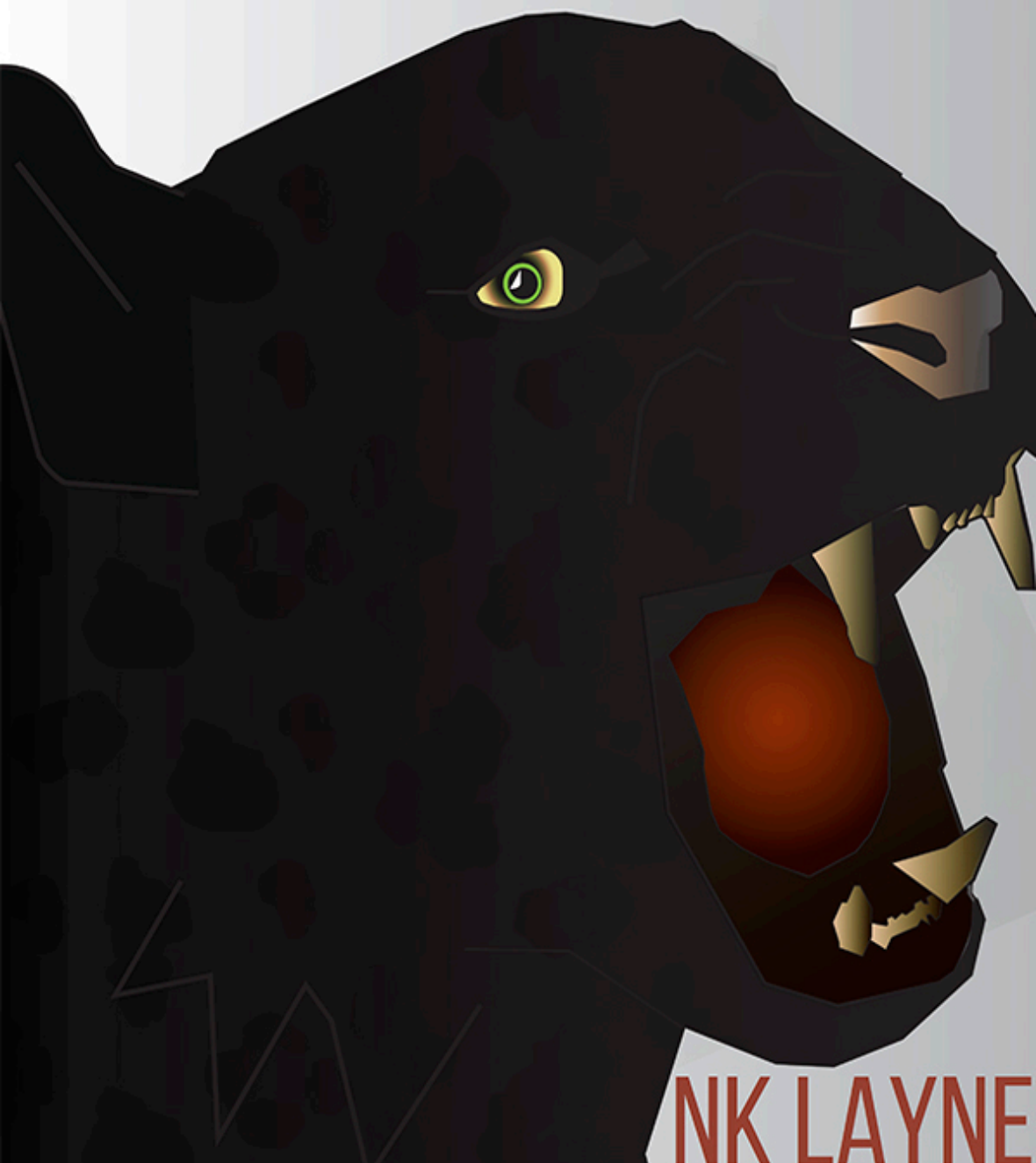


SWEET, ECHOING
HOWL



NK LAYNE

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SWEET, ECHOING HOWL

By NK Layne

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.

