Kei’s excitement. Oh shit.

His nostrils flared and his cock hardened even further in his pants as his mate’s musky and somewhat sweet scent hit his system. It was a “want to roll around in it all night long” odor. He licked his lips, eager to taste his mate.

At the same time, Dji clenched his hands where they rested on his thighs to keep from grabbing his slender mate and throwing him to the floor in blind desire.

“No,” Kei said, his voice deeper now. And husky. Fairly sure the little cat had read his intention, Dji’s gaze snapped up to meet Kei’s. Prepared for rejection, his mate’s blown pupils, flushed face, and panting mouth were the last thing he’d expected to see. Kei’s slender fingers still held the straps of his overalls, but the garment had slipped to mid-calf.

“No, what?” Dji rasped, not even trying to conceal his lust now that he was sure Kei felt the pull, too.

Stepping out of his pants, Kei said, “No, the advantage is that, as a cat, I’m wickedly bendy. You should see what I can do with my legs.” After dropping a bombshell which did nothing to cool down Dji’s libido, his perky mate turned on his heel and sauntered off, a teasing sway to his hips.

If Dji had been some kind of dog or wolf shifter, he was fairly sure his tongue would be lolling by now.

Instead, Dji used the last available brain cells to ogle Kei’s ass till it vanished through the red bathroom door. Then he jumped up and followed. He

shed his clothes on the way over and, just like Kei had invited him to do, added them to the bazaar on the floor.

Dji's eyes widened as his gaze fell on his already naked mate. The mate who was currently leaning into the shower to turn the knobs. Damn, but his memory had fooled him where Kei was concerned.

Where Dji remembered a pale, skinny, short guy covered in dust, he now found a creamy-skinned man with a smattering of freckles on his slender back and tight ass. Sinewy legs Dji wanted to feel wrapped around his waist. A graceful neckline that screamed *nibble me*.

Before he knew what had hit him, Dji stalked his mate and used his bigger body to push him into the shower stall. Kei's surprised squeak amused him and elicited a deep chuckle.

Their gazes met when Kei looked over his shoulder. What he saw wasn't the heat he'd noticed a moment ago. His mate's amber eyes were filled with uncertainty. Maybe even a touch of fear?

Seemed as if the earlier bravado had been just that. Dji had to change his approach before his mate freaked out and kicked him out of the shower.

"Shhh," he crooned, gently placed his hands on Kei's narrow hips, and caressed the soft skin with soothing circles of his thumbs. "It's all right. I just want to take a shower with you. Sharing water, you know? It's good for the environment."

Kei's laugh sounded a wee bit strained. "Yeah, right. The environment. Don't tell me you're a vegan, too." However, he placed his hands over Dji's and threaded their fingers.

It was a small victory, albeit an important one, when Kei moved underneath the spray and let the hot water sluice down his body.

Dji groaned at the sight of his mate naked *and* wet. In a few seconds, when Kei would add *soapy* to the equation, chances were high that he'd press his tiny mate against the tiles and ravish him despite his good resolutions.

So he tried to concentrate on talking. For now. "Why? You got something against vegans?" he rasped and nipped Kei's ear.

"N-n-no. Just don't understand h-how anybody doesn't like meat."

Dji grinned at his mate's stuttered, breathless reply. "Oh, don't worry. I like meat just fine." Wrapping both arms around the smaller man's waist and

bringing their bodies flush together, he enjoyed Kei's surprised gasp and the way his slender fingers dug into Dji's forearms.

They now touched from head to toe, his rock-hard cock pressing, and leaking, against Kei's back due to the difference in their heights.

Kei groaned and let his head fall back against Dji's chest. "Shame on you! That was so cheesy." Then he lifted one arm up high and back to curl his hand around Dji's nape. The move stretched his slender body in the most erotic way and Dji jumped at the opportunity to explore.

"Gods, you're stunning," he murmured reverently and placed his hand on Kei's left pec. He felt his mate's strong, fast heartbeat against his palm and took a moment to relish the feeling. Then he brushed his hand over the silky expanse of wet skin, loving the little whimper he caused to escape.

The whimpers turned into moans when he flicked the rough pad of his thumb against Kei's dark nipple. Repeatedly rubbing across the tiny peak, Dji grinned at Kei's restless shuffling and his attempts to get even more friction.

"What are you doing to me? Damn!" Kei cursed as Dji abandoned his nipples to move his hand down a flat belly.

He dipped the tip of his finger into Kei's belly button. "Just getting to know you, my mate," he whispered against the shell of his ear.

Pressing open-mouthed kisses along the tendon of Kei's neck and his shoulder, Dji moved his hand toward his goal. He ruffled the thatch of soft, black curls surrounding his mate's hard, slender prick.

"Dji." His mate whispered his name. The desperate edge coloring his voice nearly brought Dji to his knees once again. Was Kei that close already? He got his answer a second later. Obviously, they'd reached Kei's breaking point, for the kitty went wild.

The little man arched his back. His breath left his mouth in fast, gasping pants while his fingers dug into Dji's arm so hard they'd leave marks. Dji had just enough time to close his fist around Kei's pink, flushed shaft before the man shot ropy strings of cum all over his stomach, the tiles, and Dji's pumping hand.

Never before had he felt so horny and so content at the same time. Kei's smooth skin rubbing against his felt incredible. The man's sweet rosewood scent, mixed with the heady aroma of his seed, wrapped around him, filling him with the need to bottle and cork it so he could carry it around every minute of the day.



He just wished he could've seen Kei's face while his mate was lost in passion. Next time, he swore as Kei sagged against his chest. Dji held him tight and pressed a kiss to his temple.

"Ungh... Dj-Dji..." his mate stuttered and stiffened. "Crap... I'm sorry. Too fast..."

Knowing what Kei was referring to, Dji rubbed Kei's stomach and said, "None of that now. You're so beautiful, my mate. Stunning. Love how you respond. Don't ever be ashamed of what you feel or do while we're together." He nibbled along his lover's neck, hoping to distract the smaller man from his ridiculous thoughts.

After some tense seconds, Kei relaxed and turned in his embrace till they were chest to face. With his pink cheeks, blown pupils, and sensual grin, his mate was the picture of sated, debauched maleness. Dji wanted to lick him from head to toe.

"Naughty bird," Kei rasped, rubbing his forehead against Dji's chest. "Making me come before we even shared our first kiss." Then he latched onto one of Dji's dark nipples and sucked. Hard.

Dji groaned at the exquisite torture and fisted the wet strands of his mate's black hair. "Oh, my bad. Please forgive my ignorance," he muttered.

Kei released his abused nub and peered up at him. "The things you're begging forgiveness for are starting to pile up."

"Yeah. Soon they'll match those piles littering your room." He fixed his gaze on Kei's lush, succulent lips, much more interested in tasting them than listening to the words they formed.

"Shut up, birdy," Kei shot back, tangled his hand in Dji's hair and tugged him down. Dji followed the silent urging till their lips were merely an inch apart. He was stunned by his mate's hungry stare, the water droplets clinging to his long, black lashes, and his slightly open, pink lips.

They stood like that, both frozen for a moment. Kei's warm breath hit his wet skin and caused him to shiver. When he felt a light tremor work its way through his mate's body and his lids dropped to half-mast, Dji finally dipped his head and sealed their lips.

Kei's response was immediate. He tensed for all of a second, then let out a whimper and melted against Dji's tall frame.

However, his lover remained rather passive in the way he offered his closed lips for some chaste pecks. *Innocent*, the thought fluttered through Dji's mind. It was dumb, but his bird chattered excitedly at the prospect of being the first one to explore this cute, sensual man.

He licked moist, supple lips, pleased when Kei opened his mouth for a gasping breath, and pushed his tongue inside the warm, sweet heat of his man's mouth. With teasing, probing licks, he explored Kei's teeth, the roof of his mouth, and his tongue.

When his mate's knees buckled, Dji wrapped his arms around Kei's slender body. He placed one hand on his nape so he could continue his plundering. The other hand came to rest on Kei's tight butt cheek and squeezed.

Kei's sweet moans and the way he rubbed his groin against Dji's thigh drove him crazy. His kitty was hard again and he had to battle his libido so he wouldn't overwhelm his mate and take him against the cold tiles.

Separating their mouths with a last suckle to Kei's bottom lip, he breathed huge gulps of air. "You taste like chocolate cookies."

His lover, obviously not too happy about the end of their spine-melting kisses, looped his arms around Dji's neck and shot him a flirty, glazed look through his lashes.

"Had some cookies downstairs." Then he puckered his brows and said, "One nearly killed me, ya know? But that was Xan's fault. He snuck up on me and scared me. Wait! No, it's really your fault."

"Mine? How so?" Dji sputtered and pinched his lover's ass.

Kei's lashes fluttered as he let out another of those dangerous moans and rocked his hips. "You left. I had to eat to calm my cat. You came back. Xan came downstairs to tell me you were here. Ergo, it was your fault. Now make it up to me."

Given the boner poking Dji's thigh, all the blood must've left his mate's brain to pool elsewhere. However, his mate's great recovery time couldn't fully distract him from Kei's twisted view on the past events.

"Well, I don't see where this would be my—" His lover's slender hand coming to rest on his mouth successfully cut off his very reasonable reply.

"You owe me some groveling, birdy," Kei said and attacked his nipple once again.

On the other hand, with his cock still rock hard, Dji wasn't keen on being reasonable either. He'd much more prefer to drag Kei back into his messy bedroom where he'd throw him onto that overstuffed thing he called a bed.

What the fuck was happening with him? Yes, he'd heard about the mate pull. But Dji had always sneered at other flock members' experiences. Had thought he was too tough, too levelheaded to turn into one of those sappy guys fawning all over their significant other. Oh boy, had he been full of shit.

"What do you need, Kei?" he asked like the henpecked husband—no pun intended—that he was.

Kei pursed his lips, tapping the lush, lower one with his index finger. The little flirt. Then, with the triumphant grin of a man who'd just conquered a country, he snapped his fingers, grabbed a purple sponge, and pressed it against Dji's chest. "For you to wash the clay and day's sweat off my body. Then you can dry me with a fluffy towel and carry me to bed. Chop-chop, Jeeves."

If anybody else had spoken to him like that, Dji would've punched him out cold. The way Kei pinched his mouth, turned up his little, freckled nose, and waved his hand in true *Lord of the nineteenth century* fashion, was equal parts adorable and funny. Dji found himself unable to resist so much cuteness coupled with determination.

So, instead of throwing the soggy wet sponge at his mate's head, he poured a glob of bodywash on it and proceeded to cover Kei's slender body in soapy suds. He even washed his silky black hair and, like a very devoted Jeeves, massaged his scalp while doing so.

After only a few hours in his mate's presence, the little furball had him wrapped around his little finger. It didn't matter anymore that Kei was a sloppy, tiny cat with sharp teeth and claws, and had a dubious preference for weird clothes and loud fights.

He was, and would always be, Dji's mate. If he was honest with himself, he'd felt absolutely miserable sitting at that bar, with no idea where to find his little man.

His painfully erect cock, and the way the suds traveled down Kei's body, prevented him from analyzing his current feelings to death.

Despite his earlier words, Dji wouldn't be happy to settle for a simple shower and a rub down. However, he wasn't keen on scaring his skittish mate. Kei's shy response to their first kiss, the full body blush, and the surprisingly

quick orgasm, were all not so subtle hints of his mate's level of experience when it came to sex.

That meant he had to take things slow if he wanted to claim his mate tonight. Otherwise, he'd probably find himself sleeping in his truck. Unclaimed. Something his bird—and his blue balls—would let him pay for.

Given that talking was something that could go terribly wrong between them, Dji opted for the good old *show, don't tell* approach.

Great minds think alike, they say. When Dji knelt on the cold bathroom floor, carefully toweling his mate's smooth legs, it seemed like his lover had decided on the same method. He curled his slender artist's fingers around his hard prick and gave himself a couple of strokes. *Oh shit.*

Kei's sultry, "Want to claim me?" was all he could concentrate on as his brain pulled out a set of rainbow-colored pompoms and waved them like crazy. *Oh shitshitshit.*

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## Chapter Six

### *How to handle two hundred thirty pounds of horny mate*

“But you need to claim me,” Kei whined, sticking out his bottom lip in a hopefully adorable pout. He’d never before tried to look adorable in anything he did.

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” his mate mumbled from where he was busy nibbling Kei’s ankle. His ankle! Sure, that particular part of his anatomy had turned out to be much more sensual than he’d thought. However, there were other spots on his body that were in dire need of his mate’s attention.

His skin, still a bit damp from their earlier shower, had goose bumped as soon as his back had hit the cold sheets covering his bed. Or maybe it had something to do with the way Dji had slowly crawled over Kei’s outstretched body.

Anyway, Kei was on fire after their hot, sexy shower. He couldn’t for the life of him comprehend why the big bird would rather nibble his feet if he could nibble Kei’s weeping cock instead. Unless his mate had a foot fetish, of course.

“Do you have a foot fetish or something?” he asked.

Maybe that wasn’t overly romantic, but Kei tended to blurt out what came to his mind. Plus, it was better to know about his lover’s kinks *before* he found himself gagged and dangling from the ceiling in one of those slings he’d seen online.

Not that he was averse to slings. Or kink. He just didn’t know what he liked and what would cause him to run for the hills where sex was concerned.

Dji’s snicker forced him back into the here and now and he peered down to meet chocolate-brown, twinkling eyes.

“No, sexy. But it seems I could develop a serious Kei fetish,” he said with a wink. “Your skin is so silky! I could kiss and pet you for hours.”

At Dji’s admission, Kei let out a deep, rumbling purr. Intentional or not, his mate had found every cat’s weak spot. “Oh please, yes! I would kill for a good, long petting.” He stretched his limbs and even wriggled his toes in anticipation.

His mate laughed again. Kei wouldn’t scold him, though, for Dji continued to kiss and lick his way up the inside of Kei’s leg while his big hands caressed his thighs and hips.

Noticing the callouses on Dji's hands, Kei briefly wondered about the man's job. However, when Dji bent his leg and sucked up a love bite on the soft inside of his upper thigh, those thoughts fled his mind.

Kei moaned and arched his back at the exquisite pleasure racing through his body. One hand fisted the sheets, while the other moved down to grip Dji's open, luscious curls. The crinkly hair tickled his skin, while his lover's tongue left a wet trail. The occasional nips shot sparks all the way up to his balls.

He knew he'd embarrassed himself in the shower. Kei was painfully inexperienced and he had the horrible suspicion his mate was aware of that fact. Even though, he couldn't bring himself to freely admit that he was a virgin. Dji would think him a total loser when he told him he'd never been with anybody because he'd wanted to save himself for his mate.

According to his fellow pride members, Kei's views were an antiquated morality that would only serve to turn him into an embittered old spinster. Ha! He couldn't wait to see his friends' dumb faces at breakfast tomorrow morning, mating mark in place and the freshly fucked glow on his face he'd seen on others throughout the years.

That didn't mean he wasn't nervous at the prospect of having something as big as Dji's cock shoved up his ass. He was way too horny to dwell on it though. Especially now that Dji had, finally, reached his groin and nuzzled his nose against Kei's balls.

Kei moaned and the orbs pulled tight against his body when his mate took one after the other in his hot mouth and hummed. Gods, this guy would kill him! Oh, what a way to go! He'd played with himself plenty over the years. But nothing had ever felt as good as Dji playing his body like an instrument.

Dji released his balls with an obscene slurping sound—talk about a true porn moment, Kei thought giggling—and trailed his tongue up Kei's shaft. His giggle immediately morphed into a pleased groan, but it was too late. Dji looked up from his very important task.

“Is there anything funny about the way I'm showering you with my very skilled attention, my mate?” his lover asked with a grave voice. The mischievous twinkle in his eyes belied his serious tone though. He enjoyed their banter as much as Kei.

“No! It was just the way you slurped. Didn't know sex would be so much fun.” He giggled again and let his head fall back when, instead of a vocal

response, Dji's talented tongue circled the cap of his cock. A second later, Kei's length was engulfed in wet, sucking heat for the very first time.

"Oh Gods! Fuck... oh!" Now he knew why his friends had called him a fool to stay celibate.

With his gaze fixed on Dji's bobbing head, marveling at the sight of his spit-slicked prick moving between his lover's dark lips, he pushed up to sink deeper. His mate's hands gripped his hips and pinned him to the mattress though, forcing him to take what the bigger man was ready to give. "Fucking tease," he pressed between ragged pants.

Their eyes met when Dji looked up. The man winked, hummed as he moved up Kei's throbbing length, then dipped the tip of his pink tongue into Kei's slit. He did it again and again, collecting the pearly drops of precum Kei leaked. All the while, he jacked the base with his big, slightly rough hand.

Kei felt sure his head would explode any second now. "Dji... so close," he rasped when his mate took him to the base and swallowed around him. He was lost, the sensation just too much for his starved body. He couldn't even yell a warning as his whole body tensed, his eyes squeezed shut, and he came down his mate's throat.

Kei was faintly aware of biting his lip as one shudder after another racked his body. The pleasure was way too intense to care though. More so than earlier in the shower.

"So, was that fun, my little kitty?" he heard his mate's question through the bliss raging through his system.

In his current state, also known as "The limp noodle," Kei managed something resembling a nod. A lick to his chin had his eyes popping wide. He shivered as soon as his eyes had focused.

Dji hovered above him, a predatory gleam in his dark eyes. The next lick mapped Kei's lips. A weird sound between a chitter and a growl reached his ears, and finally it dawned on him. His mate had had a taste of the blood he'd spilled while biting himself in the throes of passion.

"Delicious, little cat." His mate placed his palm above Kei's frantically beating heart, then moved it down his torso, wriggling his fingers and eliciting some giggles as he went. Yes, he was ticklish, so what? Kei angled his head when Dji leaned down to capture his lips in a kiss so soft and tender it had his heart all aflutter.

Then Dji's searching fingers trailed over Kei's cock, which twitched in an effort to firm back up, and further down to caress his balls and the soft skin behind them.

Whereas Kei's mind was still reeling from the blow job, his long-neglected body didn't have any problems following Dji's train of thoughts. Opening his legs to give his mate better access, Kei stretched like a cat in heat and purred up a storm.

"God, this purring drives me crazy. Where's the lube, Kei?" Dji asked, gently massaging his taint.

Speech had deserted him a long time ago. So Kei merely flung his arm, indicating the bedside table. His mate would claim him. In the next few minutes, if the urgency with which the bigger man tugged at the drawer and rummaged through its contents was anything to go by.

Kei couldn't help it. His worried gaze fell to his lover's very impressive length. Being a bird shifter, his mate shouldn't have been gifted like a damn stallion, should he? When Dji snicked the small bottle's lid, the sound overly loud in Kei's ears, and his whole body went rigid.

His mate's brows climbed toward his hairline and his eyes filled with concern. "Kitty? What's wrong?"

Kei was so nervous he couldn't even scold his mate for the ridiculous endearment. Dji discarded the bottle, then blanketed Kei's body with his own, and held his face with gentle hands.

In their current position, Kei felt wrapped inside his mate. In addition, when Dji feathered kisses all over his face, neck and upper chest, a deep feeling of belonging and contentment settled inside his chest and made him all warm and lovey-dovey. *Way too soon*. But was it really? Most mates fell hard and fast for each other.

Kei looped his arms around Dji's strong back and hid his face against the man's neck, breathing in his calming, earthy scent. "Sorry," he mumbled, a wee bit ashamed of his sudden burst of nerves.

"Shhh. Nothing to be sorry about," his mate crooned, placing a hand above his heart and rubbing in soothing circles.

Gods, the man was so sweet! Kei felt bad for being a cock tease. But...

"Dji, I have to tell you something. I'm... uh... You need to know that—"



A wickedly sexy kiss cut him off, complete with tangling tongues and lip-sucking. Then his man moved from his lips along his jaw to finally lick the shell of his ear. It caused Kei to shiver.

“I know. I’ll be as gentle as possible, promise,” the bigger man whispered.

Kei felt his cheeks and chest flush a deep pink. “Oh. You’re not mad?”

“Mad? Why should I be? That you didn’t tell me sooner?” he asked and chuckled. “Nah. I figured it out under the shower. That you’re innocent and untouched? No way.”

With that, Dji took his hands and placed them on the pillow above Kei’s head. He leaned up and pressed his lips to the pulse points on both of Kei’s wrists.

“The thought of being the only one to ever enjoy your tight, beautiful body, the only one to find all those little spots that will make you lose your mind and fall apart in my arms, is a heavy aphrodisiac, Kei. Oh, and it pleases my ostrich.”

Kei grinned. He liked that. Very much, in fact. Wriggling a bit, he found he could free himself easily if he wanted to.

So he just gazed up at his mate and watched in awe as the man left a series of open-mouthed kisses and soft bites while he moved from his wrist all the way down to Kei’s pit. There he nuzzled and tugged at the silky, sparse hair, causing Kei to moan wantonly and his breathing to speed up.

“Love how responsive you are, my kitty,” Dji murmured against Kei’s collarbone, where he dipped his tongue into the soft hollow. Kei could only squirm as his brain swam in a sea of bliss.

“Love the way you shuffle on the sheets and press closer to my caresses while I pleasure you. Plus,” Dji said, his voice strangely firm all of a sudden. Kei looked up and found his mate smirking down at him. “I want my spunky, pert little kitty back. You’ve never been afraid of me before, Kei. You *want* me to claim you, I can see it in your eyes. Also, I’d bet your cat is on the same page.”

Crap. Dji was right. Yes, he was nervous. However, this panicky, anxious breakdown wasn’t like him. He was a cat, dammit!

Kei grabbed the lube and pushed it against Dji’s chest. Wriggling till he rested on his stomach, he folded his legs underneath him so his ass would be on display.

Dji laughed. It wasn't teasing or mocking, but a joyous, happy sound. "It's like that, is it?" his mate asked as he fondled Kei's ass.

"I love this position," Kei said and shrugged, fighting his nerves. The snick sounded once again, then Kei hissed as his mate nipped his cheek. Next, a slippery finger trailed down his crease and circled his pucker. God, that was mighty close, wasn't it?

"And how would you know which position you love, my mate?" Dji asked, sounding smug, and teased his wrinkled flesh.

Kei rolled his eyes. "I should never have told you I'm a virgin. You're enjoying this way too much."

A squeak escaped him when his mate, unceremoniously, pushed a lubed finger inside his hole. Dji wriggled the digit, gently working the tight ring of muscle, and Kei fell face forward onto the sheets with an ecstatic moan.

"Awww, crap, that's good!" Kei, being a cat, should've known he'd turn to putty, no matter how his mate used those skilled fingers of his. Dji pumping his finger in and out of his hole beat fingering himself. Big time.

"Did you play with yourself, kitty-cat?"

"None of your business." Kei growled in warning, but then the damn bird found *the spot* and turned him into a groaning, panting and, embarrassingly enough, begging pile of goo.

"Guess that's a yes," Dji teased. Kei hissed a bit when one finger became two, then three, but the pleasure that quickly replaced the initial burn was way too good to nag. Nagging would only distract Dji from his duties. Namely, to peg Kei into oblivion.

Kei reached for the hard, slightly neglected prick dangling between his legs. His mate, however, beat him to it and circled the base in a tight grip, suspending Kei's much-needed orgasm. Damn, would that be the third one today? Mating was so much fun!

"Dji," he whined, dragging out the word till breathing became a necessity. "Please." His mate, the sadistic fucker, licked all the way up his spine and bit his nape.

"So close, aren't you?" the man asked. He tightened his hold on Kei's erection, but slid his fingers out of his hole, leaving him painfully empty and needy.

“Fuck...” he sobbed into the sheets. Dji nudged him, teased him, with the smooth, wide head of his cock rubbing back and forth over his opening. Delicious torture. His nerves, all his insecurities and fears, were gone, leaving only raw need and lust.

“You’re so tight, Kei. You’ll grip me so snugly, won’t you?” Dji whispered against his ear.

Kei snapped. “Would you fucking do it already, Mr. Rooster? Take me!” He shoved back, then groaned, and bit down onto the sheets as the first inch or so, which felt more like a foot, popped through the first ring. Crap, the birdy was huge.

Dji cursed behind him, his fingers tensing where they rested on his hips. “Slowly, love, or you’ll only get yourself hurt,” he pressed between audibly clenched teeth. One hand left Kei’s hip and rubbed his lower back. Kei whimpered, fucking whimpered, at the gentle caress. The soft circles, along with some slow pumps to his cock and wet kisses trailing the tendons of his neck, finally did the trick.

Kei felt the tension seep out of his body under his mate’s thoughtful ministrations. Eventually, he grew restless and wriggled tentatively.

“That’s it, kitty, slow and easy,” Dji crooned and began a shallow, rocking motion, pushing deeper every time. He felt so incredibly stretched and full. The moment Kei felt his lover’s balls nestle against his crack, he wanted to cheer and clap his own shoulder. Instead, he turned his head so he could peek at his mate.

“Oh Gods, you’re stunning. Devastatingly so,” Kei said.

His mate’s grin was, although he wasn’t a cat, predatory. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Dji’s brown eyes seemed almost black, his gaze pinned to the spot where their bodies connected so intimately. His dark skin glistened with sweat; little droplets Kei longed to lick away. Oh, and those muscles rippling and cording under his skin. Kei could only guess how much it cost his mate to remain still.

Only, Kei didn’t want him to. He tightened his ass around the invading length and moaned at the exquisite stretch. “Please, move. I need!”

“You don’t need to beg, kitty. Never,” Dji said and slowly, oh so slowly, pulled out till only the head remained inside.

Oh! Oh, wow. “Shit, yeah. Out’s good.” Then his mate pushed back inside in a swift motion, causing them to groan in unison.

“How’s in?”

Kei’s brain was mush. A very eloquent, award-winning, “Uh-huh. More,” was everything he came up with.

It didn’t seem to matter though. Neither of them were particularly interested in verbal communication right now. Kei was too busy falling apart and marveling at the way Dji’s thick length filled and stretched his channel in the most pleasurable way.

“Gods, you’re so hot and tight around my cock,” Dji said. Obviously picking up on the fact that his mate was a shifter, too, and not a fragile little flower, he started reaming Kei’s ass in earnest now.

“Yes! Oh, Dji... yes!” Kei just held on for the ride, stretching out one arm toward the headboard because Dji’s strong thrusts slowly moved them up the bed.

Come morning, every member of the pride—and probably the rest of Nebraska, too—would know Kei had been thoroughly claimed. The headboard banging against the wall, along with Dji’s deep groans and Kei’s high-pitched “Fuck me harder,” made sure of that. And Kei fucking loved it.

He felt possessed. Desired. Cherished. Then his mate changed the angle of his hard thrusts, nailed Kei’s gland, and it was over. White lights exploded behind his eyes and Kei threw his head back, howling as cum splattered over the sheets and his belly.

Dji hauled him upright so Kei came to rest on the bigger man’s lap, Dji’s cock penetrating him as deep as possible. Then he looped his arm around Kei and scratched dangerous-looking claws over his left pec, right above his heart.

Kei gasped in shock, but the pain lasted only a second before a wonderful, warm, tingling sensation spread from the bleeding marks through his whole body and coiled around his heart. *Claiming mark.*

“Fuck... Kei. Please!” His mate’s words sounded muffled, for the bird had pressed his face against Kei’s nape. Oh! His man needed!

Kei purred and tightened his ass, massaging Dji’s throbbing shaft with his muscles. Dji grunted and, bucking up, shot his release inside Kei’s still twitching channel, filling him with warmth. Pride flooded Kei’s sated, tired body at the knowledge that he’d brought his mate joy.

All the strength seemed to leave Dji's body and they sagged to the mattress. With his mate's slowly softening prick still lodged inside his ass, Kei hissed at the sudden move.

"Don't ruin my freshly fucked bliss. I've waited so damn long for it," he admonished and jabbed Dji's ribs with his elbow.

Dji wrapped his arms around Kei and took him with him when he rolled to the side. Nuzzling the damp hair at Kei's nape, he whispered, "Sorry, kitty-cat. Give me a sec and I'll clean you up properly."

Oh, and he did. With. His. Tongue.

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## Chapter Seven

### *How to soothe your clingy cat*

The next morning, Dji woke alone. Okay, so the phrase *alone* didn't really come into effect when a man had to share his bed with more pillows than could be found in an ancient, oriental harem. Dji counted himself lucky that his roost wasn't occupied by just as many women.

However, Dji's cuddly cat was nowhere in sight either and that pissed him off. Having woken up several times throughout the night, he knew his mate was a fierce snuggler. Hell, the small cat had slept right on top of him. Kei's little snores had been cute as hell. Oh, the way he'd scrunched his nose, stretched and purred every so often... adorable.

Dji had never had a relationship in his life, always sticking to fast encounters at clubs and bars. Now that he was blissfully mated, he wanted to collect the benefits of waking up with another man.

Namely, have someone who'd suck his morning wood. That wasn't asking too much, was it? Sex in the past had lurked somewhere on his "Enjoy when the mood strikes" list. Sex with his mate, on the other hand, took first place on his "Do as often as possible" list.

Since he'd claimed Kei last night, his ostrich had napped. Contented to the bone and chittering every now and then. Now though, with their mate out of kissing distance, Dji felt his bird's feathers ruffle.

Grumbling and muttering like the sunny morning person that he was, he rolled off the surprisingly comfortable bed, and crossed to the red door to take a piss and wash up. Ten minutes later, clean and clothed in his working attire, he took a look around Kei's room and sighed deeply.

Shit. He had to be at work in an hour. Plus, he wanted to enjoy breakfast with his mate. If the man knew what was good for him, he'd be waiting in the kitchen. With coffee.

But he couldn't leave the room like that. The thought hit him that, maybe, he suffered a mild case of OCD. Till now, it just hadn't had the possibility to break through. Honestly, how much mess could a man cause in his own truck when all his possessions fit inside a backpack?

Then his gaze fell on the bedside table, where a lamp looked like it was caught in a fight with the dangerous Nebraska Boxer Shorts Strangler, while an armada of clutter functioned as the gawking bystanders. Dji decided right there and then to never leave his mate alone in his truck.

Oh, well, he could spare fifteen minutes and at least pick up some clothes and bring them downstairs to the washer. He'd seen it yesterday, when Kei had given him a short tour through the house after he'd introduced him to his friends.

Twenty minutes, several armfuls of clothes, and a circling washing machine later, Dji entered the kitchen.

Xander, the alpha, sat at the head of the table. With his reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose and the paper spread in front of him, he looked for all in the world like the distinguished head of the family. Eerie.

Alan slouched on his chair, a bowl filled with soggy... something... in front of him, and threw little chunks against Thony, who sat across from him. What were they? Five? Why were they here anyway? Dji had thought only Xander and Kei lived in the house.

And his wayward mate? Dressed in a purple and green striped bathrobe, Kei munched pistachios at an alarming speed. Right out of the bowl. A cup of tea, untouched, sat beside him.

"If you consider nuts a proper way to start the day, you could've stayed in bed. With me," Dji teased and, in passing, pressed a kiss to Kei's messy locks.

At Alan's snort, Kei chucked a shell at the other cat. Then he let his head fall back, said, "Morning, birdy," and puckered his lips. Dji was only too happy to give him a proper good-morning kiss.

"How do you feel?" Dji mumbled between kisses while lightly massaging Kei's nape.

Kei's amber eyes sparkled and two bright-pink spots bloomed on his cheeks. "Terrific," the little cat whispered, then he nipped Dji's bottom lip.

"Oh man. I just knew it. From now on, they'll act all lovey-dovey around us unmated ones. Go on, shove it in our faces," Thony mocked, but his smile belied his harsh words. He seemed genuinely happy for them. Not that Dji cared what the other cats thought of him. However, he didn't want Kei to be caught in the middle.

“Quit the jealous bitching,” Kei shot back, chucking the next shell at Thony’s head. “Sit down, my mate. You must be hungry.”

“Of course he’s hungry after the marathon you put him through last night. I’m surprised you’re able to sit down, Kei,” Alan muttered behind his coffee cup and grinned.

Kei, in true kitty form, hissed and let out that special pissed-off-cat growling sound. “Not my fault that my mate has more stamina than your right hand, panther.”

Alan sputtered, bringing his cup down on the tabletop with a bang. “Now, you leopard for the poor—”

“Boys!” Xander’s booming voice filled the kitchen and brought everything to a screeching halt. He didn’t even look up from his paper, merely straightened his glasses. “Alan, be nice to Kei and his mate. We’re all happy for them, aren’t we? And Kei, you retract you claws and take care of your mate. The man has a job he needs to go to, I guess. Plus, he looks like he’s in dire need of a big cup of strong coffee. God knows I wouldn’t survive the bunch of you every morning without my coffee.”

“Oh, of course! Sorry,” his mate said, jumped up, and pushed Dji down onto his own chair. Then Kei let himself fall forward.

Dji swiftly opened his arms, catching the playful cat against his chest, and kissed him once again. The happy purr that accompanied the smooching had Dji hot and hard in a few seconds flat.

When the kiss came to an end with both of them gasping for air, Kei asked, “How do you take your coffee?”

Dji cleared his throat, quickly adjusting his cock in his very uncomfortable jeans. “I prefer it big and black, kitty.”

“That’s what she said,” Alan piped up, then cursed when Xander slapped him upside the head. Probably without missing a line of his paper.

Kei snickered as he placed a steaming hot cup of coffee in front of him. “Thanks, Alpha. What do you like for breakfast, Dji? Xander makes mean hash browns.”

“Sound great, kitty-cat.” He snagged the cup and hummed as the strong, bitter brew hit his taste buds. “Wonderful coffee.”



“The coffee is Thony’s doing,” Thony said, proudly slapping his muscled chest.

“And before you ask,” Alan threw in, lifting a sludge-filled spoon to his mouth. “Yes, Thony likes to talk about himself in the third person. He has self-assurance issues.”

Dji only snorted. He pulled his mate down onto his lap as soon as the little cat set the plate piled with hash browns and several slices of toast on the table. Kei wriggled a bit, forcing Dji to bite back a groan. “Of course he has. He’s a cat. I’ve never met a cat, shifter or not, that didn’t suffer from self-assurance issues.”

That statement elicited several growls, hisses and angry snarls. And a smirk from Xander. Dji thought it hilarious and just laughed.

“Oh, stop it, guys. My mate has figured us out,” Kei said and pecked Dji’s lips. He snuggled, politely refraining from further hard-on-inducing ass-wriggling, into the crook of Dji’s shoulder. Then he proceeded to kill his pistachios.

After demolishing his own breakfast and watching his mate for several minutes, he asked, “Kei, shouldn’t you breathe from time to time? You know... between stuffing your mouth with nuts?”

Kei lifted his face, looking like a cute chipmunk. Thony was the one waving his concerns away with a flick of his hand. “Don’t worry. It’s normal. Usually, he’s progressing at the speed of eighty ppm.”

“Ppm?”

“Pistachios per minute,” the redheaded cat deadpanned.

Kei flung a nut across the table, hitting Thony’s forehead with alarming accuracy. “Shut up! You’re ruining my mate’s perception where I’m concerned.”

Thony scowled and rubbed the abused spot. “Nah. You’re managing that on your own just fine.”

“Ass.”

“Food vacuum.”

“Hey! I have a high—”

Xander groaned and folded his paper. “Just one fucking morning I’d like to enjoy a simple, calm breakfast. Without you guys trying to rip out each other’s throats.”

“Aww, come on now, boss man. We’re not that bad,” Alan said, fluttering his lashes. On a man that big, that move just didn’t look right.

Dji snickered, just sitting and enjoying his first meal amongst cats, while his gaze flicked from one man to the other. In his old flock, nobody would’ve dared to talk to the alpha like that. It was refreshing, actually, and made Dji feel relaxed and... welcome.

“You’re worse,” Xander shot back. However, he smiled fondly around the table and ruffled Alan’s black hair. “So, what is it you do for a living, Djimon?”

“I’m in construction,” he replied without missing a beat. Where he came from, lazy asses weren’t welcome. He guessed Xander thought likewise. “I’ve done it for several years now and I can do just about anything from electrics, to drywall installation, laying tiles or plumbing. You name it, you get it.”

“Wow,” came his mate’s soft reply.

Somehow, he’d changed from pistachios to grapes. When Kei blinked his big, amber eyes and looked at him like Dji had hung the moon, just because he could wield a hammer—pun intended—he wanted to throw the sleek cat on the breakfast table and show him exactly how skilled he really was.

A throat being cleared repeatedly, and a collection of snickers, pulled his mind out of the gutter.

Dji guessed his mate knew perfectly well how he affected him, for he placed another grape against his succulent lips, then sucked it into his mouth with a little pop. The sexy, seductive fucker.

“So, as I said,” Xander said around a chuckle. “If you’re ever out of work, you can always talk to the pride members. Most have their own homes around here and they always need someone to fix things or remodel them. You’d get paid for it, too, of course.”

Dji, grateful for the easy acceptance and camaraderie, not something he’d expected from an alpha, emptied his cup and smiled. “Thanks, Xander. I’ll keep it in mind. Also, if there are people in the pride needing help, they can just drop me a line and I’ll take a look.” Then he pecked Kei’s way too tempting lips. “I need to go now. It’s a bit of a drive into town. And I can’t be late.”

His mate, however, wasn't pleased. His fingers curled into Dji's plaid work shirt and his brows puckered. Kei's stretched, "No," confirmed his suspicion.

"No?"

"You can't leave again," his mate snapped, his tiny fangs descending. Aww, shit, that was so cute! Dji sighed heavily and peppered his cat's scowling face with kisses.

"Just to get some work done. I'm off at three thirty and I'll be back at four. Okay?" He tried to sweeten the deal by gently rubbing Kei's chest, right where he'd left his mark last night. Being birds, ostriches didn't bite to claim their mates but scratched them with their claws. Choosing a mate's left pec was considered a particularly romantic gesture.

Kei, stubborn cat that he was, flat out refused to comply. "No."

Well, shit. Again. Taking in his mate's petulant expression, Dji decided on a different approach. He unwound his necklace from around his neck. It was a simple, braided leather strap with some silver pearls woven in, and an ostrich feather at the end. He dangled the feather in front of his mate's face, delighted to see Kei's eyes shift to their slit cat form.

Kei's gaze remained fixed on the feather, his eyes following when Dji moved it to and fro, like a patient who got hypnotized with a pendulum. Then he let out a little mewling sound and reached for the pendant.

Dji placed the necklace in his mate's hand, kissing his temple. "Will you keep that safe for me today? It's very important to me, because this feather belonged to my grandmother," he murmured. "You can give it back when I come home. Deal?"

"Okay," Kei replied, still mesmerized by the pendant. With a bit of nudging, the cat finally stood up and accepted Dji's kiss. Only, he wouldn't let go afterward. It took another minute of kissing and some gentle words from Xander till Kei snapped out of it.

Flushed to the tips of his ears, Kei rubbed his naked toes against the floor and said, "Sorry, cats are very possessive. And, most of the time, they don't care if their cuddle interest has other plans."

"It's okay. My ostrich doesn't like leaving you either," Dji quickly assured his embarrassed mate, and he meant it.

Kei looked up at him, doing this obnoxious thing with his eyes where they rounded to big, shining marbles. “Can we do something together when you’re back? You promised some wooing, after all.”

Knowing he didn’t stand a chance, Dji groaned and hung his head. “Yeah. All right. By the way, do you have a written permission to use your eyes as a weapon? Should be illegal.”

His mate’s answering giggle—an actual giggle!—had Dji shaking his head. Damn, he had it bad. A careful kiss later—no need to poke the bear, err, cat—he left the house and hopped into his truck.

He’d never liked clingy men, quite the opposite in fact. With his mate, however, he wouldn’t have it any other way. Not that he understood that sudden change of mind. But who was he to question fate?

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When Dji returned home—crazy that he already thought about the pride as home when he’d never felt particularly homey in his birth flock—he ran into Xander on the way up to the house.

“Hey. Good day at work?” the big lion asked.

“Yup. I’m knackered, though.”

“Hmm... I thought you and Kei could drive into town and handle the grocery shopping. List is on the kitchen table.”

Ah. It wasn’t really a question. Not surprising at all. Alphas, in general, were used to people asking “how high” if they told them to jump. Something in Dji’s expression must’ve clued the other man in on his reluctance to follow the order. He laughed and clapped a hand on Dji’s shoulder.

“Do me the favor, please. It’s your mate’s turn to do the groceries and he hates it. Even if he takes the list, he usually forgets half the stuff and then the others will get pissed. I guess it’s the artist in him. When he’s hooked on a project, he forgets to eat, sleep, and shower.”

Dji, who wanted nothing more than to take a shower, preferably with his mate, groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Yeah, he didn’t like other people commanding him around. Not even an alpha. However, if he wanted to fit in, he had to contribute something. He didn’t think fucking cute, bendy Kei would be considered a contribution to the general welfare. Not unless Kei turned into a moody bastard who’d piss off every living soul if he didn’t get any.

“Fine,” he agreed reluctantly. If he had to decide between cruising a supermarket with his spunky cat and not spending time with him at all, he’d pick the supermarket. “Where is he?”

“Kitchen,” Xander yelled over his shoulder, already running for the hills. Or his car, in that case. Clever cat.

Dji trudged up the stairs of the porch, entered the house and found his mate, indeed, in the kitchen. He’d curled up on a kitchen chair that only a cat with a tiny ass could feel comfortable on, and nursed a cup of tea.

“You’re still wearing a bathing robe,” Dji finally said after taking in the scene for a few seconds. Kei snapped his head around, a million-megawatt grin blooming on his pretty face.

“I missed you so much! What have you planned in the wooing department?” The little guy reached out a hand, wriggled his fingers, and made a kissing mouth. Unbelievable.

“Oh, no. You’ll not wrap me around your little claws by making goo-goo eyes and throwing air kisses. It’s four in the afternoon. Why aren’t you dressed?”

Okay, so maybe his mate didn’t deserve his snappy attitude and the glower Dji bestowed on him. However, the mere mention of wooing, when he knew he’d spend the next hour or so pushing a shopping cart through a crowded supermarket—God, he hated crowds—had his mood plummeting.

Kei, completely unperturbed like only a cat could be, rolled his eyes and heaved an exasperated sigh. It came from deep down and sounded as if the entire world’s burden was resting on his slim shoulders, whereas it was only a fluffy, striped bathing robe.

“Fine. I’ll go upstairs and dress up for you.”

“Thank you,” Dji said and watched his mate bounce up the stairs.

Damn Xander and his fucking grocery list. Finding Kei in only his robe would’ve been a cause to celebrate—and get laid on the kitchen table—on any other day. But no, his brand new alpha had to burden him with the responsibility of shopping for food. Plus, he’d probably pissed off his mate with his unromantic greeting.

The light sound of small feet rumbling down the stairs had him looking up. Oh, boy. Not his day at all. “Kei. I thought you were going to dress!”

Exasperation colored his voice and he took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself.

Kei untied his belt and opened the purple and green monstrosity, resembling a flasher in the park. Then he pirouetted. “I did. I’m wearing a button-down shirt and jeans underneath my robe. Happy?”

Well, that was an improvement. “I’ll be as soon as you chuck the robe.”

The words had barely left his mouth before his mate took off the offending garment. He grinned like a kid in a candy store. Also, he shuffled from one foot to the other, like a kid who’d been in the candy store for too long and was now doped on sugar.

“Where are you taking me?” the smaller man asked, excitement swinging in his voice. “Dinner in town? A romantic picnic under the stars?”

Shit. Dji could virtually feel the hardwood floor he’d be sleeping on tonight. He rubbed his neck and said, “Err, almost. We need to do the groceries.”

His mate’s answering groan was heartfelt and matched Dji’s own feelings. “You can’t be serious! That’s not even remotely romantic!” Then he puckered his brows, tapped his index finger against his lips, and mused, “Unless you convinced the store owner to switch off the lights, light a ton of candles, and spread rose petals on the floor. Did you do that?” he asked, stemming his little fists on his hips.