Words of Caution

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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SWEET, ECHOING HOWL

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Photo Description

Photo 1: A shirtless androgyne is immersed in the woods, swaying with the confidence of an Amazonian. The androgyne is stalked by a black leopard wearing the facial expressions of a predator going in for the kill, but with the soft eyes of a guardian, emitting a green light over the androgyne.

Photo 2: One paw up and eyes wide open, a black leopard is making its next move.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I had always felt different to the others around me as I grew up. I mostly thought it was because of my tendency to not settle on a gender, oft times dressing as either male or female and sometimes even both together. Then I had my 21st birthday and everything in my life changed. I found out that my late parents had had a secret and now I had to learn how to hide it too. Mind you changing into a leopard in the middle of Main Street was probably not the way to do that.

Sincerely,

Ilona

Thank you to whomever picks this. I look forward to reading what you create.

N.B. Please feel free to change everything except the ‘gender fluid shifter’ aspect of the prompt and please give me a HEA. No goes are incest and rape.

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: bartender, coming out, friends to lovers, interspecies, Peruvian, shifters, trans

Content Warnings: cigarettes, binge drinking, discrimination, catholic guilt, casual use of the word queer

Word Count: 10,417

Author's Note

Additional disclaimers:

Some characters in the following story use gender neutral pronouns. Here is a helpful guide for those unfamiliar with trans culture:

Nominative (i.e. he): zhey

Oblique (i.e. him): zhem

Possessive determiner (i.e. his): zheir

Possessive pronoun (i.e. his): zheirs

Reflexive (i.e. himself): zhemself

Important vocabulary words:

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity agrees with the gender identity they were assigned at birth [sometimes shortened as cis]

Genderqueer: a person whose gender identity is neither male nor female

Queer: non-heteronormative people; can be used as a slur, however, recent LGBT movements have focused on reclaiming this word; is also used in academic spaces to refer to the study of LGBT issues

Trans: someone who is on the transgender spectrum

Transgender: a person whose gender identity doesn't agree with the gender identity they were assigned at birth

SWEET, ECHOING HOWL

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Part One

“So how do I look?” Leone twirled around the bar, long brown hair cascading to zheir movements. Surrounding zhem were blush-red, liquorice-perfumed furniture. Zhey were wearing one of zheir favorite dresses. It was knee length and lilac, with a tight bottom half, accenting zheir curvy, perky ass, and a flowing, loose top, giving the illusion that Leone had breasts.

“Fuckable. Mad fuckable,” said Ash, leaning across the glass bar. “Your sister is totally going to want to ride that.”

Leone laughed. “You’re fucking trash.”

Ash shrugged zheir shoulders, wiping the sticky, brown remains of someone’s spilled drink off the countertop. Zhey were petite with a curly fauxhawk, and umber-toned skin, wearing a small, golden septum piercing, and a black studded crop top, showing off pink armpit hair. Ash was an effeminate trans man and Leone’s best friend. “My break is coming up. You ready?”

Leone rubbed the contours of zheir golden-olive shoulders. “I was planning on never coming out... like *never* never. Like, ‘bury me in a suit and tie’ never. But now... now that I have you... I guess I’m ready, in the sense that I’m absolutely one hundred percent horrified but also kind of ready.”

“Need a shot?”

“No. I... I gotta do this sober.” Leone bounced closer to the bar and grabbed Ash’s hand. “Thanks. For coming with me.”

Ash gripped Leone’s hand, for a second, before shrugging the hold off. “Hey, what are friends for?”

Sara held both of Leone’s wrists together, gripped in a firm death lock.