“No.” Dji blinked for a moment. Blinked some more—because, honestly? Rose petals?—and finally grabbed the shopping list from the table.

That done, he wrapped his arms around the slender, sulking cat and gave him a long overdue kiss. “Come on now. We’ll make the best of it. I’ll drive us to town and you can tell me more about yourself. How’s that?”

“Fine,” Kei mumbled into the next kiss. “I’d rather tell you all that stuff while we’re naked, though.”

Ushering his mate out of the house and steering him toward the truck, he slapped Kei’s tight behind. “Nice idea, but I don’t think the other shoppers would appreciate us shopping in the nude.”

The peeved look Kei shot him over his shoulder cracked him right up.

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## Chapter Eight

*How to converse sensitive topics with your oversensitive mate*

“You can’t be serious!”

Kei looked up at his mate’s angry face, confused by the strong reaction. The drive to the grocery store had been nice and their chatter even nicer. Why did his stubborn mate have to make a scene in the middle of the damn store?

“Where’s the problem?”

“The problem?” Dji snapped, yanking the package of lunch meat they were arguing about out of Kei’s fingers. Kei rolled his eyes. It was only lunch meat, for God’s sake. They weren’t talking about spending three million for a yacht or something like that.

“Can you read? Tell me what it says here.” His mate held the package in front of his face and pointed at the label.

Kei sputtered. “Of course I can read! Pretentious ass.” Then he concentrated on the tiny label Dji was referring to. “One hundred percent poultry inside,” he read out loud. “And? I like poultry.”

Dji raised one black eyebrow, not looking like the ostrich he was but like a pissed off cat somebody had doused with a hose. The bigger man’s jaw was clenched so tight Kei thought he could hear him grinding his teeth. Oh, and there was the little tic again.

“Well, then you should decide if you prefer it on your sandwich, *or* in your bed. Because you can’t have both, my mate,” Dji said, putting emphasis on the last word.

When he waved the package, realization hit home, causing Kei’s face to turn into the reddest tomato ever seen.

He wished a hole would open up in the tiled store floor and swallow him whole. Their first day as an actual couple and he’d managed to fuck up. Royally, with a capital R. *Craptastic!*

He was such a bad mate, buying poultry products with his partner being a *bird* shifter. No, he was the worst mate to ever walk the earth. Kei had to make it up to his mate. If that meant threatening his fellow pride members till they gave up on the chicken wings, so be it.

“Uh, how about you pick the lunch meat then?” he mumbled. There? That was a nice gesture, wasn’t it?

“Thanks. Suggesting I should eat a turkey sandwich is like feeding you a kitten burger. Doesn’t sound very tasty, does it?” Dji grumbled and threw the package back onto the shelf.

Kei bristled. Now that he’d switched on his brain, and although he’d never met a bird shifter in his life, he understood it was a matter of course that a bird shifter wouldn’t eat poultry. Even to someone like Kei who had no idea what ostrich shifters liked or didn’t like to eat.

That didn’t mean his mate had to go all haughty, long-necked cockalorum on him.

When he peeked up at his mate through his lashes, he found the man still frowning and glowering. Not at him, but the display of different lunch meats, like the colorful packages contained his uncles and aunts. Urgh. Bile-inducing thought!

Well, he’d already figured his mate wouldn’t make this easy for him, so he offered another olive branch. “I don’t know what you like yet. Are ostrich shifters vegetarians?”

Dji sighed deeply before he replied, “Mostly. We eat meat on occasion, but we’re not steak-lovers either. And never, ever, offer anything that contains poultry meat to us,” his mate added with another sexy scowl. *Focus, Kei. You can jump him later. When he’s not trying to fry you with his laser stare.*

Clearing his throat, Kei asked, “Guess eggs are a sore topic, too?”

“Most definitely.”

Kei saluted. “Duly noted and memorized for later use. I apologize for my dumb behavior.”

When Dji merely grunted, he crept closer, carefully placing his palms on his mate’s huge pecs and rubbing in soothing circles. Kei ignored the miffed glares of the other shoppers. Small town Nebraska be damned.

Lifting his hand to caress the taller man’s cheek, Kei said, “You need to understand that I’m a cat, a predator. Just like Xander and my friends are, too. We need meat to satisfy our animals.”

Dji’s chest expanded as he took a deep breath, pulling the shirt that had been painted on his chest even tighter across his droolworthy muscles. *Bad train of thoughts.*



“I understand,” his mate said eventually, although Kei couldn’t quite quash the thought that his mate sounded like he’d been forced to chew on a handful of tacks.

Finally, after some more minutes of petting and soothing, Dji’s wide shoulders sagged and he let out his breath in several puffs. Kei felt hope bloom in his chest that they’d successfully avoided another fight.

Problem was, they hadn’t finished their shopping trip, yet. A grocery store bore so many possibilities for couples to slip right into the next argument. Kei was sure many divorces had been caused by initially relaxed grocery store strolls that had morphed into a journey to hell. Just because one of the couple was fond of Brussels sprouts or something like that.

To escape such a fate, Kei was willing to compromise—before his mate dumped him in the parking lot and drove home alone.

Walking back to pride lands would be worse than roaming the grocery store naked, for shortly before they’d arrived, it had started to pour down. If there was something Kei hated more than fighting with his mate, it was rain. Gah. In his mind, Kei’s cat hissed and arched its back at the mere thought of rain.

In the meantime, Dji’s hands had wandered to Kei’s waist to pull him closer. When the tall bird leaned down to sniff at him, Kei craned his neck to accommodate the man’s shifter instinct. A mate’s smell always had a calming, soothing effect, and Kei was only too happy to oblige.

“How about we switch to beef and deer? Or rabbit?” Kei asked in a whisper, shuddering and stifling a moan when Dji’s nose nuzzled the spot under his ear. “Would that be okay? I didn’t mean to offend you, honestly.”

Dji smacked a kiss against his neck. With his lips pressed to Kei’s skin, he mumbled, “All right. I’m sorry, too. Didn’t want to snap at you. Guess my damn hormones still are all over the place.”

Understanding perfectly well what his mate was talking about—after all, he felt his own cock plump behind his fly at his mate’s hot breath fanning across his skin—Kei nodded.

When they gazed into each other’s eyes, Kei was taken aback by the raw emotions he saw in his mate’s chocolatey brown orbs. Someone needed a cuddle.

“Let’s grab the meat and then change to the aisle with the freezers to pick up the ice cream. Then we go home for some much-needed quality time.”

Dji's kiss and following radiant grin had butterflies flapping and whirling in Kei's belly.

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On the drive home, Kei's body still buzzed with excitement. He couldn't keep his eyes off his sexy mate. Their occasional kissing and touching in the supermarket had left him hard and needy. So all he could think of now was to go home as soon as possible and get laid by his exceptionally gifted mate.

Too bad they were in the truck, with Dji driving them through the pouring rain. The downpour had forced them to cram the groceries on the tiny backseat. Was it asking too much for the rain to get worse? They'd be forced to park at the curb. Waiting for the rain to pass would give them a great opportunity to fog the windows.

Or maybe Kei could find a way to *force* his mate to park at the curb?

Dji's stifled groan caused him to turn his head and gaze at his mate. "Whatever you're thinking about, stop it," the man pressed between clenched teeth. His white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel spoke of his tenseness.

"Why?"

"Because I can smell when you're horny, little cat. And when you're horny, my body reacts! Driving with a boner is not the safest thing to do. Especially when all I want to do is slam on the brakes, undress you, and slam into you."

Oh. Ohh! An evil little grin tugged at Kei's lips as he placed his left hand on Dji's upper thigh, close his man's groin. "What's holding you back? Think I'd try to resist or escape from the truck?" he asked and snorted. "Not likely. I want you, my mate." Kei purred, something he knew drove his mate wild, and massaged his muscled thigh.

Dji's sharp intake of breath was quickly followed by a deep groan. The tall man flexed his hips in the confines of the seat and the safety belt, probably trying to nudge Kei's hand into the right direction. Namely, his cock and balls.

Sensing an impending victory, Kei cupped his mate's package and gave it a squeeze.

"Shit!" Dji hissed and grabbed Kei's wrist in a strong grip. "Do you want us to end in a ditch? Cut it out."

"Aww, come on. You're not as averse to the idea as you claim. I could suck you off! I mean, I've never tried it. But a guy has to start somewhere when he wants to learn new things, right? And given that you're my mate and my first

lover, you're responsible for my education," Kei said while his mate's drawn-out moan, which had started at the word *suck*, filled the truck. "What?"

"You can't suck me while I'm driving!" his mate said, his voice unusually high and squeaky. "I'd kill us both. And if that happens, I'd search you out as soon as I'm reborn so I could strangle you and—"

Kei interrupted his mate's indignant rant by popping the first button of his jeans and caressing the ridge of his long cock with his knuckles.

Dji let out a choked sound, like he'd just swallowed his tongue. "Can't you at least wait till we're home? Five more minutes, Kei. Please..."

The earthy, musky scent of Dji's arousal perfumed the air, making Kei light-headed and even harder in his pants. He whined as he fought with his mate's zipper and pants, and said, "But I wanna taste you! You always smell so good, I bet your taste is even better."

With that, Kei bent over the console and nuzzled his face into Dji's groin. Sniffing, he moaned when the bird's heavy scent hit his senses. "Yeah, mine," he mumbled, snatched the waistband of Dji's boxers with his teeth, and tugged.

"Gods, you're going to be the death of me. Literally," his mate growled.

Strong fingers carded through Kei's hair. Then his face was pressed against soft boxers and the crinkly, black hair Kei's impatient tugging had revealed. He kitten-licked Dji's fluffy treasure trail, then worked his way farther down till he could kiss the base of his mate's rock hard prick.

The truck swayed, followed by a curse Kei would've gotten his mouth washed out for by Xander. However, he should so not think about his foster father while making his first attempt at oral sex.

Instead, Kei freed Dji's heavy dick from the confines of his boxers and nibbled his lips along the upside. Reaching the flared, leaking head, he brushed the flat of his tongue over the head and scooped up the moisture. Dji's precum hit his taste buds for the first time and made him moan around the flesh he suckled.

The hand holding his hair in a forceful grip got accompanied by Dji's second hand. It came to rest on his nape and massaged his tendons.

Wait? A second hand? Only now did Kei realize the sway hadn't been caused by his sucking skills, but by Dji taking the turn into the pride land's driveway. The truck stood still, the only noises his mate's moaning and harsh breathing, and Kei's amateurish slurping. Good.

Kei marveled not only at his mate's taste, but the smoothness of his silky skin wrapped around steely hardness. He curled one hand around the throbbing length and stroked, moving the skin over the hard core.

"Oh fuck! So good... you sure you've never done this?" Djí asked between panting breaths. "Love your hot mouth and raspy tongue, kitty."

Before Kei could put his praised mouth to use and suck his lover's prick down, Djí's fingers tensed in his hair and tugged Kei away from his tasty task. He mewled, not at all happy with the interruption.

However, his mate had different plans. Their lips met in a desperate, demanding kiss. Soon, Kei found himself dragged across the console and into his man's lap. Kei wrapped his arms around the man's neck while their tongues dueled for dominance. Not that Kei cared who came out the winner, as long as they continued making out.

A big hand landed on Kei's ass, kneading his buttock through his jeans. Kei wanted to scoot closer and rub his painfully erect cock against Djí's. Only the thought that it probably wouldn't be very comfortable for Djí's naked prick to rub against Kei's jean-clad one kept him from doing so. But he was in desperate need of some pressure.

"Touch me, dammit!" he snapped, lightly nipping Djí's neck.

His mate merely grunted. Then Kei heard a distant clicking sound and suddenly they tipped sideways. Squealing, Kei clutched at the bigger man's shoulders. They tumbled out of the truck, with Djí landing on his back in the dirt of the driveway and Kei on top of him. Their gazes met, then they broke out laughing.

But their mirth didn't last long. Djí's eyes twinkled dangerously as he cupped Kei's nape, tugged, and crushed their lips together once again.

Compared to their necking in the truck, their kisses and the way they ground against each other now, made it obviously clear they were only a few minutes, and several hindering layers of clothes, away from fucking.

As it was, Djí seemed pretty busy with peeling a purring Kei out of his shirt. It was a wonder such big hands could move so swiftly.

Kei groaned when Djí's rough fingers found their way into his silky boxers and teased his shaft. He attacked the man's neck with biting, sucking kisses, flexing his hips to get more friction on his slender rod.

Just as Dji pushed Kei's pants down his ass and skimmed his crease, somebody cleared his throat. Their heads snapped up, simultaneously, and banged together with a hollow sound.

The unknown throat-clearer with a death wish now changed to snickering. Kei groaned and rubbed his forehead, already feeling a slight bump. Damn ostriches and their hard heads. And damn intruder who kept Kei from taking care of his mate's equally hard but much more interesting parts.

"Maybe you should stay in the truck next time. Instead of flashing your asses like that. Not that I don't appreciate the view," Alan—who else?—teased.

"Or you could take care of the groceries. Before the ice cream you hopefully didn't forget to buy begins to melt," Xander's deep voice boomed from farther away. A quick look confirmed the alpha stood on the porch, with his hands placed on his hips. Both men, however, wore matching expressions of amusement.

Kei's cheeks pinked with embarrassment. Sure, Xander knew he was now a sexually active man. That didn't mean Kei was keen on giving the older man visual proof.

He rolled off his grumbling mate and quickly pulled up his pants. Then he threw his discarded shirt across his mate's still exposed groin. Kei didn't like Alan's glittering, exploring gaze one tiny bit.

"I should've allowed you to suck me off at the curb," Dji muttered.

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## Chapter Nine

*How to explain polygamy to your possessive mate without losing a limb*

Two weeks after the incident at the grocery store, they were reclining on some kind of outdoor chaise, with Kei sitting between his legs and his back snuggled against Dji's chest. He'd looped his arms around his mate's slim frame, wrapping them both in a soft blanket.

They didn't really need it, what with the fire burning in a pit. But the blanket bore a great opportunity for Dji to tease and fondle several parts of his mate's anatomy without being seen. Not that the other shifters sitting around the fire wouldn't smell their arousal, but Dji didn't like live shows.

"I'm sorry I didn't manage a romantic evening, just for the two of us," Dji murmured against his lover's ear.

"It's okay," Kei whispered, angling his head so he could brush a fleeting kiss across Dji's lips. The kiss tasted sugary sweet and felt sticky because Kei had already eaten his own weight in grilled marshmallows. Whereas Dji was still busy with his own treat, securely placed in a brown paper bag on the ground, so his mate wouldn't eat that, too. "I've always loved sitting around the fire. Even more so now that I have a big, strong man to cuddle with. Just in case you didn't notice, cats are big cuddlers." Kei wriggled a bit and let out one of those cute, short purrs.

Dji tucked his nose behind Kei's ear, nuzzling the soft spot that he knew would increase the purring. He breathed in his mate's wonderful scent. He liked the subtle way it'd changed after their mating.

"What about the other cats? They're not bothering you? You wanted me to woo you. I can't imagine the whole pride watching is particularly romantic."

"Well, we can do the wooing thing another evening, can't we? This is pure domestic bliss. I've never had this before and I'm enjoying it very much," Kei murmured, wriggling once again.

The little frustrated huff accompanying his mate's movements clued Dji in on the fact that it wasn't meant to be seductive. He let his gaze roam around their chaise and spotted a bag with chips. Aha. Snagging it, he dangled it in front of Kei's face. Kei's happy squeal and lightning-fast grab for the bag caused him to chuckle.

“How can you still be hungry, kitty-cat? You demolished the marshmallow resources for half a year.”

“I told you. High metabolism. Dammit!” he cursed, unsuccessfully tugging at the bag. “Open, you piece of—” Dji cut off his mate’s rant by giving the bag a strong yank. Then he placed the chips in his mate’s lap with a kiss to his temple. Kei sighed and voiced an exaggerated, “My hero.”

“Always at your service. So, you never encountered domestic bliss you said? How come? What about your parents?” Dji had to admit, he was more than a little bit curious how the cheetah had ended in Nebraska. Till now, the topic hadn’t come up.

With the same care with which Kei had killed the marshmallows, he now attacked the chips. Between crunches he mumbled, “My parents divorced when I was a kid. They weren’t true mates and my mom was human. She returned to her family in California.”

“And you grew up with your dad?”

“Yeah. Mom wasn’t interested in raising a shifter. I guess she was more worried about raising a half-white, half-Asian boy though. Dad said her family was very conservative and gave her a hard time when she stayed in Hawaii to marry him. Of course, living in a city wouldn’t have worked anyway as soon as I’d have started shifting.”

Dji nodded, understanding a shifter’s need to run and roam freely. “Are you in contact with your mom?”

Shaking his head, Kei stuffed another handful of chips in his mouth. “Nah. She remarried a few years ago and has three daughters now. They don’t even know about me.” Kei’s voice gave nothing away. But his body had tensed under Dji’s hands, so he knew the little cat wasn’t as unaffected by his mother’s abandonment as he led on. Dji tightened his arms and pressed a kiss to Kei’s nape, offering silent support.

“How did you end up with Xander? You said he’s some kind of foster father to you.”

“Yeah. Dad died,” Kei whispered, sorrow radiating off his body in thick waves. Dji felt him snuggling deeper into the embrace as he continued. “I was thirteen. A friend of my dad’s knew Xander and that he was leading a mixed cat pride. That’s rather uncommon, you know? Cats mostly stay amongst their own race. Anyway, Xander said he’d love to take me in and so I ended in Nebraska. I was painfully shy, and it took Xander months to get me to open up a bit.”

Dji's heart broke a bit for the surely frightened boy Kei had been. Losing first his mother because she hadn't wanted him, and then his father, must've been hell. Especially for a teenager in desperate need of guidance and loving support. "How did he manage that?"

Kei laughed. "Oh, he was sneaky. He left a glob of clay and some tools in his room and the door ajar. At that time, I was a curious little thing, always on the hunt for mischief. So I snuck into my alpha's room and played with the clay whenever Xan left the house. After a while, I noticed that I was pretty skilled with the stuff, too. Then, for my fourteenth birthday, Xander surprised me with the studio in the basement. It was the turning point in our relationship, and he's been my confidant ever since."

"I'm glad you had him."

"What about your family? I don't know much about bird shifters, but I thought you lived in flocks."

"I left my flock several years ago. My father gave me an ultimatum I wasn't happy about, so I packed my stuff and left. I've never looked back," he said, not overly keen on sharing his own story. However, it was only fair. Most mates didn't keep secrets from each other. What's more, sharing tidbits about his life with Kei wasn't nearly as painful as he'd thought.

"Was it the gay thing?" Kei whispered, gently patting Dji's hands where they rested on his mate's flat belly.

"It was part of it. The concept of male-male mating is not foreign to ostriches. My father is the alpha of the flock though. He wanted me to be his successor and chose some females as mates."

"What do you mean, some?" Kei inquired, turning to the side so they could look into each other's eyes. His voice sounded strained, full of barely contained... anger.

Dji swallowed and silently cursed himself. With his dumb comment, he'd jumped headfirst into a den of rattlesnakes.

Clearing his throat multiple times, he shrugged his shoulder in an attempt to appear nonchalant. "Lots of ostriches are polygamous. The males have some kind of harem, with one female acting as main hen and the others as... secondary hens."

Kei gasped, shock clearly written on his cute face. "Polygamous? Does that mean you have other mates out there? I'm not the only one?" Well, shit. Okay,



so there wasn't anything nonchalant about having to explain polygamy to one's mate. A possessive, snarling mate, whose claws were, right now, digging through the thick fabric of his jeans.

"No, love!" Dji hurried to explain. "You're the only one, I swear. The harem thing only applies for those whose true mates are ostriches, too. At least, I've never heard of a harem of mixed races. Plus, I'd feel it if the bond were incomplete. It's not. I knew as soon as I met you that there wouldn't be another one for me."

Kei's face remained pinched and he crossed his arms in front of his lean chest. *Shitshitshit*. How could he convince his mate of his honesty?

Before he saw himself forced to go down on his knees, again, Kei snapped, "There better not be anyone else. My cat couldn't stand it. And if you ever include another bird into our mating, I'll allow Alan to relaunch C-W-F."

"What's C-W-F?" Dji asked, trepidation filling him.

"Chicken Wings Friday," Kei said. A fierce fire blazed in his eyes, attesting to his seriousness. Here was a cat that would, and could, shred anyone he saw as a threat to their mating.

Dji found himself instantly turned on by this sudden show of possessiveness and wanted to... submit. What the fuck? He couldn't... there was no way...

Suddenly, Kei's nostrils flared and the anger on his face changed to lust. Of course, he'd picked up the scent of Dji's arousal.

Shielded by the cocoon of their blanket, Kei wriggled and turned till he was straddling Dji's hips.

Dji's breathing sped up. By the Gods, but his cat was a thing of beauty. The flickering fire cast soft lights over Kei's face, caught in his amber eyes so they looked as if they were smoldering. Dji felt his prick harden at the barely contained desire shimmering in those eyes and he wanted nothing more than to shred his clothes and fuck right here on the chaise.

Kei seemed to be on the same page, for he attacked Dji with a series of biting, sucking kisses that rendered him speechless.

Dji let his head fall back and stifled a moan that threatened to escape him. The pleased shudder, however, he was unable to suppress. Before Dji had his wits together, his mate's tiny, savvy hands found their way to his fly and began fiddling with the buttons. When Kei's knuckles brushed against the ridge of his cock, Dji hissed through clenched teeth.

“Kitty, I don’t think that’s such a good—” A muffled grunt was all he managed to get out while Kei put their earlier kissing lessons into practice. Damn, but the man could kiss!

He carded his hand through his mate’s artfully tousled hair and held on tight, angling his head just so he could push his tongue deep inside Kei’s sweet mouth.

“Want you,” the little cat said when they came up for air. A groan was ripped from Dji’s throat when Kei rocked his hips and nudged his balls.

Yeah, he wanted, too. Unfortunately, several facts dashed his hopes of getting laid.

First, neither of them was into exhibitionism, so fucking in front of the whole pride wouldn’t do. Second, given Kei’s temper, and the need to stake his claim after their conversation about polygamy, his mate would probably want to top him. As much as Dji wanted to give in—and wasn’t that just a shocker?—he couldn’t do it. At least, not right now.

Somehow, he had to find a way to cool his mate down. Just as he felt slender fingers wrap around his now freed cock, a voice interrupted their tryst.

“You could at least shuck the blanket, ya know? So the rest of us poor fuckers who’re single can watch,” Alan teased.

Kei froze on top of him, hid his hot face against Dji’s neck, and groaned. Then he threw the bag of chips—a clear proof how pissed off Kei was—at Alan’s head.

“Gah! Kei, you little fucker!” Chips flew in every direction, but most of them landed in Alan’s hair and on his clothes. When the other cat brushed a hand through his hair, crumbs fell down. “Dammit!”

Dji snickered and watched with glee when Alan jumped up. Some of the crumbs must’ve found their way under his shirt, for he cursed like a sailor and started scratching his chest and back through his shirt.

All the while, he glared daggers at a maniacally laughing Kei, who’d flopped down on Dji’s body. The little guy laughed and shook so hard, his upper body slipped down the chaise till his head and shoulder met the ground.

“Ow, shit! Dji!” His mate wheezed and flung his arms. Dji just laughed and quickly wrapped his arms around Kei’s hips to prevent him from completely toppling down.

In the meantime, Alan had pulled his shirt over his head and shook it out. “That was a mean attack you’ll pay for.”

“No, I won’t,” Kei quipped and flicked his hand in a shooing motion. How a guy whose head hung to the ground while his ass was up in the air could act all superior was beyond Dji. However, his mate pulled it off. “My fiercely protective mate won’t allow anything to happen to me. Right, honeysuckle?”

“What did you just call me?” Dji asked, loosening his hold just a second so his mate would slip a few inches.

Kei giggled, craned his neck awkwardly, and peered up at him, a smirk on his face. He better not—“Honeysuckle,” his mate repeated, sealing his fate.

With a loud squeak, Kei fell to the ground. Instead of being pissed that Dji had let him fall though, the little punk laughed even harder and wrapped his arms around his stomach.

When he looked up he saw Alan, dressed again but still scratching imaginary crumbs, shaking his head at Kei’s antics. “If he’s like that, all you can do is wait till it’s over. The laughing-like-a-lunatic stage will soon be taken over by the unable-to-breathe stage,” he explained at Dji’s questioning look.

But it didn’t turn out that way. Somehow, even while gasping for air, Kei noticed the bag Dji had hidden under the chaise and snatched it. His giggles died as he sat up, legs stretched out in front of him and his back against the chaise.

Dji rolled his eyes. Of course. The only thing able to distract his mate was food. And now he’d found Dji’s secret stash.

Kei poked his freckled nose into the paper bag and sniffed, looking more like a bloodhound than a cat. “Oh, chocolate! Why didn’t you tell me we had chocolate out here?” he asked and looked up. Was that an accusation Dji heard in his mate’s voice?

“Well, it’s mine. Am I not allowed to have my own sweets?”

“He hid it from you,” Alan threw in. Dji yanked his head around, noticing the way the other cat jutted his hip and crossed his arms over his chest in smug satisfaction. Growling, Dji pointed his index and middle finger toward his own eyes, then pointed them at Alan in silent warning. Damn cat just blew him an air kiss.

Meanwhile, Kei had fished one chocolatey chunk out of the bag and popped it in his mouth. The purring started almost instantly and several other chunks found their way into Kei's belly.

Dji had to bite his lip, hard, to keep from laughing. It wasn't that watching his mate eat was particularly funny. But...

"That's really good!" his mate gushed, pressing the bag to his chest like a kid holding a doll. "Love the crunch. What is it anyway? Cornflakes?" he mused, holding one chocolatey piece between his fingers and turning it back and forth.

"Chocolate-covered grasshoppers," Dji said.

If he hadn't known it would earn him a month without sex, Dji would've laughed at his mate's reaction. The smaller man's face pinched in the universal sign for *I need to hurl!* Then, under a litany of choking sounds, he gripped his throat with both hands and fluttered his lashes.

Alan laughed, doubling over and slapping his thighs. He lost it eventually when Kei fell backwards while he twitched and garbled like a man fighting imminent death.

Silence descended around the fire, the other pride members looking at them with expressions varying between boredom and the kind of fondness one bestowed on playing kids.

"Grasshoppers? How could you, Djimon?" Kei yelled suddenly. "That's disgusting!"

Disgusting? Crossing his arms on front of his chest, Dji glowered at his mate in rightful indignation. "What? How is eating grasshoppers more disgusting than celebrating Chicken Wing Friday?" he asked, ignoring Alan's shout of protest. "I'm a bird. We like the occasional bug in chocolate. Also, I told you it was my bag. That'll be a lesson to you not to poach and wolf down everything you can get your hands on."

"I don't wolf down everything I can get my... okay. You've got a point. But grasshoppers?" Kei scrunched up his nose and made yet another choking sound.

Someone chortled. Dji's gaze met Xander's. One of the white lion's brows was raised in an elegant arch, the right side of his lips lifted in a smirk. "Welcome to our next show of *African Wild Animals in Nebraska*. Today—the ostrich poisoning his mate, the choking cheetah, and their companion, the loony

panther. Stay tuned,” the alpha boomed in true show-master fashion. Dji chuckled at the guy’s playfulness.

Kei, gripped by yet another fit of giggles, rolled from one side to the other. By now, his colorful clothes were full of dust, as were his hair and skin. Dji looked forward to undressing his mate and carrying him under the shower. Ever since their first shared shower, he’d wanted to fuck Kei against the tiles. His blood pumped through his veins as he imagined his mate bracing his hands against the wall and sticking out his butt. Or with his back to the wall, wrapping his legs around Dji’s waist while he pounded his tight ass with abandon.

“Igotkyyo!” his mate pressed between wheezes.

“What did he say?” Thony asked, eyeing Kei with curious attention.

Shrugging, Alan said, “No idea. Should we help him? Maybe?”

“Igotkyyu!” Kei tried again. Tears streamed down his red-hued face. Dji’s poor kitty was in dire need of air.

As funny as it had been, Kei’s desperate struggle to breathe pulled him out of his lusty thoughts. Something on the cat’s face told him that his mate wasn’t having much fun right now, as it always happened eventually when one had a laughing fit.

He swiftly lifted his mate off the ground and into his arms. Once seated on his lap, the cheetah held onto Dji’s shirt, sucking huge gulps of air. His wheezing didn’t die though.

Dji stroked his lover’s back, murmuring, “Hey, shhh. It’s all right. Breathe.”

Alan flopped down on the chair beside them and offered a bottle of water. Nodding his thanks, Dji took the bottle and helped Kei drink tiny sips of water. At first he coughed, but then he guzzled the water like a man walking the desert.

“What were you trying to say?” Alan asked, scooting to the edge of his chair.

Clearing his throat, and looking like a disheveled cat that had been in a fight with... well, another cat or two, Kei glared around the assembled shifters. “I said, I’m going to kill you.”

Xander laughed. “Whom exactly? Just so we know how many graves to shovel.”

Kei hissed at his alpha, not a very wise decision in every other pack, pride or flock. With Xander, however, things were different. The tall man just grinned and waved his hand in a *go on* fashion.

Dji's mate sniffed and turned up his perky nose. "I haven't decided yet. However, Alan's on top of the list."

"What? Why me?" the panther sputtered and snatched the bottle of water he'd so gracefully shared out of Kei's fingers. "Those were Dji's grasshoppers, not mine. What's more, my back still itches with chips crumbs."

"Well, the chips are your own fault. As for the hoppers... Dji is my mate. Killing him would only serve to punish myself. That wouldn't be very clever now, would it? I'm rather fond of the big rooster."

"Because he sucks your dick like a Hoover?" Alan shot back.

Dji, although not known for his shyness, felt his face heat at Alan's words. Thank God for his dark complexion.

Chances were that Alan had heard them getting it on more than once. Once introduced to the joys of sex, his mate had turned out to be rather explorative. With the result that he'd sucked—and fucked—the little cat in almost every room and on every flat surface the house had to offer since Dji had moved in two weeks ago, the only exception being Xander's room.

Obviously secure in his new-found sexuality and not in the least bit embarrassed that their sex life was discussed in front of the whole pride, Kei grinned like the cat that got the cream. Or rather, the cat that had spent his cream down his mate's very eager throat on several occasions.

"Yes, exactly. And because he hoovers my room like a pro, too," he added, a smuggest of smug smiles curling his lips.

Xander's gasp caused many heads to turn. Shock was clearly written on the blond man's face.

Embarrassing or not, it was true. Not only had Dji willingly taken the role as Kei's humble sex slave slash teacher, he'd started cleaning the messy cave Kei called a room, too.

Dji wondered if Xan was honestly shocked by Kei's and Alan's saucy banter or just acting out. Sure, Kei was kind of a son for him but—

"Kei! You're allowing Djimon to clean your room? Who are you and what have you done to my boy?" the alpha's words cut through the silence.

Kei growled again. “Stop giving me crap about my room. You all just have a different understanding of the word decoration,” he said, waving his hand at the shifters around the fire. Kei’s following exasperated sigh caused another short fit of coughs.

Dji offered his mate the bottle of water, after snatching it out of a protesting Alan’s hands, along with a kiss to his temple.

“Thanks, birdy,” Kei said after emptying the bottle. “I shouldn’t have said that stuff about you cleaning my room. I could’ve said ‘Because he has the cock of a stallion.’ But no,” he whined, dragging out the o. All heads snapped to Dji, gazes raked over his body.

Dji coughed.

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## Chapter Ten

### *How to turn a midnight snack into a midnight lay*

Over the following weeks, Kei thought they were settling in rather nicely.

That was, if one forgot the way Kei acted like a three-year-old who got dumped at the daycare by his mommy every time Dji went to work. Or how Dji tried to, unsuccessfully, come up with romantic dates just for the two of them. He'd promised Kei to put some effort into chasing and wooing him.

Despite the man's ongoing attempts though, most dates had gotten sabotaged.

Sometimes, Dji was bone tired after a full day of construction work *and* helping out pride members with their renovations. Then the big bird would fall into bed soon after dinner, without so much as a quick rub off.

On other days, Kei forgot the time while working in his basement studio. When he emerged hours later, he often found Dji passed out amongst the pillows.

That didn't mean there was a recognizable lack of sex in their relationship. Far from it. It just appeared that most nights, or whenever they managed to sneak away during the day, both of them weren't particularly interested in romance. Or talking. Instead, they forewent the mushy stuff in favor of a very thorough, hard fuck that left them both a panting, sweating, tangled mass of limbs.

Kei loved getting dirty with his man. Very much. The things Dji could do with his tongue, holy fucking hell. However, the lack of romance started to bug him. Dji wasn't to blame, for he went above and beyond with his plans. They just couldn't seem to carve out some time alone without the pride, especially Alan, the fucker, interfering.

Problem was, when they weren't fucking each other's brains out, they argued. Not as often or as crass as when they first met. However, Kei had, in all his youthful ignorance, thought that building a life with his mate would be as easy as pie. After all, fate had chosen them for each other, right?

Well, seemed fate wasn't averse to making life-altering decisions in a drunken stupor. Okay, maybe that was a bit harsh and over the top. Being well



on his way to falling head over heels for his birdy, Kei felt more than thankful for the man fate had picked for him.

However, as a cat, Kei was subjected to fast, erratic mood swings. Often without needing a reason.

One second, Dji and he cuddled in bed, with his mate petting his back, and the next moment, he got stuck by a particularly uncuddly mood. Then Kei would jump off the bed and hide in his studio for hours. Or go for a run, followed by hours of grooming.

Gods, being a cat was much more complicated than most people were able, or willing, to understand.

No wonder Dji pounced and pinned him to the bed, or another sufficing surface, as soon as he returned from work. They never argued or fought during sex. In fact, sex was the one thing where they matched with such a wonderful accuracy it took Kei's breath away. Literally, in most cases.

Kei felt grateful his man slept peacefully in their bed right now. Of course, what else was there to do in the middle of the night? Especially after a very long day of work and a round of rumpling the sheets.

However, his birdy wouldn't like the fact Kei had snuck out of their room to plunder the kitchen. Again. Sex always left him famished like a bear waking from hibernation.

"What do you think you're doing?"

He'd deny it later, but Kei startled and let out an unmanly squeak at his mate's gruff question. The opened and halfway plundered package of corned beef slipped out of his grip, clattering to the floor.

Kei turned so fast, and so clumsy, that his elbow made uncomfortable contact with the fridge door. Holding onto the meat with his teeth and cursing around the mouthful, he grabbed his bruised arm and moaned as a zing radiated through his bones. Damn, he hated that shit.

He shot his mate, who was scarily stealthy for such a big guy, an annoyed look. The tall man even had the audacity to cross his arms in front of his naked, droolworthy chest and to knit his brows into a disapproving frown. A frown that had long lost its effect due to overuse.

"What?" Kei mumbled around his prey.

Yes, he felt bad for sneaking out of bed and plundering the fridge like a starving man. Maybe he even felt a little bad for going straight for the meat as soon as his mate wasn't present to observe his choice of midnight snack. Also, that thought made him mad as hell.

He knew his mate's stance when it came to meat. However, he wasn't a little kid who had to ask permission for everything. What's more, it wasn't as if he'd gone and happily barbecued himself an ostrich steak.

"You know exactly what," came his mate's tired reply.

Kei ignored the words and let his gaze travel down Dji's scarcely clothed body. Couldn't the guy at least wear a shirt before he came down to the kitchen where everybody could ogle what was Kei's? Not that there was much traffic this time of the day. However, Kei's cat snarled its agreement and he mentally petted its head. Good cat.

"Aww, come on. Metabolism! You know that game, I needed a snack." Without taking his eyes off his mate, Kei reached behind himself, snagged the next best thing out of the fridge, then nudged the door shut.

Dji sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What did you just grab, Kei?"

"Nothing!" he assured, his voice a bit too high for his liking.

He quickly turned and looked down at his prize. Cocktail onions? *Cryptastic*. His mate's voice forced him to turn back and paste a big, fake grin on his face. Onions. What should he do with onions? Mix a fancy cocktail and get plastered?

"Kei..." Dji said, exasperation ringing in his stern voice and causing Kei to flush.

His alpha always said Kei couldn't lie for shit and, really, it was bad behavior to lie to one's mate. The man didn't make it exactly easy to tell the truth either. Kei sometimes felt like a schoolboy sitting in the headmaster's office when Dji lectured him. For all his coolness—ripped jeans, leather necklaces, and feather trinkets in his long, wild curls—the man was way too stiff and proper for his own good.

"Don't start again, Dji. I was hungry, okay?"

"You're always hungry. Is there a time when you're not nibbling on something?" A smile tugged at Dji's sensual lips, making them look even more

kissable. He shuffled closer, wrapped one arm around Kei's waist, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

Oh. Now Kei could tell his mate wasn't really mad. When he looked up and roamed Dji's face, his mate seemed rather... tired? Exasperated? Worried?

Why? Because Kei had left the bed in the middle of the night? What was there to worry about? The only midnight dates Kei ever had involved him and the fridge. Aside from his little fit when he'd misinterpreted the word *clay*, the big bird hadn't shown any signs of jealousy.

The little devil sitting on Kei's shoulder whenever Dji was close was solely responsible for his next words. He was sure of that. "Well, I wouldn't have left our bed if you'd have given me something else to nibble on. You know how much I like meat."

Corny? Hell, yes, but in the middle of the night, corniness was all he came up with.

Dji chuckled and pecked his lips. "What about some muesli?"

Kei scrunched up his nose. "As opposed to other people living in this house, I'm not a chicken," he grouched.

"Chicken? You little..." Ten long, strong, work-roughened fingers started to attack Kei's sides, sending him into fits of giggles and unladylike snorts. He turned and wriggled, but couldn't escape his mate as the big guy pinned him to the fridge. A high-pitched squeak ripped from his throat when his naked back hit the cold surface.

Kei gasped in shock and slapped Dji's chest. "Cold! Not sexy!"

His mate picked him up, placed one arm under his butt, and the other around his back. Dji's big hand cupped the back of his head, enfolding him in warm security and protective muscles.

Soft lips brushed along Kei's eyebrows, nibbled the bridge of his nose, and finally found his mouth. Their kiss was slow. A simmer instead of the usual burning desire that swamped their senses whenever they touched. The simmer, however, didn't last long.

"How's that?" Dji whispered and delivered a quick nip to the tendon of Kei's neck.

He hissed. Then Kei arched and gave his mate more room to suck and kiss his way to his ear. Goose bumps broke out over his skin when the ostrich clamped teeth around his lobe and tugged.

“Perfect.” Kei let his head fall back against the fridge.

Dji’s arms tightened around him even more, causing a deep purr to emerge from Kei’s chest. He breathed in his mate’s strong, earthy scent, confident it was an odor designed to drive Kei to distraction. Once again, they fit like two pieces of a puzzle.

“Why is it that our conversations either end in an argument or sex?” he asked in a whisper. To get his mate’s attention, Kei carded his hands through the man’s messy locks and gripped them, forcing Dji to meet his gaze.

Dji’s deep-brown eyes looked almost black in the dimmed light of the kitchen. Or maybe his arousal had caused his pupils to swallow the chocolatey irises. Either way, Kei fell into those eyes, helpless against the sensual lure and the promise of passion hidden in the dark depths.

“Sometimes,” his mate said, his voice husky. “Conversation isn’t verbal. Sometimes, it doesn’t *need* to be verbal to gain the desired result.”

Kei swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “And... what’s the result you’re aiming for when you steer our conversation into nonverbal territories?”

“Getting to know you. Without your or my attitude interfering. After spending hours away from you because of work, I’m agitated, and my ostrich is sulking,” Dji said, lifted him a bit higher, and dipped his nose into the hollow between Kei’s collar bones. It was distracting, but Kei wanted to hear what his mate had to say even more.

What’s more, he understood what the bigger man tried to convey. His cheetah wasn’t happy about their forced, daily separation either.

Then Dji continued, “When I come home and the first thing we do is argue about some silly stuff, my bird sees that as a rejection. All I want when I come home is to curl around you. Hold you. Kiss you. I need you, Kei. What’s wrong with that? I know you want me, too,” his mate said, his words muffled because he’d pressed his mouth against the mating mark on Kei’s pec.

Before he could come up with a reply, Dji beat him to it. To be honest, Kei was way too overwhelmed by his mate’s open words to form coherent sentences anyway.

“Your heart beats so fast. Sometimes, when you’re asleep, I place my head against your chest and listen to your heart beat. Do you think that’s sappy?” Dji whispered.

Kei shook his head and choked on a, “No.” Damn, his birdy was right. They might not be the most skilled conversationalists when it came to words, but their actions screamed their feelings, loud and clear.

It was in the way Dji always sought him out after work first thing to give him a toe-curling kiss. The way he cleaned Kei’s room, again and again, although Kei always managed to mess it up in the few hours his mate wasn’t home. How Dji got up early to make breakfast for him and, every so often, used the opportunity to smuggle veggie lunch meat on Kei’s sandwiches.

Hell, the man even washed, dried, and folded his clothes! Reminded him when it was time for a run. Every touch, no matter how fleeting or short, every look, told Kei how much he meant to Dji.

Fate, it seemed, worked exceptionally well, even if it had a drink from time to time.

“Still hungry?” his mate asked, palming his ass.

Kei giggled and rubbed his growing excitement against the man’s ripped stomach. “Not for food. You. Now.”

Dji chuckled. When he looked up, his eyes twinkled. “Is that an order?”

“A friendly suggestion. A suggestion that is not open for discussion.”

“Your suggestion is my command.” A big grin on his face, Dji sat him down on the sturdy breakfast table. Kei’s sleep pants went flying over his mate’s shoulder. Next the man shed his own gear, grabbed Kei’s legs, and pulled his ass to the edge.

“On the table?” Kei squeaked in mild shock. He knew his mate didn’t care about location once they got it on, as long as nobody was watching them, of course. But the table where they took their breakfast every morning? And not only them, but Xander and his friends, Alan and Thony, too?

Dji just shrugged. “Tomorrow morning, you’ll sit right here,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the wooden surface. “And you’ll remember what we’ve done. You’ll blush and stutter oh so lovely, like you always do, when Alan asks you what’s going on.”

“To what purpose?” Kei panted and held onto Dji’s strong arms. The heat in his mate’s eyes set Kei on fire and his heart pumping.

“So your friends will know I’m so hot for you I just couldn’t help myself but take you.” Then Dji leaned forward and, with his strong chest, pushed Kei’s slender body down till his back rested on the table.

“I think they got it when we came back from the supermarket some weeks ago and humped each other on the ground. Or the day we all went on the picnic and you sucked me off in the bushes.” Kei smiled and cupped his mate’s cheek.

They gazed into each other’s eyes, both panting. For a breath, for a blink, time stood still. The heat of the humid night, along with their close proximity, made their skin slick and sweaty. Kei moved his hand and curled it around Dji’s neck to pull him closer.

It happened like in slow motion. Dji bent over his body, closed the distance between their bodies. The taller man panted above him like he’d run for an hour straight.

Finally, their lips met. It was a hard crash of flesh and teeth, of biting and stroking, tangling tongues.

In the sparse light, his mate’s dark skin glistened enticingly. Kei wanted to lick it, taste it, trace every ridge and scar with his tongue. Dji seemed to entertain the same thoughts, for he moved down and licked the sweat off Kei’s breastbone in a long, slow swipe.

Goose bumps broke out all over his body and his hands clenched on Dji’s shoulders. “Please,” he whispered when their eyes met once again. Dji, still hovering over his chest, sucked on his nipple before biting down on it.

Kei moaned at the rough caress. He carded his hands through the bigger man’s long hair.

When Dji flexed his hips, rubbing his hard prick through the crease where Kei’s thigh met his groin, their slippery bodies glided against each other. The friction nearly toppled Kei over the edge.