Leone rolled zheir eyes. Zhey weren’t exactly expecting zheir sister to pop out a frosted cake or hand out party hats or do anything remotely celebratory, but this wasn’t exactly the reaction zhey were expecting either. Leone wasn’t sure why zheir sister thought zhey would flee the second zhey came out as trans, but as her grip got tighter and tighter, fleeing became more and more tempting.

Ash wiggled zheir bushy eyebrows, silently mouthing the words *nice bondage*, from across the dining-room table.

Leone gritted between clenched teeth, the edges of zheir mouth twitching into a small smile, as zhey nodded toward Ash. “You’re gross.”

Sara quickly let go of her grip, as if Leone’s comment was directed to her. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I...” Leone stretched zheir hands out, releasing the phantom feeling of Sara’s hold. “It’s just, many important business transactions rely on me having functional wrists. Like earlier, I popped over to hand you your rent check, for instance. Tomorrow, I might have to fight... a gang of crocodiles. Who, notably, are always late with their rent checks, despite having perfectly intact wrists.”

“Oh. That would be shameful, Sara, if zhey couldn’t fight. Leone is such a ferocious croc-fighter. Punching with the toughness of a someone marred from incurable croc-trauma,” said Ash.

Sara looked at Leone, looked at Ash, and returned to Leone. “Are you being serious? You really... you really fight crocodiles?”

“No. Sara. I don’t fight crocodiles. I mean, duh?”

“I don’t know what trans people are into! What you guys do in your free time...” Sara scrunched her long, dark-brown hair with her fists. Her skin was the same golden olive as Leone’s, from their Peruvian American ancestry and mutual love for long sunbaths on the California shore.

“We can assure you, the Venn diagram between large aquatic reptiles and the Iquitos trans community is narrow,” said Ash.

Leone couldn’t help but smile. Up until that moment, Leone was never able to even imagine the possibility of exposing zheir true self as a genderfluid trans person. But with Ash, anything was possible...

...as long as they were friends. That’s what Ash said, at the bar: *Hey, what are friends for?* God, this was Leone’s big, life-changing moment, yet it was zheir relationship with Ash that still somehow loomed over zhem.

Like, what if they weren’t friends? What if Leone proposed they be something more? Would Ash still be there, across the dining-room table, offering support?

Sara wailed as she collapsed her head into her cupped hands. This jerked Leone back to the moment. “I totally should have known. Why else would my brother be so interested in my quinceañera? Stealing my catalogs and everything. Like... duh. I must be an idiot.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I could have been jerking off to the models. How would you’ve known?”

Sara scrunched her face and grappled the air. “You would think being genderqueer would make you a little less of an asshole brother. Where’s the sisterly love?”

“Slipped away once you held my wrists together,” said Leone.

“I said I was sorry...” Sara sighed. “Do you hate me? Is this going like *really* bad? Like, am I fucking you up, giving you some sort of PTSD right now? I’m sorry, I know I’m not saying the right things, but *I want* to say the right things...”

“I believe you. I think you will figure it all out, Sara, and that’s why I’m okay. It’s just, I need you on my side when I break the news to Mamá.”

Sara’s face visibly twitched.

“Please... you have to help me with Mamá. How many times, growing up, did I help you hide your ex-boyfriends from her? I practically reinstalled your hymen a dozen times.”

Sara pursed her lips. “What are you going to tell her?”

“The same thing I told you. I’m not Marco. I might never have had the capacity to be Marco. I’ve always been Leone.”

“Always? Like even, *pre*-quinceañera always?”

Leone nodded. “Genderfucking since before I learned what gender or fucking was. And with that, time to get to the second part of tonight.”

Sara scrunched her face. “Ew gross. *¡Qué cojudo eres!*” She raised the back of her hands to both of her cheeks, in a gesture of surrender. “I’m not like you, Leone. I’m very much PTSD susceptible. I’m on the PTSD queue, waiting for my turn to be traumatized. And you—you could be the ticket.”

“Well, as long as it is sex jokes traumatizing you, not my identity, I think we’re back to our normal place,” said Leone.