His mate left the abused peak, kissed his way down his ribs, nibbled at his belly button.

His leaking, throbbing prick painted Dji’s chin with pearly precum. Gods, he loved the sight of his creamy spunk on his mate’s dark skin. What’s more, he’d missed the man’s talented mouth on his cock.

Not that Kei didn’t get it often enough, but as a newly mated shifter couple in their honeymoon phase, every interruption they had to endure by Kei’s friends felt like a major cock-block.

“Aww, hell. Not again,” Xander’s deep voice sliced through the silent kitchen. Okay, not really silent, what with their panting and moaning, and the way the damn table creaked with every flex of Dji’s hips.

Dji cursed and let his forehead fall on Kei's belly. "Dammit, Xander. What the hell are you doing here? It's three in the morning."

Kei just nodded, way too shocked to form coherent sentences. Fortunately, his mate's bigger bulk shielded Kei's body from Xander's gaze.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I was hungry. And just so you know, it's my kitchen and my table you're abusing here," Kei's alpha bristled.

When the fact that their current position put Dji's ass in perfect view for the alpha finally registered, a deep growl emerged from Kei's chest. Not that he'd ever attack his alpha, or that he thought Xander would poach, but a friendly warning was never wrong, was it?

"Kei, lover, that's not helpful at all," Dji whispered, his teeth clenched. "Your growl, albeit very sexy, vibrated my balls. So..."

He felt his face, and the very naked rest of his body, flush at those quiet words. "Oops. Sorry." Lifting up onto his elbows, he peeked around Dji and he saw Xander pinching the bridge of his nose. Poor guy. "And sorry, Xan," he added with a wave.

"It's all right, son. I'm happy for you, really," the white lion said while examining the tiled floor with great interest. "However, the heavy pheromones you both are giving off are a bit..."

"You need to get laid," Dji interrupted, causing Xander to look at their tangled bodies after all. Kei pressed a hand against his mouth and snickered at his mate's teasing. And his foster father's shocked expression.

His mate remained absolutely unperturbed. He merely bent down, snagged their sleep pants off the floor, and helped Kei slip his back on.

Xander cleared his throat, a suspiciously rosy hue to his cheeks. "You're such a little shit, Djimon. Also, if you weren't such a big lug, I'd place you over my knee and tan your ass."

Kei snarled and jumped off the table, pushing his small body between his alpha and his mate. Ridiculous? Yeah, probably. But he couldn't help his instincts. In his mind, his cat stretched and sharpened its claws, ready to slice Xander into pretty white lion ribbons.

Strong arms wrapped around him from behind and tugged him flush against an equally strong chest. Xander lifted his hands in a placating gesture. It helped soothe his agitated cat and Kei's growl morphed into a deep purr. Anyway, he

pressed his body deeper into the embrace. The more of his scent he left on his mate the better.

Xander pushed a hand through his white-blond hair and sighed. “Sorry, Kei. I’m just too tired to think straight right now. I apologize. I’ll just grab a glass of water, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Cool. Then we can continue shagging on the breakfast table,” Dji said and bumped his still hard cock against Kei’s ass. Kei’s eyes rolled back in his head, because Dji’s nudge reminded him how good it felt to feel his mate inside his ass.

His alpha’s own eye roll must’ve been more along the lines of *Are you fucking crazy?* for he said, “If you do that, I’ll force you to scrub this table with bleach. And not only once.”

Kei turned in his mate’s arms, reached up, and patted his disappointed-looking face. “You were right, love. Xan needs to get laid.”

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## Chapter Eleven

### *How to catch an ostrich*

Dji worked his legs with all his strength, although it was a moot point. He knew the predator chasing him would eventually catch up with him and bring him to the ground. The sleek cat was wickedly fast, moving with a grace Dji would've loved to observe. As it was, his hunter kept him pretty busy.

Swiftly angling his wings, Dji changed direction once again and heard a menacing growl behind him. His mate's struggling body caused a cloud of dust when he toppled ass over teakettle.

Dji's heart skipped a beat at the sight, but soon Kei had regained his footing and sped up even more.

He screeched, not really a warning but a sign for his mate that he had fun. The scenario was so close to the way they'd met weeks ago, but served a completely different purpose.

Where in the past he'd run to avoid getting eaten by the cat, Dji now wanted to play with Kei.

The man had been restless all day, not even the picnic Dji had planned for them was able to soothe him. The pacing, snarling, and allover cat-like behavior, had clued him in on the fact that his cheetah needed to run. In his animal form. So, they'd stuffed the picnic basket and a blanket in Dji's truck and had driven half an hour into the wild till they were sure no human would stumble across them.

A furred flash caused him to concentrate back on their chase. Just like the first time, Kei tried to bring him down by wriggling his body between Dji's long legs.

Dji chattered a warning, not wanting to hurt his mate with his sharp claws in case they fell. Of course, that was what happened a second later.

He fell with an indignant squeak and found himself under a heavily panting, spotted cat. A cat who immediately rubbed his face all over Dji's body and eventually started grooming Dji's feathers. It was an odd sensation, but not unpleasantly so.

To show his appreciation for the somewhat awkward show of affection, Djì bent his long neck and nuzzled his beak through the fluffy ruff at his mate's nape. He liked the longer strands of fur growing there and chattered happily.

Only when Kei's raspy cat tongue scraped across his face, did he hiss and peck. The cat chuffed, probably the cat equivalent of a laugh or giggle. However, Kei climbed off Djì's bigger body and allowed him to get back up on his feet.

Djì spread his wings wide and shook out his ruffled, dusty feathers. Not that he cared. Working in construction, Djì wasn't a stranger to being dusty for the major part of his days.

What's more, knowing the hunt had brought his mate joy made the whole experience even better. But after exhausting his sinewy body, Djì knew his mate would be in dire need for a catnap before they enjoyed their picnic. So he nudged the cat's flank with his head and trotted toward a group of trees.

Kei not only followed but outran him. Reaching the trees first, the cat turned, placed his butt on the ground, and watched Djì's approach while panting for breath. Then he flopped sideways and rolled on his back. The cat presented his belly and craned his neck so he could look at Djì.

If he'd been in human form, Djì would've rolled his eyes at his mate's antics. His mate was such a little slut for petting, no matter if he was in human or animal form.

Djì stalked toward his mate, finally coming to rest with his feet left and right of the cat's stretched body. When he rubbed his beak and head through the soft fur of Kei's belly, his mate, quite predictably, started to purr. Djì fucking loved this purr.

Their nuzzling didn't last long though, for he soon noticed Kei's eyelids drooping. Another thing Kei shared with his cat. They grew tired very soon after bodily activities like running. Or sex. To be honest, Djì thought it cute as hell.

A last rough lick to the side of his long neck made him shiver even in his animal form. Then Kei curled into a freckled, fluffy ball of fur, squeezed his eyes shut, and dozed off.

With his mate napping, it was Djì's responsibility to keep them both safe. So he lifted his head and surveyed their surroundings. Despite them being in a rather secluded area, he took this responsibility seriously. It wouldn't do them

any good if a human stumbled across a cheetah whose beauty sleep was overlooked, and carefully wing shadowed, by a protective ostrich. In Nebraska, to top it off. And yes, wing-shadowed, because after one and a half hours of Dji standing and watching, the sun had moved in the sky and now fell in his napping mate's face. Or would've fallen in his face if Dji hadn't spread his wings to shield Kei.

He had no idea if cats could get a sunstroke from sleeping in the sun for too long, but he didn't want to take the risk. A sunstroke caused nasty side effects. Dji had witnessed it often enough while working outside when the weather was hot and the sun fried construction workers' brains.

Holding a barfing mate while the man hit the toilet tossing his cookies wasn't his idea of a romantic evening with his lover.

At least, he hoped for a romantic evening. With the help of Thony and Xander, Dji had worked hard to surprise Kei with the romance his kitty so desperately longed for.

Sure, their sex life was great, and Kei hadn't complained the lack of candles, flowers, or massages with fancy coconut oil or stuff like that. However, every cat not only wanted, but needed spoiling. The more the better. Just because Dji was totally clueless when it came to romantic gestures, due to his former life as a fuck and run kind of guy, didn't mean he wasn't interested in furthering his education. Especially if it meant a very happy and appreciative mate.

Dji mentally grinned. As soon as sleeping beauty woke from his catnap, they'd enjoy their picnic, then return home.

The guys, meaning Alan, Thony, and some of their friends, had scheduled a game of pool to take place in Xander's impressive man cave. Complete with chips, beer, and manly conversations. Not romantic? True.

In fact, the romance would start after playing with the guys. Gazing down at his dozing mate and his twitching tail, Dji couldn't wait to see Kei's face.

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"Is this a setup to get me to fuck you on top of the pool table? Because I have to tell you... that's a terribly corny cliché," Dji said as he watched his mate bending over the pool table and wriggling his ass.

Kei shot him a look over his shoulder. "No, of course not," he said, his voice dripping with rightful indignation. Then a grin tugged at his sensual lips. "Does it work?"

Dji threw his head back, laughed, and swatted his teasing mate's behind. "Stop freaking out the guys."

"Aww, come on, they're probably enjoying the show."

"Yes," Alan replied without missing a beat at the same time Xander shouted a steady, "No."

Thony just snickered and took a swig of his beer. "At least he didn't ask Djimon if he could teach him how to play pool. *That* would've been even cornier. I can't count the girls who used that line on me as a hookup line."

"And that would be a problem because?" Dji asked while chalking the tip of his cue and blowing over the tip.

"Because Thony is as queer as a designer. A designer with a Persian cat that wears a diamond necklace," Alan threw in while bending over the table and taking his shot. Thony stuck out his tongue at the teasing panther.

Dji pecked his mate's lips as a thanks for a fresh bottle of beer, then slung an arm around the smiling man and asked, "Then why don't you tell the ladies to bugger off and leave you alone?"

"I don't like to act rude. My momma taught me to always be nice to women. So I usually keep quiet till they lose interest," Thony muttered, a wee bit shy.

Alan rolled his eyes and poked his cue into the other shifter's side. "You need to change from silent hunger striker to boisterous, flag-wielding antiwar activist."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Thony asked and batted at the poking weapon, an incredulous look on his face. "Not all of us start a conversation with 'Hi, I'm gay and I'd like to suck you off.'"

"Well," Alan said, cupped his package and grinned. "At least I'm getting laid, as opposed to other guys." Thony's face flamed red, causing his orangey freckles to stand out even more.

Dji swiftly changed the topic so the poor man wouldn't go up in flames. "Come to think of it, what kind of cat are you, Thony?"

Dji's little mate didn't even think about letting Thony answer for himself though. "A Persian cat," he said around a chuckle. Then Kei's smile spread into a wide grin. "A fluffy, red one."

“Shut up,” Thony snapped and took a long swig of his beer. “You make me sound like a damn pet. I think it’s time you concentrate on somebody else now.” He lifted the bottle back to his mouth, tipped his head back, and scowled at the obviously empty beverage. “Dammit. In the past, one bottle of beer at least lasted for one round of pool,” the redhead muttered.

“Guess they were bigger back then.” Alan laughed, came around the table, and ruffled Thony’s bronze curls, much to the recipient’s loudly voiced dismay.

Dji snagged another bottle and stretched his arm toward Thony, offering him the beer. “Sorry, Thony. I was just curious and wanted to steer the conversation away from sex. Seems Alan has a one track mind when it comes to that topic.”

“So true,” Kei threw in. His voice sounded slightly muffled, and when Dji turned to face his mate, he found him with a spoon in his mouth.

Dji gaped at him, open-mouthed. “What are you doing?”

“Eating,” his mate mumbled around the spoon, then slowly pulled it out of his mouth and released it with an audible pop. “Our picnic was hours ago.”

“But... you had a bunny. After our picnic,” he stated while his mate, totally unperturbed, spooned something sloshy and runny that Dji recognized as melting ice cream.

Kei glared at him, as if a full basket of picnic stuff and a whole bunny weren’t enough to last him for a few hours.

Thony’s voice sliced through their glaring match. “You killed a bunny? But they’re so cute.” The assembled guys groaned at the Persian cat’s admission.

Although Dji didn’t begrudge his mate the joy of hunting live game, he felt the same as Thony. From the bird shifter view. Maybe the man’s indignation when it came to killing bunnies stemmed from him being a house cat. Dji couldn’t for the life of him imagine a Persian cat hunting down a bunny. Maybe a little one.

Alan poked him once again as he said, “Of course he killed it. A bunny isn’t a lobster. You can’t cook it without killing it first.”

Thony flinched. “Yeah, with the exception that Kei probably didn’t cook the poor thing either,” he said, rubbing his side. “And stop poking me already! You’re not my type.”

“Aww, come on. We both know that’s not true. You like big cocks,” the panther said with a leer.

“Not when they come with an empty head,” Thony shot back, eliciting a gasp from his friend.

Kei dismissed Thony’s objection with nonchalance. “I’m a cat. I need meat. And you,” Kei said and, dismissing his friends’ banter, poked his finger into Dji’s chest. “Why are you harassing me about the eating thing? I thought we discussed the issue of me needing more calories.”

Seeing that Xander had placed his cue to the side and had stepped between Thony and Alan to end their fight, Dji concentrated on his mate. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I’m not trying to harass you, kitty. In fact, I think it’s cute as hell that you can eat for three and not gain weight. However, I made arrangements for a dinner.” When Kei didn’t say anything, just blinked his amber eyes with a look of wonder on his face, Dji added, “Just for the two of us.”

“Wow! Really?” Kei stepped closer, placed the ice cream on the table, much to the players’ annoyance, and rested his hands on Dji’s chest.

The soft rubbing that followed caused a shiver of anticipation to travel through his whole body. And with the way Kei’s scent permeated the air around them, his cock stiffened behind his fly and his balls pulled tight.

“That’s so romantic,” his mate whispered. He looked up at him with heavy-lidded eyes and traced his pink bottom lip with his tongue. Sexy fucker.

Dji wrapped his arms around the slender man’s waist, pulling him tight against his chest. “Thanks. So, enjoy your ice cream, but don’t eat so much that there’s no room left for dinner, okay?”

“Oh, there’s always enough room for dinner in my belly. Especially if it’s a dinner you arranged for us, my mate.”

With that, Kei rose on his tiptoes, which didn’t put him that much higher, and puckered his lips. Dji grinned at the cute gesture and was only too happy to oblige the wordless demand. In the background, he heard the faint noises of Alan and Thony starting to tussle with each other. Ignoring the ruckus, after all, it wasn’t the first time those two quarreled, he brushed his lips lightly over his mate’s.

“Birdy? Do me a favor?” said mate muttered into their kiss.

“Everything.”

“Fetch me a tea? Ice cream sometimes upsets my belly, and the tea helps to calm it down again.”

Dji arched one eyebrow. “Why do you eat ice cream if it’s not good for your stomach?”

With the way his eyes rounded and his jaw sagged open, the look his mate shot him was along the lines of *Are you fucking insane?* “Because it’s ice cream! What’s wrong with you?”

He quickly backpedaled. “Okay, okay. I’ll go and make you a tea. Got any preferences?”

Kei loosened his hold around Dji’s middle, turned, and picked up his bowl again. “Yeah. It’s in the cupboard with all the coffee and tea stuff. A paper bag,” he threw over his shoulder. “Chop-chop, Jeeves.”

Thoroughly dismissed by his tiny mate, Dji chuckled and shook his head as he made his way to the kitchen.

A quick search through the cupboards—he’d never made his own coffee or tea since moving in, thanks to Thony—finally revealed the supplies he was searching for.

Well, shit. The cupboard contained about twenty different boxes and bags with various blends of tea and coffee. A growl of annoyance worked its way up Dji’s throat at the amount of choices. If he picked the wrong bag, Kei wouldn’t be a happy furball and use Dji as a scratching post.

He snatched a brown paper bag, turned it, and grunted as he noticed the label reading “Kei.” Interesting. And very handy to note one’s name on their favorite tea.

Dji fiddled with the damn tea ball, musing if it was a shame that he as a gay man couldn’t handle it and snickering about himself. Eventually, he dumped the filled ball in a teapot. There was no question whatsoever that it was Kei’s pot. The cat had obviously molded it himself and chosen the colors, too. No man with a bit of self-respect would spend money on a delicate, white teapot with a pattern of tiny, pink flowers and delicate, green vines.

Dji filled the pot with steaming hot water and placed it, together with the matching saucer, cup, and jug of milk, on the tray. His kitty loved milk, no matter if pure, with tea, or with his cereals.

When he returned to the den, Alan sat slumped in an armchair, pressing a cloth to his split lip. He glared daggers at an equally beat-up looking Thony.

“Nice shiner,” Dji said as he placed the tray on a table, then motioned for the Persian cat’s black eye. “Seems I missed the action while playing the humble servant. What’s going on?”

Thony and Alan continued staring at each other, both men still panting for breath. From Dji’s point of view, Alan seemed furious for some unknown reason, whereas Thony looked... defeated? Heartbroken? Why? Was there something going on between the two shifters or did they have a history?

In the past, Dji wouldn’t have cared one way or the other. What did he care if others had problems with their love lives? Now he considered most pride members his friends, though. That made their problems important. Shit. How had that happened?

Suddenly, Alan jumped up. He pointed his finger at Thony, his mouth opening and closing again and again, but no words left his lips. Thony just stood and watched his friend with round, green eyes. Finally, Alan’s whole body shuddered, like he was trying to stop himself from shifting, then he turned and stormed out of the room.

“Well, shit,” Xander muttered under his breath. Dji couldn’t have phrased it better. “Come on, Thony. I’ll take you home. It’s long overdue we have a little talk.” The big alpha wrapped an arm around Thony’s shoulder and gently steered the man, whose eyes looked somewhat glassy and sightless, out of the den.

After the alpha was gone, the other guys soon said their good-byes, too. Dji shook hands, clapped backs, and engaged in manly half hugs.

When the last guy had left, Dji leaned his hip against the pool table and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on between Alan and Thony, love?” he asked around a sigh. “Sure, they always tease each other like kids, but it never came to blows before. You know them better than me.”

“Guess Alan fucked our cute Thony and now Thony wants more,” his mate slurred.

Irritated, Dji turned and took in the other man’s appearance. Kei reclined on a sofa, the teacup balanced on his belly. His face was flushed and his amber eyes... dilated? If Dji didn’t know better, he’d say his kitty was drunk or doped. Both possibilities were pretty much out of the question, unless his mate had snuck away and... Okay, so it was absolutely possible. But till now, his mate had never indulged in alcohol or shown an interest in psychedelic substances.



“Kei?” he asked warily.

“No, not me, silly. Thony wants Alan-the-ever-horny. Poor Thony. Alan doesn’t do relationships. Doesn’t even want to find his mate.” Kei started giggling about whatever.

As far as Dji was concerned, the topic wasn’t even remotely funny. The cat drained his cup and swiftly reached for the pot. His aim was slightly off though, because his hand didn’t come even close to the pot’s handle. Which, of course, send the man into another burst of giggles.

Something was seriously wrong. Dji stalked over and brought the pot out of Kei’s reach. That gained him a cute pout and a huff he ignored. Instead, he lifted the lid and sniffed the brew he thought was herbal tea. It smelled like herbal tea. Huh. Odd.

“Dji? I feel kinda hot, birdy. Why don’t you undress so I feel better, yes?” Kei’s eyebrows crunched and he looked thoughtful for a second, then waved his hand like shooing away an annoying fly. “Don’t interrupt me,” he said, obviously much more dazed than Dji had thought.

Dji’s eyes widened as his concern grew. Maybe his mate’s odd behavior was due to some kind of allergic reaction to the herbal tea? But the label on the bag had held Kei’s name, so...

He watched in shock while Kei tugged his shirt over his head and started unbuttoning his ass-hugging jeans. Uh-oh. Not good. Dji’s gaze traveled up from the bulge in Kei’s jeans, over his smooth chest, till their eyes met.

The amber of his kitty’s eyes was nearly gone, swallowed by the black pupils. Usually a sign of arousal, the glassy quality of his mate’s eyes concerned Dji even more along with the man’s sluggish movements as he sat up and struggled to his feet.

Kei’s next words pulled the rug out from under Dji’s feet. “Come here, birdy birdy, it’s time me and my cat claim your ass.”

*Oh shitshitshit.*

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## Chapter Twelve

### *How to take advantage of your mate doping you up*

Kei didn't know why his sexy mate acted so stubborn. All he wanted was for the tall man to undress, bend over the back of the sofa, and offer his ass for a thorough claiming. A pleasure Kei thought long overdue anyway. They'd been together for a month now!

Well, if his mate insisted on resisting Kei's obvious lure, Kei had to take matters into his own hands.

Everything was a bit fuzzy while he quickly stripped out of his clothes, but he didn't care. He felt so carefree he wanted to hug the world! Or at least his mate. Okay, so he wanted to do more than hug the guy, but they had to start somewhere, right?

Kei fought through an awkward hobble till he finally managed to get naked. Then, with a little much-appreciated help from the furniture, he made his way toward his mate. He gave him a slow once-over and a very seductive grin.

Given the lack of an appropriate response from Dji, namely falling onto his knees and begging for the honor to suck Kei's very pretty cock, he had the weird feeling something had to be wrong with his grin. Or maybe something was wrong with his mate.

A sexy flutter of his lashes, along with his hand cupping his tingling balls, finally had the desired effect, for Dji grabbed him, tossed him over his wide shoulder and bolted for the stairs.

"Yeah! Now we're talking," he said and smacked his man's flexing ass. Liking the man's answering grunt, Kei used the opportunity to grab his man's ass with both hands and knead the mounds. Gods, he wanted to fuck this ass.

Unfortunately, indulging in a victory wriggle while being carried like a sack of potatoes didn't have the best effect on his already sensitive balance.

"Put me down before I get sick," he warned. Puking down one's mate's back wasn't conducive to getting laid. Suddenly, Kei went flying as Dji dropped him on their bed. Then his mate fisted his hands on his hips and glowered down at him.

Writhing under his man's scrutiny and stroking his chest, Kei purred. "You're such a sexy fucker when you glower. Every time you look at me like

that, I want to drop on all fours and beg you to pound my ass.” Kei slapped his hand over his mouth and giggled at his own boldness. Damn, he’d never talked like that. “What’s going on?” he asked between giggles.

His hot, albeit overdressed, mate pushed a hand through his long hair and sighed deeply. Kei didn’t understand the worried expression on his handsome face. He felt good! Very, very good. No reason to be concerned.

“If I didn’t know better... I’d say you’re high as a kite,” his mate finally deadpanned. The ridiculous thought sent Kei into another fit of laughter and, admittedly, unsexy snorts. Wait. Was there a sexy way to snort? He’d never heard a sexy snort, now that he thought of it.

“Kei!”

His gaze snapped up at his frazzled looking mate. The big guy really should learn to chill. “I’m not high! C’mon. I don’t even drink. And if there was no weed in the nachos Alan brought, it’s absolutely impossible that I’m drugged.” Kei frowned and wrapped his hand around his hard shaft, giving himself a couple of tugs, as he asked, “Do you think Alan takes drugs? Maybe that’s the reason why he’s got those nasty mood swings.”

Dji let out a garbled sound, his gaze fixed on Kei’s groin. Kei grinned, continued to stroke himself, and cupped his balls with the other hand. Kei could almost taste the sweet taste of victory when his mate licked his lips.

Then the man muttered, “The mood swings have nothing to do with being a druggie but with being a cat. What else did you drink and eat? Maybe it’s an allergic reaction.”

Kei rolled his eyes like he simultaneously rolled his balls in his palm. God, that felt good. If only Dji would join the fun. “Stop talking and lose the clothes, birdy. I’m going to claim you. Don’t want to talk about food.”

When his mate showed no intention to do as he’d demanded, Kei growled. He reluctantly abandoned his aching privates, instead rolling off the bed and lunging at Dji. It was the combination of the moment of surprise, his shifter strength, and the desire to mark what he and his cat considered theirs that enabled Kei to overpower his taller, stronger mate.

Somehow, they landed on the bed in a tangle of flailing arms and legs. Kei’s instant tugging, as well as his claws, helped him undress his mate. Although, with the way the guy kept wriggling, cursing, and moaning, they’d both be covered in bruises come tomorrow.

Kei used all of his strength to roll on top and straddled his mate's thighs. His purring increased as he bent down and rubbed his face all over the man's sweaty chest and ripped stomach. Yeah, his mate smelled fucking great.

Dji, probably in a last attempt to rescue his virtue, had a white-knuckled grip on the waistband of his briefs.

Under normal circumstances, that would've stopped Kei. However, somewhere along the way his cheetah had taken over. His cat liked neither the fact that their mate was still running around unclaimed, nor that the guy fought against them. The big man's smell, arousal mixed with manly sweat, drove him out of his mind till all he could think about was fucking his mate's ass and leaving a claiming mark on his neck.

"Love," Dji said around a whine as Kei yanked down his last defense.

"Please! I need you," he shot back, looking down at the sexy man sprawled across his bed. Kei tried to convey the scorching hot need rushing through his body with his eyes. When his whole body began to shiver and goose bumps broke out all over his skin, he hoped Dji would get the hint. "Please," he pleaded. "Please, don't deny me."

Dji's breathing was fast and harsh. His chest heaved. With his hair in complete disarray, sweat glistening on his face and chiseled chest, and his eyes darkened by desire, he'd never looked sexier. After a deep sigh, all the fight seemed to leave his strong body. Dji reached under their pillows, rummaging till he came back with the lube clutched in his hand. "All right," he whispered. "Take what you need."

Kei groaned at the permission. His damn prick was so hard, chances were high he'd shoot before entering his mate's body for the very first time. Or die because of a serious case of blue balls.

He hurriedly snicked the lid, his hands shaking so much he doused Dji's belly and groin in clear slick. His mate hissed when the cold stuff hit his skin, but Kei didn't have time to be sorry. He scooped his fingers through the mess, then reached between his mate's legs in search of the tiny opening.

Till now, he'd always been happy with bottoming. Hell, he thought there was nothing better than feeling Dji's hard cock fucking his ass into submission. What he felt now was new and scary as hell. However, Kei didn't waste time playing around, and circled his finger around his mate's pucker.

“I’m yours, love. Take me.” When Dji looped his arms under his own knees and pulled them up against his chest, Kei only took a second to admire the view. Then he pushed his lubed finger deep into the man’s hole.

Silky heat and tightness surrounded him, nearly pushing him over the edge as he thought about what it’d be like to feel this pressure around his cock. Gods, he needed to know!

Dji grunted and said, “It’s all right. Push in a second one, then fuck me.”

Nodding, Kei did just that. Even through his haze, he remembered to wriggle his fingers till they encountered a bump. Dji’s holler, either of surprise or bliss, where Kei hoped for the latter, made him feel ten feet tall. The expression on his man’s face was a thing of beauty. He seemed caught between rapture and pain.

“Now! Do it,” his mate urged, tilting his hips just so to push more of Kei’s probing fingers into his rectum.

Kei grinned at the man’s eagerness. He quickly lubed his slender, leaking erection with the leftover lube on Dji’s six-pack. Hissing at the pleasure zinging through his stalk, he kept the touch as light as possible so as not to embarrass himself.

Kei fought a serious bout of nerves as he brought the head of his cock against his mate’s stretched, twitching hole. His body shook. Sweat ran down his overly sensitive, pebbled skin. *Shitshitshit*. What if he hurt his mate? What if he was a crappy top?

Then he felt strong, calloused hands smoothing down his chest and he heaved a deep breath.

“C’mon, love. You can do it. I’m ready,” Dji said, his voice strong and so very sure. Their gazes met, and when Kei saw the emotions swirling in his mate’s eyes, his heart skipped a beat. He leaned forward and, applying light pressure, popped the angry flushed head of his cock through the tight ring of muscle.

Kei gasped and squeezed his eyes shut at the exquisite pleasure. Dji only grunted underneath him. Hot damn! The heat, as well as the muscles rippling around his hard flesh, felt incredible. More. Kei needed more.

Bracing one hand on the comforter beside his mate’s chest, Kei sank into the best place on earth till his balls pressed flush against Dji’s crack.

“Oh shit,” he squeaked and sucked in huge gulps of air. His mate’s hands came to rest on his ass, cupping both globes and squeezing.

“Yes,” Dji hissed. “And now show me what you can do with that pretty dick of yours, my love. Fuck me.” Dji growled and raised his hips in a silent demand. Oh, well...

He slowly pulled out of heaven till only the head remained inside. When he looked down, he found Dji’s ring stretched around his invading cock. And if that wasn’t the hottest damn sight ever.

Concentrating back on his and his mate’s needs, Kei watched his man’s face as he snapped his hips and drove his cock back in. He must’ve done something right, because the bigger man yelled and threw back his head. Sure, Kei’s movements were a bit fumbling at first, but soon he thought he got a hang of things, smoothly moving in and out of his lover’s tight ass.

“Kei, so good,” his mate said and panted.

Yeah, he could only agree. The sensations spreading from his groin through his whole body turned him into a shaking, trembling mess. The pleasure was way too overwhelming to care though.

He loved Dji’s muscles gripping him tight, massaging his prick. He loved the slippery glide of their bodies against each other. He loved their combined smells and the noises. The rustling of sheets, the *slap slap* of their skin, and harsh breathing. And he loved feeling such a deep connection with the man he... loved. *Shit*.

It was the last coherent thought before the tingling at the base of his spine made it impossible to think.

“Yes! Oh fuck!” Dji shouted. One of the man’s hands left Kei’s hammering ass only to sneak between their bodies and wrap around his very hard, very leaking cock.

Kei looked down when his mate gave himself two uncoordinated strokes before white, ropy strings of cum splattered all over the man’s washboard abs and chest. Hot as fuck and a striking contrast to his dark skin.

That instant, Dji’s channel clamped tight around his prick and Kei lost it. He yelled in bliss, probably audible for the whole pride, as he shot his seed deep inside his mate’s ass.

At the same moment, he fell forward, clamped his teeth around the spot where Dji’s neck met his shoulder, and bit. Hard. Breaking skin, he greedily

sucked at the bleeding wound. Dji groaned and jerked underneath him, hopefully in pleasure and not pain.

As soon as his mate's hot life essence flooded his mouth and completed their bond, Kei felt a deep sense of calm and contentment wash over him. It felt like being wrapped in the softest, warmest blanket ever, while the most important person ever cuddled you close. Total perfection, that fated mates stuff.

Kei purred happily and rubbed his scent all over his mate's sweaty body. Or at least all over the parts he could reach with his limited range. Then he collapsed on top of the big shifter.

The minutes passed and Kei remained snuggled to his mate. Both of them were panting for breath. Dji had slung an arm around Kei's back and held him close. Not that he needed the support. His mate's cum stuck them together like glue, preventing him from slipping off his man.

"Holy shit." Dji murmured words caused Kei to snort.

He kissed the nipple closest to him, then blew across the nub before he said, "Yeah. Couldn't have phrased it any better. What the hell happened?"

Dji shuddered underneath him and chuckled. "Dunno. Seems the tea you drank to calm down your stomach failed to work on the rest of your body."

"Ya think? Epic fail, I'd say." He snickered while brushing his hand slowly down Dji's side. His lover's skin just felt too good not to touch whenever he was close. With Kei's prick still lodged in his man's ass, they couldn't be any closer. He'd not quite softened.

"You need a new bag, by the way."

"Huh?"

"Tea," Dji clarified. "It's nearly empty."

Kei frowned, shaking his head. "Nah, you're just exhausted. The bag is brand new." He considered changing the topic because, really, talking about tea was as romantic as talking about the weather. He'd rather tell his birdy that he'd fallen in love with him.

However, his mate's next words pushed all thoughts of declarations of undying love away. "No," Dji said, dragging out the word. "I mean the stuff in the brown paper bag, with your name on it."

Kei reared up, their upper bodies separating with the nasty sound of cum-glued skin getting tugged apart. He ignored Dji's wince and asked, "What? That's what you used to make that pot of tea?"

"Well, yes. Why?" Dji grunted when Kei's next move caused his cock to slip from the man's ass. He'd apologize later, when he wasn't so mad and didn't battle the urge to strangle his dumb mate.

"Are you fucking insane? That's not my tea. It's my catnip, you moron!" Kei yelled and sat up, resting his ass on his folded legs.

Dji looked utterly puzzled. "Catnip? Why would you have a bag of—Oh, shit!"

"Yeah, exactly."

"Oh shit!"

Kei whacked his mate's stomach with the back of his hand. "Would you stop repeating the obvious, please?"

"Does that mean I drugged you?" Dji asked as he sat up and rested his back against the headboard. "I didn't mean to, honestly." When Kei snorted, his mate waved his hands. "Look, the bag said 'Kei.' Not 'Brew me to turn your mate into a purring sex maniac.'" Then he grabbed his shirt that, miraculously, had ended slung around the nightstand lamp. He used it to dab at the drying cum on his stomach.

Kei licked his lips at the sexy sight. "I'll make sure to change the label then. Afterward," he muttered, not really interested in discussing the catnip incident right now. With incredible sex being the result, Kei wouldn't hold it against his mate that he'd accidentally drugged him.

Dji's gaze snapped up in mid dab and he eyed him warily. "After what?"

"Do you think I'm through with you? After only one round?" Kei gave a rumbly purr as he curled his hand around his mate's semi-erect cock.

Yeah, he wanted more of that. In his mouth. In his ass. Squished between their bodies when Kei fucked his man again.

Dji's answering groan, along with the way he pushed up his hips and drove his prick through Kei's fist, couldn't be anything else but approval. "Good birdy," Kei crooned, then bent over and proceeded to show his mate the benefits of a raspy cat tongue.



## Chapter Thirteen

### *How to hide a big secret from your mate*

Dji pressed his hand over his mouth as he rushed out of bed and ran for the bathroom. He barely managed to bend over the bowl before he lost his breakfast. The pain shooting through his knees when they hit the tiled floor didn't even register. Not with the way he spat and coughed till there was nothing left but a cramping stomach and the sour taste in his mouth.

*Shitshitshitshitshit.*

After cleaning himself with some toilet paper, he rested both hands over his belly.

If he hadn't been an African with a very dark complexion, he would've gone as pale as a ghost at what he felt. He'd feared it ever since the damn catnip incident. Had hoped and even prayed that the night wouldn't have any repercussions.

No such luck, though. Kei and he had been blessed, without questioning how they'd feel about it. Okay, so he knew how *he* felt about it. Quite frankly? Dji was so close to totally freaking out. But what about his mate?

Dji quickly lurched forward as another wave of sickness hit him full force, causing him to hurl some more bile. Gah. He was so not looking forward to tomorrow morning. Or the day after tomorrow. Or the next few weeks.

Fairly sure that there was nothing left in his stomach, Dji spat one last time and flopped down on his ass. Although it made him shiver, the chill he felt when he leaned his back against the cold wall also served to clear his head.

*Shitastic.* How could he have been so reckless? The mess he found himself in now was solely his own damn fault. He should've talked with Kei right after he'd moved in. But no, he'd pushed it away, not keen on sharing just one more tidbit about himself that would set him apart from the *normal* shifters.

Closing his eyes, Dji pushed a hand under his shirt and rubbed his right hand over his belly. Back and forth, up and down went his hand, mapping the little bump that was already noticeable.

In the following weeks, the bump would grow till Dji looked like he'd swallowed a dumpling. Or, more precisely, like he'd swallowed a still unknown

number of ostrich eggs. It'd happen quickly, for an ostrich's gestation period was very short. Merely eight weeks.

*Shit.*

Dji wasn't ready to become a father. Okay, probably nobody could be called truly ready to become a father, but still. A six-foot-five man just shouldn't grow a baby bump. That wasn't right. Plus, he had a job. In construction, dammit! What should he tell his boss?

And the prospect of giving birth to several freaking big eggs? Yay. So a reason to celebrate and throw a baby shower along with freaking the fuck out.

Kei would flip. Maybe. Because of Dji's panic concerning that particular topic, they'd never talked about kids. Therefore, Dji had no idea whatsoever if Kei wanted kids or thought they were tiny embodiments of the devil. Hell, on his best days, Kei didn't act much better than a kid himself. What a mess.

He had to talk with his mate, tell him the truth and hope their love was strong enough to... *Wait! What? Love?*

Dji sighed deeply and repeatedly banged his head against the wall. Yes, he loved his little kitty-cat. Although Kei was the most exhausting, twirly, food-demolishing, and capricious man he'd ever met, Dji couldn't deny that he adored him. Despite all his quirks and weird antics. Or because of them?

He didn't care that his mate couldn't for the life of him keep their room tidy. Once he'd come home after a short day at work only to find their previously clean room completely vandalized. At his question what the fuck Kei had done, his cute mate had only blinked his huge eyes, shrugged, and then said, "The dog did it." He hadn't been able to stay mad after that.

Hell, Dji didn't care about his mate's eating habits or the fact that he left clay stains wherever he went either.

What if a pregnant mate was a deal breaker for Kei? A *male* pregnant mate, to top it off. Dji had grown up with the knowledge that male ostriches could become pregnant when mated to another male, and even he was scared shitless.

After all the running, bitching, shouting, and fighting, he couldn't bear the thought of losing his cat. Only because said cat had knocked him up in a slightly drugged state. Damn catnip anyway. Why had he mixed up the bags? Why hadn't he been able to say fucking "no" to his horny-like-a-gang-of-sailors mate?

In an unconscious, protective move, he curled his arms around the lump growing inside him. Maybe an honest talk with Xander was in order. The alpha probably could offer some tips as to how to broach the topic with Kei. After all, the white lion had known Kei for a long time.

He needed someone he could confide in and Xander was just the man. Usually, that someone should've been his mate. For as long as he could hide the bump though, he had a reprieve he'd use shamelessly.

At least till he had his shit together and figured out a way to say, "Congrats, we're going to become responsible for some brats for the next twenty-something years!" without causing his mate a heart attack. Or getting one himself.

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One week of losing his breakfast and avoiding his mate's advances as best as he could later, he still hadn't had the guts to talk with either Xander or Kei.

Whenever his mate tried to touch him erotically, he panicked and found excuses why they couldn't engage in some carnal action. His mate had been right all along, he was a chicken. Now he was a sexually starved chicken, too.

However, today would be the day. Thony, who looked more heartbroken with every day that passed, had taken Kei to town. Kei needed some supplies for his atelier and Thony had drawn the short straw in the weekly grocery store game.

Poor guy. Lucky Dji. He'd returned earlier from work, so he'd have roughly an hour to talk with his alpha.

He found Xander lounging on the porch swing, soaking up the early afternoon sun like the big, lazy lion that he was. A cough and a clearing of his throat caused one of Xan's eyelids to peel back. One icy-blue eye assessed him for a few seconds before the big man sat up and stretched his arms over his head.

Xander groaned as his tendons popped audibly, then he patted the place beside him on the swing in a silent invitation. A man of many words the alpha wasn't.

Dji parked his ass on the cushion and, automatically, placed one hand on his belly. He fought hard against the move day in and day out. Two times out of three, he lost the battle. It was a wonder nobody had called him on the odd

gesture. Not that he expected people to ask him if he had a bun in the oven, but he'd thought people would ask if he had an upset stomach or something like that. After all, those cats were known for poking their furry noses in other peoples' business.

Two days ago, he'd bought some shirts a size bigger than usual. Just more proof how Dji's paranoia grew the more he looked at his naked body, always wondering if he was showing already.

It was the fourth week of eight. With his fit body and formerly ripped stomach, he now looked like he'd joined Kei in his campaign to demolish as much food as possible in a short time. Without having his mate's fast metabolism though. Shirtless, his baby bump resembled a pouch.

"So," Xander's voice pulled him out of his musings. "I wondered when you'd come and talk to me."

Dji snapped his head around to face the big lion. Sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought Xan could already know what he wanted to talk about. Which was dumb, considering that he *wanted* to talk. Gah. Damn hormones.

A soft, understanding smile curved the alpha's lips. In Dji's opinion, understanding smiles were worse than the occasional slap upside the head he'd gotten from his former alpha and father. At least he'd known what he'd been up against. Now? Not so much.

Xander patted his knee and, looking out over the yard, said, "Djimón, I can smell the change in your scent. To be honest, I'm surprised nobody else noticed it till now. Not even Kei. On the other hand, it may have something to do with stereotyping."

"Huh?"

Shrugging, the other man said, "Well, if you were a woman and your scent had changed, everybody would've known what it meant and congratulated you. But given that you're a man... they just don't expect it."

"Yeah. Didn't expect it either," he muttered, then sighed deeply. "No, that's not quite right. I expected it, but *hoped* I'd be wrong."

"Don't like kids?" That had Dji closing his eyes and resting his head back against the swing. Like they had a mind on their own, his hands moved to his belly. "Don't tell me you already feel it kicking," Xander said. "I know several bird shifters have male pregnancy, but that's as far as my knowledge goes."

Dji faced the alpha and shook his head. “I won’t feel any kicking, ever, because I’ll give birth to eggs. One to four is a common number.” He saw the alpha’s eyes bulging at that comment and snickered, although it really wasn’t funny for the guy who had to carry them around and lay them eventually. “The eggs then need to be kept warm and safe for another two months before the fledglings will hatch in their ostrich form.”

That got a surprised gasp from Xander and a raised eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. They’ll shift for the first time two days later and then stay in their human form till they’re about six.”

Dji thought it weird, but that was the way it worked. Female ostriches gave birth to normal babies. Not that he’d prefer that. He shuddered at the mental picture.

“And how does it work? I mean, how will you lay those eggs? Are they big?” Xan asked, curiosity swinging in his voice. Dji felt a twinge of guilt that it was Xander, and not Kei, he told all those things. It wasn’t right, but he answered anyway.

“An opening will form at my lower belly,” he said and shot Xander a glare. “So don’t even think about me squeezing those eggs though my ass! They’re a bit smaller than the eggs of our animal relatives, thank God for small favors. I bet giving birth to them will fucking hurt, though,” Dji grumbled.

Xander nudged him with his shoulder. “Why haven’t you told him yet?”

Well. That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it? Dji shrugged and crossed his arms in front of his chest. Unfortunately, Xan wasn’t easily fooled and saw it as the defiant gesture it was.

“Djimon,” the alpha scolded gently. “Kei loves you, no matter what. Will it hit him by surprise? Yes. Will he freak out at the prospect of having children so soon? Hell, yeah, most definitely. But he won’t ditch you and the... chicklets,” Xander added with a snicker. Dji just blinked at his friend. His heart pounded in his chest at Xan’s words and he felt a bit light-headed.

“What?” he croaked.

Xander eyed him, bewildered, then his frown smoothed out into a soft smile once again. “It’s so obvious from the way he looks at you, Djimon.”

“Huh?” Damn, but was he an eloquent devil today.

“He looks at you with so much love and adoration that it makes all the unmated pride members jealous as hell. Not because they want Kei,” Xander hurriedly added at Dji’s scowl. “They want what the two of you have. This deep love and devotion for each other. It’s a thing of beauty, Dji. And watching my boy so happy and in love is the best thing I’ve seen in years. Don’t tell me you didn’t know Kei loves you.”

“I…” Dji snapped his mouth shut.

Kei had never said the three magical words. But neither had he. Maybe herein lay the secret to his reluctance to share the good news. Was he unsure of Kei’s love? Xander’s words were true. Dji didn’t have any reason to question his mate’s love. Even though Kei hadn’t told him with words, the cheetah’s actions spoke for themselves.

“Do you love him?” Xander interrupted his thoughts.

Dji answered without missing a beat. “Yes. Wholeheartedly. I loved him from the moment he first called me birdy.” He grinned at the memory.

Xander sighed deeply. “Good. You need to know… a lot of guys here in the pride gave Kei shit about waiting for his mate. All of us want to find our special someone, but most don’t pass on having a good time with a willing someone. At least till we find our mates.”

“Not Kei.”