“And with that, not to be rude, I need to skedaddle,” Ash said as zhey got up from the dining-room table. “Hey, now that the truth is out in the open, I’ll probably be seeing you a lot more.”

“I hope so too, Ash,” Sara said. “And Leone, thank you. For allowing me into your life. I’m sorry, that’s another thing I should have said earlier. I really mean it.”

Sara shook Ash's hand, and Leone's smile spread wide and hearty, wrinkling zheir tanned face. Fine, there were no glitter bombs, or cute cupcakes, or witty, DIY banners. And yes, some of her words were hurtful and ignorant, but nothing that wasn't fixable if Leone taught her a bit more about trans culture.

Ash and Leone walked out of Sara's flat toward the juxtaposing sidewalk, where Leone's motorcycle was parked.

The bike was a decade-old model, covered in enough grunge and rust to camouflage anything remotely white in the original painting. Leone inherited it from zheir mother when she stopped riding only a few years prior, due to relatively old age. It was still decorated with travel stickers of check points from the Amazon rainforest where she did a lot of her work.

Leone straddled the bike and tied zheir long hair into a ponytail. Ash curled zheir arms around Leone's waist, and Leone could feel the lightness of the ride hit zhem already.

"Thanks Ash. For coming with me. You being here really helped keep me strong and optimistic and stuff," said Leone.

"Ya... ya... so, what's that about fucking?" Ash whispered in Leone's ear.

Leone's cock jerked. "But don't you have to go back to work?"

Ash kissed the back of Leone's ear. "What if we did something naughty in the bar bathroom..."

Leone kick-started zheir bike. As it growled to life, Leone woke up with it. This night was special, in a way that had nothing to do with Sara. It was a night of celebration, of gratitude, for everything that had happened in the past year: it was zheir one-year anniversary of meeting Ash.

They headed off zheir sister's block and pushed onward, back to Ash's bar, Cotopaxi.

Colores Street was a famous block in downtown Iquitos. It had one of the few remaining cobbled roads from when the city was originally colonized, but that relic was all Colores offered from its traditional era. Modern day Cotopaxi was plopped right in the center of the block, sandwiched between a BDSM dungeon and a sex-toy shop, only a glimmer of the industry that framed the road.

Leone's favorite place, of all of Iquitos, was Colores Street. Here, one year prior, zhey introduced zhemselves with zheir true name without having to explain, without having to prove zhemselves. That night was also the night that zhey met Ash.

It was zheir one-year anniversary of actively participating in Colores Street, but it was also more than that. It was the first year of Leone existing as zheir genuine self.

In this sense, it was more of a birthday than an anniversary of zheir friendship with Ash.

Ash was behind the countertop, serving drinks.

Leone was at the corner of the bar, eyeing the unisex bathroom in the corner. It was a pretty slow Tuesday night though, and there was another bartender working. They should get away with this, if they were nimble enough.

Truth be told, it wouldn't be the first time Ash and Leone had public sex in Cotopaxi; however, it would be the first time they were doing it while Ash was on the clock.

The first time zhey had public sex was in the backroom, on the velvet love seat, during one of Cotopaxi's sex parties.

Leone wore nothing other than tight, form-fitting black panties. Zheir cock throbbed in its constraint, adding more tease to the moment.

Ash whispered, "I wonder if you will stretch more in public or not; my big monster strap-on is still rocking my backpack. Ready to re-test you."

Then, the harsh crackle of a condom package breaking, the sterile scent of the lubricant lathering Ash's cock, precum dribbling out of Leone, staining zheir panties.

Ash, howling, as if zhey were the one being stuffed, as zhey entered Leone—

"Psst," Ash whispered while sitting on a bar stool next to Leone, bringing zhemselves back to the present. "Meet me in five minutes."

Leone nodded. Blood rushed to zheir growing cock.

Zhey looked out into space as zhey let some time pass, falling back into their thoughts.