The alpha nodded. “Exactly. Have you been in the basement studio? Checked out his recent work?”

Confused, Dji frowned and looked at the other male. “No. I tried a few times but Kei doesn’t like me coming down there. He throws a fit as soon as I pass the first step. What does his work have to do with our feelings for each other?”

“I guess his feelings are linked to his artists’ block.”

“What?”

Xander smirked and said, “Since he met you, all of Kei’s figures look alike.”

“Like what? And why would Kei hide them from me?”

“Because each and every one shows you. In human and ostrich form,” Xander said, shocking the hell out of Dji.

He and his animal were their mate's favorite models? Wow. Why hadn't Kei said anything? Before he came up with a possible explanation, Xan continued.

"They're stunning, by the way. Maybe you should use your alone time to sneak downstairs and check them out. It could be very enlightening. Much more so than sitting here and talking with your alpha about something that affects you and your mate."

Dji sat speechless for a moment. "Maybe you're right," he murmured eventually. That got him an exaggerated eye roll and a click of Xan's tongue, two things he never would've expected from the tall man.

"I won't pressure you, Djimon. However, you really need to tell him, before your body takes the decision out of your hands. One thing I know for sure. Kei will be pissed as hell if he finds out by mistake. That means, looking at your growing belly one morning and putting two and two together."

"Yeah, I know. He's got quite a temper."

The alpha grinned and bumped their shoulders together. "It's a cat thing."

"It's a Kei thing," he shot back and they both snickered. "Guess I need to quit my job. Soon. In my current condition, heavy lifting is not good for the fledglings' health. This week, I was responsible for wiring. However, next week we'll do some drywalling. I can't do that anymore."

Xander nodded and patted his knee. "Don't sweat it. The pride takes care of their own. What's more, your mate earns enough money to support the two of you."

"I know," Dji said. "Shocked the hell outta me when he told me how much he makes with his figures." They laughed again, but soon the alpha's mirth faltered and he pinned Dji with a calm stare.

"One more piece of advice. It's your decision when you tell Kei about the pregnancy. You should keep in mind that he's my son, though. You better not hurt my boy, Djimon."

Dji swallowed, trying to dislodge the sudden lump in his throat. In the blink of an eye, Xander had changed from the understanding friend to Kei's very protective, badass foster father. A foster father no son-in-law should piss off. Not if he was fond of his balls staying attached to his body.

“Deal,” he said. At the same time, he wondered how much time Xander and his changing body would give him. “Just one more thing, Xander.” He waited till he had the Alpha’s attention, then said, “Don’t call my kids chicklets.”

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The next evening, Dji’s mind still reeled from his talk with Xander and what he’d found when he’d snuck down into the basement to check out his mate’s art. True to the alpha’s words, he’d found dozens of figures embodying him and his ostrich.

When he’d seen all those beautifully modeled ostriches and men, the thought of how many hours and how much love Kei must’ve poured in creating them had choked him right up.

Dji had sat on his mate’s chair and brushed away tears of emotion while taking in all those silent declarations of love. He especially adored the figures of Kei and him together, either in human or their shifted forms. Some figures showing their human bodies were so erotic Dji had felt his face grow hot as he’d looked at them.

Now he lay in bed, feigning sleep, and listened to his mate singing off-key under the shower. The kitty was so cute.

When he’d heard Kei’s feet on the stairs, he’d quickly scrambled under the covers. He felt so bad for not reacting at all when his sweet mate had crawled up behind him, kissed his cheeks, and told him he was sorry for staying in his studio for so long. His mate’s sad little sigh when he’d thought Dji was already asleep had almost caused him to turn and claim the cute guy’s lips. Almost.

Instead, he’d kept quiet, allowing his mate to undress and shower all by himself. Dumb, dumb, dumb. Dji could be in the shower with Kei right now and fuck him into the tiles. But no, he had to act like an ass just to hide his pouch.

The bathroom door opened with a squeak. Tomorrow he’d oil the damn thing. Just one more item on his damn long to do list.

*Why was it that every time you needed to do something very important, you did everything but said important thing? The fridge is empty, and suddenly you notice the dirty windows. Your man wants you to mow the lawn, and just as soon you remember that you’d wanted to wash your car for weeks. You need to tell your mate that he knocked you up, and all you can think of is oiling all the squeaking doors.*



Dji felt the mattress dip when his light mate climbed into bed behind him. Just as soon, Kei snuggled close against his back and mewled.

“Promised I’d be back in a jiffy,” Kei whispered. When his mate wrapped one arm around Dji’s middle, he crossed his fingers that Kei’s slender hands would remain on his chest and upper stomach.

He sighed and gave in, simply not able to ignore his man any longer. “Hi, babe. Sorry you had to shower alone.” Dji could almost feel the fire of hell licking at his toes. So, he hadn’t outright lied, still...

“It’s all right,” Kei interrupted his inner scolding. “You’ve been tired a lot lately. Are you okay? Healthwise, I mean.”

“Uh...” *Oh God, please, shoot me now.*

“I worry about you,” Kei said. “Do you have problems at work?”

“No, work is all right.”

“But as soon as you come home you eat and then fall asleep. I miss you, Dji. I don’t expect you to woo me for the rest of our lives. However, it’d be nice if we could spend some alone time with each other. When you first moved in, you planned all those wonderful activities for us. Or surprised me with a midnight quickie,” his mate added with a snicker.

Oh God. Guilt swamped him till he felt like his heart was being squeezed in a vise. He grabbed his mate’s wandering hands, lifted them to his lips and kissed them. “I’m sorry, kitty. You’re right. Would you like a cuddle before sleep?” He winced when Kei squealed into his ear.

“Yes, please!”

Dji couldn’t deny his mate, so he turned and found Kei grinning at him like he’d just gotten the best present ever. Pushing his fears away for a second, Dji smiled and wrapped his arms around the smaller man. “Hi,” he whispered.

“Hi yourself,” Kei replied, then pressed a kiss to his chin. “Thank you for the cuddle. It’s a start, at least.” Then his mate scooted closer and started patting Dji’s tense back.

Dji frowned at his mate’s odd comment. A start to what? Sex? A conversation about their increasingly complicated relationship? He should simply come clean and see what would happen. But dropping a bombshell like male pregnancy was bound to cause a longer argument. Every fool knew that arguing with your partner before going to sleep was never a wise decision.

Aww, shit. Who was he trying to kid? Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Dji looked down at the cuddly man in his arms and opened his mouth.

And found his little mate fast asleep. Kei puffed deep breaths through his pink, plush lips. Well, shit. He'd just gotten another reprieve. This time, however, he wasn't quite sure if he should feel happy about it.

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## Chapter Fourteen

### *How to react when shit hits the fan*

Kei felt like he was going out of his mind. Something was seriously wrong with his mate.

It had started with small things, like the fact that Dji suddenly ate his own body weight each day. Or that he picked the weirdest things to fill his belly. Right now, watermelons were on top of the list.

That alone wouldn't have worried Kei. But add in that his mate had quit his job without giving him a reason a few days ago, and Kei didn't know which way was up anymore.

Plus, Dji hadn't fucked him in weeks. Okay, so he'd sucked and jerked Kei off. But Dji had never taken off his clothes during their encounters. They didn't even shower together anymore. The forced celibacy started to piss him off. What's more, his mate's reluctance to have sex made him suspicious. And Kei hated feeling suspicious.

It wasn't like Kei hadn't tried to seduce or even trick his man. Far from it. Neither parading around in nothing but his skimpy boxers nor sunbathing in the nude had had the desired effect though. Unless one considered a fuming mate who yelled, "Get dressed right the fuck now!" a victory. Which Kei didn't.

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One and a half weeks after Dji had quit his job, his behavior had morphed from odd to erratic and, finally, downright creepy. Okay, so maybe creepy was a harsh word, but what else should Kei think?

He'd come upstairs in the knowledge of having at least an hour for himself, and to clean their room, before his mate returned from a shopping trip. Instead, he found his mate in their bedroom.

The tall man was busy arranging blankets and pillows into a pile on the floor that assembled some kind of nest. First, Kei thought this was his mate's attempt to create a romantic ambience for a cuddly evening. But given Dji's shocked expression upon seeing him standing in the doorway, he wasn't quite so sure.

"What the heck is going on here?" he demanded to know. Dji stiffened and he gazed, somewhat dazed, at the mess he'd created. "We have an absolutely

comfy bed over there. Also, you're constantly giving me shit when I mess up the room after you cleaned up. So, please, explain to me why you felt the need to throw all the pillows and stuff on the floor and create a... a... nest!" Kei said forcefully and waved his hands.

Dji's eyes popped wide. Aside from that, he didn't offer any explanations. Kei was at a loss what was going on inside his mate's head. That the guy wasn't talkative on his best days put an additional strain on their conversations. He'd tried to be patient till now. However, enough was enough.

Living all of his life as a nomad, moving from place to place, surely hadn't made it easy for Dji to acclimate to a strange place and new people. But that didn't explain why he'd pulled away from Kei during the last weeks. Or why he felt the need to create a makeshift bed.

Suddenly, a dangerous thought popped up in his head. The ugly green monster reared its head, dragging all of Kei's insecurities to the surface.

"Do you have another lover, a second mate? Is that the reason why you don't want to sleep with me? Why you did... this?" he asked, motioning to the inviting looking pile. "Are you trying to keep his scent out of our bed by fucking him on the floor?"

Well, now that he'd said it, the whole scenario didn't make any sense. Every shifter would be able to smell if another person had been in their room. So Dji moving from the bed to the floor with his lover wouldn't conceal anything. That didn't put his concerns to rest though.

Dji flung the pillow he'd held to his chest onto the floor. "Are you insane? I told you that I have only one mate. And I'd never cheat on you, but thank you very much for your trust!" he snapped.

His mate, obviously, wasn't amused about Kei's accusations. Several emotions played over his face, hurt and confusion only a few of them.

Kei felt like such a jerk for eliciting those feelings in the first place. He growled in irritation. "I've noticed you talking with Xander a lot lately."

The look Dji shot him gave way of the bigger man's thoughts. That Kei was completely bonkers to think such a thing.

"So, I'm having an affair with your alpha just because we talked? I've got news for you, kitty, I talk to a lot of people because you encouraged me to do it! You were the one who accused me of acting antisocial shortly after I moved in, so I did my best to fit in. And now you're trying to use it against me? Fuck you!" Dji yelled, turned on his heel and rushed out the door.

Kei stared after his retreating mate, dumbfounded at the sudden dismissal, before anger kicked in. Anger at himself, mostly. Fearing that he was about to lose his mate if he didn't get a move on, he stormed after him and rushed down the stairs.

“Don't you dare run from me again, Djimon Akintola. We're not through with this conversation!” Kei followed Dji into the kitchen where he came to a halting stop.

*Craptastic.* Xander, Viggo, and Alan were seated around the table, busy with dinner. Thony had remained absent since his fight with Alan. Viggo, Thony's brother, had taken over coming to talk with Alan whenever possible. Anyway, all of them gaped at Kei and his mate with different expressions on their faces.

Whereas Xan seemed concerned and frowned his blond brows, Viggo looked simply confused. Alan, on the other hand, smirked, his fork full of steak and mashed potatoes lifted halfway to his mouth. Kei wasn't in the mood to hear snarky comments from the annoying cat, so he turned his back to the table and faced his shaking, agitated mate.

“Kei, you're seeing things,” Dji pleaded with him and sighed heavily.

“Would one of you please tell me what the hell is going on here?” Xander demanded to know. With a mere gesture of his hand, he cut off any possible comments from the other men at the table.

Dji sat down on a chair. Not with the typical heavy slump Kei was accustomed to, but carefully. Deliberately. Then he looked up and pinned Kei with his intense gaze.

“My mate thinks I'm having an affair,” he whispered. Oh God, Kei felt his heart splinter at the hurt swinging in his mate's voice. He looked so damn heartbroken and... dejected. There was a loud snort behind him, probably Alan's valuable contribution to the topic.

“Kei,” Xander said, his tone dripping with parental disappointment. Why the hell had he come down again?

Feeling cornered, Kei paced the floor between the table and fridge and raked his fingers through his hair. “What am I supposed to think, Dji?” he asked and shot his mate an imploring look. Begging him with his eyes to both understand his worries and lay them to rest.

When Dji looked toward Xander instead of talking to him, Kei felt so hurt he blurted out what was on his mind without thinking twice.

“You’ve been acting weird for a while now. It started with refusing to let me see you naked. Then you wouldn’t sleep with me anymore. With every day that passed, you pulled away from me a bit more! Ever since...” He looked up in shock as realization hit him. “Ever since the catnip incident! Oh my God...”

When his mate swallowed visibly and tensed even more, Kei thought his biggest fear confirmed.

“Did I... did I hurt you? Is that the reason why you shut me out?” he whispered. The anguish he felt at the mere thought of, even accidentally, hurting his mate, during sex or otherwise, felt like a fist closing around his heart.

“Wait? Does that mean Dji let our little Kei fuck him? Nice, man,” Alan hooted.

Xander slapped him upside the head and snapped, “Shut up.” Alan rubbed the back of his head, looking properly chastised.

The alpha shoved his chair back and stood. He came over and placed a comforting hand on Dji’s shoulder. “Djimon, dammit! You need to tell him what’s going on before you lose him. We discussed this. Don’t you see how miserable Kei feels? Just tell him and everything will turn out okay.”

“Tell me what?” Kei whispered. This secretiveness was driving him crazy and his feelings were all over the place. He fought hard against the urge to shove Xander away from his mate, or shake Dji till he spilled the beans.

Eventually, Dji straightened his shoulders and met his gaze. “You didn’t hurt me. But... what I need to tell you has something to do with that particular night.” The tall man fidgeted some more and his nervousness became clear when he curled his fingers into the fabric of his loose plaid shirt. “I... I’m expecting.”

“Expecting what?” Kei frowned, totally confused at the odd phrasing. When he looked from one person to the other, he noticed his friends’ wide-eyed, disbelieving stares.

Then Alan’s whispered words sliced through the tense silence. “Holy shit! You knocked the birdy up?”

The panther’s words felt like a punch to his gut. “Excuse me?” Kei squeaked. “Knocked up? As in...” When he noticed Dji looking at him with

dread, the truth Dji had hidden from him all those weeks hit him like a ton of bricks. “You’re... you’re...”

“The word you’re searching for is pregnant, Kei,” Viggo piped up.

Oh crap. Suddenly Kei felt very light-headed. He wasn’t going to faint, was he? Men didn’t faint. Not even flamboyant, swishy, gay men like him. This had to be a very bad joke. Yeah. That must be it.

Kei took the three steps separating him from his mate and knelt down in front of him. He placed his hands on his mate’s thighs. Then he gently rubbed the man’s strong thighs—if to soothe himself or his mate he didn’t know.

“Djimon?” he asked and cleared his throat when the single word was nothing more than a squeak. “You’re not really... are you? I mean, you’re a guy!” Kei had never heard of a pregnant man. Not outside of a romance novel, that was.

Dji took a deep breath, then snatched one of Kei’s hands, and placed it on his lower belly. His distended belly that Kei had thought was the result of his mate’s constant eating.

Kei felt his face lose all its color when he realized what he felt under his hand. He blinked in wonder. Then he blinked some more, because speech had deserted him.

“I’m sorry, love,” his mate whispered. “I should have told you immediately. But I was...”

Kei looked up when his mate’s words faltered. He saw and heard the bigger man swallowing. “I was afraid you’d be disgusted. That you’d toss me out or something. Ostriches have a very short gestation period. We show very quickly after impregnation. That’s the reason why—”

“Why you hid from me,” Kei interrupted. He fixed his gaze on his hand and gently rubbed over the... well... the baby bump. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh.”

When he looked up, he found Dji’s eyes swimming and knew his mate had gotten him wrong. “No! No, that’s not what I meant. Damn.”

Reaching up, he cupped his lover’s face in his hands and brought their foreheads together. He breathed in the man’s scent, so familiar and yet so new now that he knew what to search for.

Dji's scent *had* changed. But Kei had chalked it up to their mating. He'd never thought of a pregnancy as the possible reason for the subtle shift.

He hadn't lied earlier. He really didn't know what to say to his mate's revelation. Quite frankly, he'd known he was gay since the age of fifteen. So he'd never entertained the thought of having the "Darling, we're going to be parents" discussion. It scared him shitless. However, he didn't want to hurt his mate.

Kei raked his hands through the messy, black-and-white curls he loved so much, and brushed their lips together in a gentle, sweet caress. "I love you," he murmured. "I won't lie and pretend that I'm not a bit freaked out by the fact that you'll... give birth to a baby—"

"Egg."

"Excuse me?" Kei's brows tried to climb into his hairline.

Dji smiled and a fond, soft expression flickered across his face. "I'll give birth to an egg. Several eggs, more precisely. Two or three I'd reckon from the size of the bump. After they're laid, we need to keep them warm and secure for about two more months till they hatch. Hence the nest on the floor. It's a hormonal thing and happened completely unconsciously, Kei. I saw the pillows and... just started."

Kei's mind reeled from the sudden blast of information. The words "several" and "eggs" swam in the soup that once had been his brain.

"Kei? Love, you're pale," he heard Dji's distant voice like through a thick fog. It was the last thing he heard before his mind shut down and he shifted.

In seconds, his cheetah crouched on the floor, snarling and hissing at the surprised shouts of his friends. When he spun around, he found his shocked mate staring at him with wide eyes. Kei's gaze dropped to Dji's belly, and immediately the tall man curled his arms around their... cubs? Chicklets? Was that even the right term for baby ostriches?

The gesture hurt. Rationally, Kei understood why his mate felt the need to protect their little ones. That knowledge didn't diminish his cat's pissy mood though. Kei had never felt so at odds with his animal. Whereas his animal wanted to curl around Dji and their chicklets and snarl at everyone who came too close, his human half longed to run. And Kei gave in to the urge.

He simply needed some time to process the news of Dji's unexpected pregnancy, as well as Dji and him becoming parents to two or three kids.



As far as decisions went, running wasn't the wisest one. It was the same knee jerk reaction he'd criticized when his mate had run from him the first day. However, as soon as he'd left the house, he pushed his body into a steady run. Against his cat's instincts, but in the knowledge that exhausting his body would allow him to think more clearly.

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An hour later, Kei knew he'd fucked up. The realization had hit him after a short albeit fast run when he'd rested in the shades of some trees.

Instead of talking with his mate, telling him how happy he was about their cubs... chicks, he'd left. A little time alone to get his bearings had sounded so good when he'd taken off. In hindsight, he could admit it had been a dumb decision.

Dji had kept his pregnancy a secret because he'd been afraid of Kei's reaction. Turned out his mate was a very wise man, for his reaction had been a poor one. He wasn't mad at Dji for not telling him sooner. Instead, his mate's decision went a long way toward unveiling the major problem in their relationship. Communication.

Now Kei was on his way back to the house and mused about the best way to apologize. He saw a whole lot of groveling in his future, as well as hours of talking. And blow jobs. Lots of blow jobs. After all, man couldn't live on talking alone.

First and foremost, he'd tell his Dji how much he was looking forward to their kids. Kids. Wow. In the plural.

Kei knew nearly nothing about being a parent. He'd once babysat for a pride couple. The evening had ended with Kei bound to a chair, and the three little devils running wild and going all Picasso on their parents' wallpapers. Needless to say that he'd never been hired again.

He wasn't the best role model and, most of the time, didn't feel like a responsible adult. Hell, he sometimes forgot to eat and shower when he was busy in his basement studio.

Kei wasn't alone in this though. He had a mate. A very capable mate. Plus lots of friends who'd help them, along with a foster grandfather for their little ones.

Kei would forever be grateful that Xander had helped his mate in word and deed when Dji hadn't been able to open up to Kei. The alpha had not only

welcomed Dji into their pride, but their little family as well. So much consideration for his mate warmed Kei to the core and let him realize something he'd always felt, but never phrased into words.

Xander wasn't just his foster father. He was Kei's dad. Had been his dad since Kei had come to live with him all those years ago. Why had he never told him?

Kei would correct that mistake as soon as possible. However, Dji came first. He didn't even shift back before he entered the house, just used his paw to nudge the switch for the electronic door opener Xander had installed. Then he bounded up the stairs to their bedroom.

Using his head to nudge the door open, Kei peaked his head into the room in search for his mate. A moot point because he could smell that Dji was here. However, after ditching his mate in the kitchen, he had no idea how his reception would turn out.

His mate lounged in bed, but he was awake. Dji smiled as soon as he noticed Kei hovering just inside the door. When Kei crept a wary step closer, Dji reached out his hand and wriggled his fingers.

"Come here, kitty."

Dji didn't sound mad, hurt or any of the other things he should feel after Kei's behavior downstairs.

Encouraged by his man's open smile and the pet name, Kei jumped up on the bed and immediately sniffed his mate. Chances were low that somebody had touched or hurt his mate while he'd been out running, but his cheetah needed to check anyway.

His searching nose finally reached Dji's belly. He chuffed and rubbed at the annoying fabric separating him from his mate's skin. Dji chuckled, fisted the longer fur at his neck, and shook him lightly. Kei purred at the familiar, tender gesture.

"All right, furball. Behave," Dji scolded lightly. Then he pulled his shirt over his head and, for the first time, revealed his altered body. Kei thought his mate looked stunning.

The pregnancy, as well as the constant eating, had fattened Dji up a bit. Aside from the obvious baby bump, the ostrich had developed some cute love handles.

“Just so you know, I’m going to kick your ass if those kids ruin my six-pack and V muscle for good. I worked damn hard for them.”

Okay, that really deserved an answer. Kei shifted and, cautious of the bump, flung himself into his mate’s strong arms. “I love you! With or without them. If you like, after the kids are born, or eggs are laid or whatever, we can train together to get rid of the little extra padding,” Kei said and pinched his mate’s side.

Dji let out a bird-like screech and pinched Kei’s naked ass in return. “Jerk,” he said around a laugh. But soon his mate grew serious. “You... you love me?”

Aww, damn. Another point on the bad communication list. “Yes, I love you. Very much. And I love our little ones,” he added and rubbed Dji’s belly.

“You... you don’t think I’m a freak?” His mate’s whispered question nearly broke his heart. Kei gasped and, carefully straddling Dji’s thighs, cupped the man’s face in both hands.

“Listen to me, Djimon Akintola. You’re not a freak. You’re the man I love, so stop talking about yourself like that.”

When he saw Dji’s pretty brown eyes starting to water, Kei pressed their lips together for a tender, soothing kiss. The big guy was usually so tough and strong. This time, Kei needed to be the strong one. He could only guess the havoc the pregnancy hormones caused on his mate’s body.

He feathered light kisses over the ostrich’s face, then said, “So what if you got knocked up? Those are our cubs—”

“Chicks,” his mate interrupted, his voice scratchy.

“Whatever. You could give birth to sparkly, two-headed unicorns and I’d still love them.”

Dji laughed and slung both arms around his waist, pulling him tight. “You’re a nut.”

“I’m your nut,” Kei quipped.

His mate grinned and pecked a kiss to his lips. “You’re the best nut ever. And I love you so damn much it scares me. I’ve never...” Dji trailed off and scowled. Probably at himself. For Kei, this particular expression would always be special, no matter how many years they’d live together.

Kei smiled fondly and trailed the tip of his index finger over his mate’s puckered brow. His mate patting his back caused him to purr deeply. “I’ve

never been in love either. Now that I've got you, I can't imagine living without you. We'll handle this new situation like we've handled everything else so far. Maybe..." Kei flicked his hand. "We could talk a bit more in the process. Avoid the running, ya know?"

"Yeah, sounds like a plan." Dji kissed and nibbled along his jaw. He arched his neck to give his mate better access. "I'm sorry I couldn't shift and catch you this time, my love. But I passed the four week limit and shifting would endanger the chicks."

Kei wriggled one hand between them and placed it on Dji's rounded belly, stroking the bump lovingly. "That's okay. While I ran, something occurred to me. Something very important and enlightening."

"What is it?"

"Sometimes... catching the one you love doesn't mean running after them. But waiting and taking them in your arms when they come back to you," Kei whispered.

"How did you get so clever?"

He snorted and nipped Dji's shoulder. "Ass. I've always been smart. You would know that if you took more time to talk with me before you fuck me unconscious."

"You're one to talk, Mr. Catnip. I'm the one with the bun in the oven because my mate decided claiming was more important than going into rehab," Dji shot back. Kei giggled, hiding his face against his mate's neck. "What's so damn funny?"

Even though Dji lightly swatted his ass, Kei giggled harder. "In the romance novels, it's always the twinkish guy who gets knocked up."

"Would you rather give birth to three fucking big eggs?"

"Uh..."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," his mate deadpanned.

Kei snuggled deeper into the embrace for a few minutes. Then a thought hit him, causing him to sit back up and glare in mock indignation. "Hey! You think I'm twinkish?"

Dji just leered at him and cocked one black eyebrow. "Looked in a mirror recently?"

Kei growled and bit his mate's shoulder. His teasing nip elicited a moan from his mate, as well as another, long missed reaction. He flexed his hips and rubbed up against Dji's sweatpants-clad erection. A shudder raced through his body at the wonderful friction.

"Missed you so much," Kei mumbled while placing open-mouthed, sucking kisses along his mate's shoulder and collarbone. "Please... fuck me."

"No," Dji said around a groan, dragging out the word. Before Kei could voice his disappointment, or express it with a hearty punch to his mate's shoulder, the big man fistfisted his hair and forced him to look up. Kei gasped at the pure love and adoration shining in Dji's chocolatey eyes. "I don't want to fuck. I want to make love to my man."

"Yes, please," he said in a breathy voice. Eager to feel Dji inside him, Kei attacked his mate's sweatpants with nimble fingers. Much to Dji's obvious amusement. "But we need to talk some more. I want to know everything about your pregnancy, and the chicklets. Oh, and the whole birthing process. Afterward."

Dji grinned. "They're called chicks. And you've got yourself a deal." Then the ostrich rolled them till his heavier body pinned Kei to the mattress.

"I've got you. Finally," Kei said with glee and carded his fingers through Dji's wild locks. "You tried to run, but there's no outrunning a cheetah, my mate. I caught you."

His mate snickered and pecked his lips. "Says the man who's currently squished between his mate and the bed."

Kei spread his legs wider to accommodate his mate's hips, then rolled his eyes. "After such a long dry spell, I thought you'd be a wee bit faster on our way to sweaty bliss. How would you phrase it, then?"

Flexing his hips, Dji bent down and licked a line up Kei's neck. When he reached his ear, he nibbled the lobe and whispered, "The ostrich learned how to catch a cheetah. And he's going to keep his furball."

"You better, birdy. I'm the father of your brood." Kei groaned when Dji hitched Kei's knees over his forearms and effectively folded him in half. He fucking loved being mated to the big rooster!

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## Epilogue

### *How to live happily ever after*

Dji happily munched on another piece of watermelon while Xander was busy slaughtering the rest of the huge fruit. During the pregnancy, he'd developed the weirdest cravings. The desire to stuff himself full with watermelon had never ceased though.

It was a sunny, warm morning, hence the guys had decided to move their breakfast from the kitchen to the wide porch.

Kei, no longer able to sit on Dji's lap because of his huge belly, sat beside him and dutifully removed the nasty black seeds from the watermelon slices. He was such an attentive mate. Maybe his attentiveness stemmed from the fact that, the farther Dji was in the pregnancy, the bitchier he became. And seeds in his favorite food made him very bitchy.

The fourth man at their table was Alan. Viggo had stopped eating breakfast with them a while ago since he hadn't been able to lure any information out of Alan concerning his mysterious fallout with Thony. The panther still ate with them every morning. Whenever somebody tried to breach that topic though, the man clamped up like an oyster.

It was unnerving and Dji worried about Thony. He'd tried to talk with the redhead. However, the cat shifter didn't seem eager to open up either. From conversations with other pride members, he knew Thony had shut himself away. It wouldn't be long now before Xander took the matter in his own hand. As much as the alpha respected privacy, he was responsible for the pride members' wellbeing.

Oddly enough, Alan wasn't his typical brooding self this morning. Usually, he looked like he'd eaten a net of lemons. Today, there was a sensual grin tugging at his lips. From time to time, he'd even whistle, push back from the table, and balance on two chair legs.

Maybe he'd gotten laid. Dji knew that Alan drove to town almost every evening only to return in the middle of the night. Personally acquainted with the panther's flirtatious nature, Dji guessed he must get lucky rather often. However, this was the first morning he actually looked it.

Thony would be pissed if he found out. According to Xander, the men weren't fated mates. That fact didn't keep Thony from pining after his former best friend though. Dji understood why Alan would keep Thony at an arm's length. Falling for someone only to get dumped as soon as your lover found his mate would totally suck. He just didn't approve of the way Alan was handling the situation.

"Here you go, love," Kei said and placed a fresh plate piled high with watermelon slices in front of him. Then he reached out and rubbed Dji's belly.

"Thanks, kitty." Dji grabbed another carefully prepared slice and dug right in. He was due to laying the eggs any day now and it'd be a lie to say he wasn't scared shitless. He knew his mate would be with him, but the cat couldn't help him through the expected pain.

One of the female shifters in the pride, a beautiful lioness named Rebecca, worked as a midwife. She'd examined him and confirmed there were three eggs growing inside of him.

"You're fucking huge, man," Alan teased. "Are you sure there are only three buns in your oven, and not four or five?"

Kei waved about, then moved his index finger over his throat in the international sign for "Shut the fuck up." Dji glowered and chewed his bit of melon. When he found a seed his mate had failed to remove, he didn't hesitate and spat it at Alan with full force. The projectile hit the other shifter smack in the chest.

Honestly, he wasn't a bouncy, thrilled pregnant man, and teasing him was never a wise decision.

Yes, he loved the little tykes. He even loved that they were a mix of him and Kei, without the help of a surrogate. Carrying them around twenty-four seven had turned out to be quite a challenge though. His feet hurt, he gained weight every day, and he felt tired as hell after taking short walks because the eggs were freaking heavy.

To top it off, his mood swings pissed him off. One moment he'd cuddle and kiss his mate while they were in bed. But one innocent word from Kei and Dji would throw the furball out of their bedroom. As soon as he'd calmed down, he'd break down and cry because he'd hurt his mate. Damn hormones.

Kei was great though. Considering his mate's initial reaction, Dji never would've thought the cheetah would handle the situation so well. He was the

most supportive mate in the long history of supportive mates. God knew, if their roles had been reversed, Dji never would've shown so much patience.

Alan grinned, but held up his hands in surrender and said, "Sorry. Just jealous, I guess."

Kei snorted. "Oh, c'mon. You and kids? You can't even hold a relationship for longer than it takes spunk to dry."

A vicious snarl sounding behind them had Dji and his mate spinning in their seats. That was, Kei spun. Dji heaved and wriggled till he'd turned his upper body enough to see Thony.

The cat placed his hands on the porch railing and swiftly swung his body over it, landing on the porch. He looked... different. Gone was the heavy air of hurt and despair that had surrounded the redhead over the previous weeks. Instead, there was a fire burning in his green eyes Dji had only ever seen when the man fought with Alan.

Oh, shit. Thony wasn't here because he wanted to slug the other man, was he? Dji's gaze snapped to Alan, only to notice the look of utter joy etched on the man's face. What the hell?

Then Thony shocked the hell out of everyone by grabbing Alan's chair, hauling it and Alan around, and straddling the panther's thighs. To the gathered men's surprise, Alan didn't push the Persian cat away, but wrapped Thony in his arms while emanating a loud, rumbly purr. And as if that wasn't enough in the odd behavior department, the men started making out heavily.

"Holy shit," Dji whispered, gaping at the necking guys. When he gazed at Xan, the alpha looked just as shocked as Dji felt. Along with Kei, they all resembled those gawkers who passed an accident and deliberately slowed down their cars to watch for severed body parts and bent metal.

Eventually, when neither Thony nor Alan showed any inclination to offer an explanation that went beyond moans or grunts, Xander cleared his throat.

It took some repeats for the lovebirds—or lovecats, or whatever—to come back to reality. Thony had the decency to blush a lovely pink. But maybe that was due to his fair complexion. The redhead smiled bemused and pressed his face into the crook of Alan's neck. The panther, though, wore a big "cat that ate the canary" grin.

"Care to tell me what the fuck is going on here?" Xander demanded to know. He didn't sound outright mad. Just... exasperated. Dji could relate. First



they were best friends, then they beat each other up, stopped talking with each other altogether, and now they were acting like a couple of randy teenagers? The men's erratic behavior gave him whiplash.

"Well," Alan said, dragging out the word and stroking Thony's back. "See, Xander, we—"

"Oh, shit!" Djì shouted when suddenly a sharp pain sliced through his groin. He curled his hands into fists on the tabletop as he tried to keep breathing. *Nonono, this can't be happening. Not right now!*

Alan frowned. "Uh, as I was trying to say—"

He couldn't help it. When the next cramp hit him full force, he was unable to hold back. "Aww, fucking hell! Shit... shit..."

His mate, completely clueless about the gravity of the situation, rolled his eyes. "Would you stop it? I want to hear Alan's explanation without you constantly interrupting. We're all taken by surprise, that doesn't mean you have to lose it."

During his mate's speech, Djì had started breathing through the pain. He never would've thought he'd be grateful for Rebecca's admittedly weird tips. Now, he wanted to kiss the woman for preparing him for this shit. He needed to lie down. Now. First of all though...

Djì reached up and fisted his mate's shirt. Then he tugged till they were face-to-face and Djì was able to see the dark flecks in Kei's wide, amber eyes.

"I'm not surprised, I'm in labor, you dumbass!" he snapped. "And now help me upstairs before I'm forced to squeeze out those eggs right here on the porch."

Kei squeaked, then fluttered his hands and started to chant, "Oh shitshitshit."

Djì would laugh about this reaction. Later. Much later. When he wasn't in a world of pain. God bless Xander and his take-charge attitude, because his mate turned out the typical useless, fainting baby's father. Without the fainting.

In seconds, Xander and Alan had teamed up and carried Djì upstairs.

Somebody must've called Rebecca, for the woman miraculously appeared at his bedside. Kei was busy undressing him and covering him with a sheet. Not that he cared much for nudity right now, but the whole procedure would be

embarrassing enough without his bits and pieces flopping around while his body contorted in pain.

“Thanks, baby,” he said between deep breaths, then gripped his mate’s wrist when the guy tried to sneak away. “Oh no, don’t you dare! You made those little devils, now the least you can do is to fucking hold my hand while I press them out of my body.”

“Of course! I’m here, Dji. Press my hand as hard as you need if you—Shit!” His mate’s voice died in a whine when Dji indeed squeezed his slender hand as another contraction hit him.

“Give him some of the pain meds.” He heard Rebecca say. “With his fast metabolism, he’ll burn through it faster than a human. But it’s better than nothing.”

Next his mate pressed something against his lips. Something round. Ah, the meds. He took them from Kei’s fingers and swallowed them down with the water Kei offered him next. The cool liquid flowing down his throat felt like heaven. He drained the whole glass, then sank back into the pillows.

Soft fingers brushed his hair from his sweaty forehead. Dji looked up and sighed when he met his mate’s concerned gaze. The man didn’t deserve his snappy attitude. Just as he wanted to forgive his mate for knocking him up, pain erupted in his lower belly and rendered him breathless. Holy fucking shit. This was all Kei’s fault!

“I’ll never let you near my ass ever again,” he pressed between clenched teeth. Kei flinched, but he just didn’t have it in him to feel sorry.

“Whoa, TMI, dude,” Thony said. “I mean, we know how these eggs came into your body, but we don’t need a visual.”

Why was the guy even here? Dji had always thought birth was something private. An event that only concerned the pregnant one, a doctor, and the responsible guy with the overly eager swimmers. In this pride though, it seemed to be a publicly celebrated occasion. Damn cats and their nosiness.

Dji snarled. “Shut the fuck up. I’d like to see you while you’re trying to give birth to Alan’s cubs. If they take after their annoying dad, and you can be sure they would, they’d make it an absolutely sparkling experience for you.”

A perverse sense of joy flooded Dji when Thony’s face paled. Alan wrapped his arms around his... boyfriend... fuckbuddy... whatever, and whispered, “Shhh. It’s the pain talking, honey. Don’t think anything of it.”

“Nah, it’s the sass talking,” Kei said around a chuckle. A chuckle that morphed into a groan when Dji squeezed his hand in a bone-crushing grip. This was going to be a long day.

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Hours later, Dji felt like he’d been hit by a semi. He hurt all over, but still the opening wasn’t quite big enough for the eggs. The angry red mark sat at the side of his lower belly. Not only did it hurt, it itched like a bitch, too.

When his mate wasn’t busy slapping his hand every time Dji wanted to scratch, he smoothed a wet washcloth over his sweaty skin. Oh, and he placed kisses all over his face and sometimes his belly, too, whispering affectionate words to their eggs. In the rare seconds when Dji could concentrate on something else but cramping, breathing, and yelling, he brushed his hand through his mate’s messy black hair.

“Just so you know, for the next two months, they’re your responsibility,” he said. Gods, he was exhausted.

Kei’s eyes twinkled with joy when their gazes met. He couldn’t quite conceal his worry though. Dji was worried as well. Too bad he hadn’t paid closer attention to the “males giving birth” lesson in little shifter class.

Another cramp zinged through his groin, and this time he felt something giving. Dji gripped Kei’s hand and squeaked in panic. “What’s going on? Becca?” He tensed at the strange sensation of pressure at his side. That, of course, hurt even more and ripped a strangled groan from his throat.

Rebecca hurried over. She examined the mark at his belly, and grinned a happy grin Dji really couldn’t and wouldn’t share in his current condition. Grinning people should be banned from puerperal anyway. “It’s time, Dji. You need to push now.”

“Push?” he snapped. “Don’t think so. I hurt enough, thank you very much.”

“You have to, hon,” Rebecca said around a snort. “You don’t want to be eternally pregnant now, do you?”

“Gods, no!” Dji groaned as another wave of pain ripped through him. He scrunched up his face and pushed against his better judgment.

Shit, he’d been right. It hurt like fuck. A soft little hand touched his chest, rubbing in circles. A second hand came to rest on the swell of his belly. Oddly enough, the caresses soothed him. It didn’t lessen the pain, but gave him the

warm feeling of being connected to his mate. A mate he'd strangle if he ever knocked him up again.

White-hot pain sliced through his middle, then he yelled. The pressure became unbearable before it lessened all of a sudden and Dji flopped back into the pillows.

He heard several gasps, one very close and probably coming from his mate. When he peeled back an eyelid, he saw Becca wrapping something in a towel and handing it over to Kei. His mate's face showed an expression of wonder and so much love Dji longed to see it directed at himself.

Dji lowered his gaze to the bundle in Kei's arms, suddenly realizing what he was looking at. Their first-born egg. A feeling of tenderness he'd never felt before swamped him and made his eyes water with emotion. He knew it wasn't over yet, that there were two more eggs waiting, but that didn't diminish the pride and love he felt.

"Oh, Dji," his mate whispered. Kei sniffled, cradling the egg in his arms like it was the most important thing in his life. Which it probably was. Dji would be pissed if he didn't feel exactly the same.

As he reached out a hand, eager to touch their first egg, the pain and pressure started once again.

It took another hour, lots of screaming, and even more cursing, before three towel-wrapped eggs rested in little pillow nests on the bed.

Dji felt like he'd been put through the wringer. He was soaked in sweat and other fluids he didn't want to examine closer. His mate, bless him, had fetched a bowl of hot, soapy water and was giving him a sponge bath right now.

Alan, Thony, and Xander stood to the side and were gushing over the eggs. Not that there was much to see, really. They were creamy white, with a slightly nubby surface. Each weighed about three pounds and was five inches in diameter. They'd felt much bigger and heavier when Dji had pressed them out of his body though.

"I want that, too," Thony whined and peered up at Alan with puppy dog eyes. Or... kitten eyes. Whatever.

Alan frowned. "You want eggs? Uh... I'm sorry, but I don't think that's physically possible, honey. We're cats."

The redhead rolled his eyes and made a *well, duh* face. "I'm not stupid, Alan. No, I don't want eggs. But I want kids."

“This is the Twilight Zone,” *Dji* muttered and quickly grabbed the sheet when *Kei* attempted to pull it away. “And what do you think you’re doing, kitty?”

His mate blinked big, innocent eyes. “Washing you. In case you didn’t notice, you’re quite icky.”

*Dji* sputtered. “I’m icky because I just gave birth to three fucking huge eggs *you* are responsible for. In case *you* didn’t notice,” he shot back. He would’ve crossed his arms in front of his chest, too, but he was way too tired for more than a verbal expression of rightful indignation.

*Kei* lowered his lashes, looking properly chastised. “I’m sorry, love. We’ll postpone the sponge bath till the riffraff is finished gawking at our little ones.”

“Riffraff?” *Xander* asked with a big grin on his face. He stepped over, gripped *Kei* in a light headlock, and ruffled the cheetah’s hair. “Well, thank you, son.”

*Kei* giggled and wriggled in the bigger man’s grip. “You’re welcome, Dad.”

*Dji* liked the pleased smile that spread over *Xander*’s face at the endearment. His mate had taken to calling the big alpha Dad some weeks ago. As far as *Dji* was concerned, the white lion more than deserved that title.

He looked around groggily, taking in his mate hugging his father, *Thony* cuddling with *Alan* whose gaze was still pinned to the eggs, and *Becca* and her mate. Then his gaze roved over his and *Kei*’s unhatched kids.

After years of running from emotional entanglements, he’d finally settled down with the love of his life. *Dji* shook his head in wonder. Years of avoiding his family because he’d thought he didn’t need anyone. He’d been wrong, but too stubborn to admit it.

When *Kei* crawled up beside him and pressed their lips together in a scorching hot kiss, *Dji* groaned and curled his hand around his mate’s nape.

Yeah, that was what he truly needed. The friendship of those funny guys surrounding him. Guys he not only considered friends, but his family as well. And he needed the love of his mate. He’d found a new family. A family who accepted and loved him for who he really was.

“Thank you so much for giving me a family,” *Kei* whispered. The little cat’s bottom lip wobbled and tears glittered in his pretty amber eyes. *Dji* hoped at least one of their kids would have his mate’s eye color. He cupped *Kei*’s

freckled face in his hands and brushed away the lone tear tickling down Kei's cheek.

"You're welcome." He pecked a kiss to Kei's lush lips and grinned. "Honestly? It hurt like a bitch, and I really don't want to repeat the wonder of giving life any time soon. But... I'll forever be grateful for messing up those bags and accidentally drugging you. I look forward to raising those little tykes with you, my love."

"Aww, hell," Kei squeaked and sniffed. "Stop making me cry, Rooster." Dji snickered, accompanied by the oohing and aahing of their friends. Suddenly, a jaw-cracking yawn split his face.

"Uh, crap. I'm so fucking tired," he mumbled.

His mate chuckled and pressed a tender kiss to his forehead. "Sleep, handsome. I'll look after our little ones."

Dji snuggled deeper into the pillows, letting out a deep sigh of contentment and exhaustion. But mostly contentment. Yes.

"Kay," he said around another yawn. "However, after my nap I really want to hear what happened between Alan and Thony. I guess it's quite a story."

**The End**

## Author Bio

*I grew up in a tiny village in Germany, the kind where you know everybody and everybody knows you. I migrated to a bigger town to attend college, although my parents often wonder if I really moved out. Now, with a degree in my pocket, I'm perfectly capable of working as a librarian. Never one to do what's expected of me, I'm currently browsing different branches of employment.*

*I started writing in college when I found myself unable to ignore the guys living in my head any longer. And to distract myself from the stifling, non-fiction stuff taught in class. I'm really fond of the dudes whispering in my mind—no matter if handsome or flawed, big or small, sulky or easy-going. They all deserve love and their HEAs.*

*When I'm not writing, you can find me curled up with a good book and a cup of tea, a cat in my lap, or a camera at the ready.*

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