One year later, and Leone was not an inch closer to telling Ash how zhey truly felt. In that sense, despite coming out, Leone was still living a lie. Their friendship was a sweet security that zhey didn't want to mar with zheir feelings.

Enough time went by for Leone to head into the bathroom without bringing attention onto zhemsself. Zhey knocked three times in succession. Ash opened the door and dragged Leone in by the hem of zheir neckline.

Before Leone could orient zhemsself, zhey were pushed onto the closed door, looking into Ash's piercing, gray eyes.

Leone's smooth cheek grazed Ash's as zhey sucked on Ash's bottom lip. Ash's cologne smelled like clean sheets mixed with bourbon, intoxicating Leone to linger in zheir mouth longer. Electric zaps circulated Leone's bloodstream, bringing awareness to zheir hardening cock. Zhey gave Ash's lips one last, rough suck, before letting go.

Ash wrapped zheir fingers around the edges of Leone's hair. Ash lightly pulled, and Leone instinctively parted zheir mouth.

"So," Ash said with a sly smile, "I'm gonna give my best friend zheir birthday gift now. Good?"

Ash licked the outer curve of Leone's ear as zhey pushed Leone, so there was no space between them and the door. A rising bulge pronounced itself in Leone's skirt.

Leone lightly traced both sides of Ash's raised cheekbones, thumbs curling around Ash's soft jaw. Zhey gingerly brushed Ash's lips with zheir own, seductive tingles radiated from each touch, before sucking on Ash's lower lip, pulling it downward as zhey nibbled the edges, each bite a little harder. Leone's cock grew as zhey pushed zheir tongue into Ash's pout. A pliable joy curved Leone's smile as zheir sense of self melted into Ash's canines and gums. For a moment, there was only Ash. Zhey were more definite, to Leone, than zhemsself.

Goose bumps trailed Leone's golden flesh as Ash roamed zheir hands down zheir narrow frame.

Leone's cock jerked into zheir thigh. Zhey broke zheir kisses to rub zheir face in the curve of Ash's neck, squeezing zheir eyes shut, trying to control zheir pressing lust for Ash's salty skin, howling moans, and spasming orgasm.

Ash slowly dragged Leone's zipper down. The falling percussion echoed in the small bathroom. Leone's dress toppled off.

Ash brushed Leone's tight pecs, browned nipples, with zheir hardened palm.

Leone's breath elevated to a high-pitched whimper as zhey fell into a vignette, everything besides Ash's touch blurring incomprehensibly. Zhey ground up, moaned. "I'm so hard."

Ash slowly dragged zheir hands down Leone's chest, over defined abs. The tease tingled Leone's skin, zheir cock well defined in the charcoal-colored panties Ash was slowly entering. Leone moaned as Ash brushed past zheir cock to tangle zheir fingers in the curly wisps of Leone's pubic hair.

A chain of growls vibrated out of Leone's mouth.

Ash groaned, dipping zheir hand even deeper, cupping Leone's balls, inducing harsher, deeper growls. Zhey moved one of Leone's hands toward zheir own crotch, and Leone quickly unbuckled Ash's jeans, pulling down zheir briefs.

Ash's cock was small but fat, the tip a deep purple and as hard as Leone's own. Ash smiled zheir wicked smile as zhey stripped off zheir black briefs and crop top, revealing zheir chest, marred with two diagonal scars where breasts used to be.

Leone tightened zheir grip, feeling the squat shape of Ash's erection. "Oh, fuck, Ash. You are so hard... I want to..."

Ash stood on zheir tippy-toes to kiss Leone's forehead, already painted with a glisten of sweat. "Are we really going to battle on who goes first? It's your day. Relax."

Leone groaned. Zhey briefly looked around the small bathroom coated in stickers and graffiti. Not the ultimate place for some interlocking sex. "Okay... okay... you'll get yours..."

Ash lowered zhemsself so zhey were kneeling in front of Leone's throbbing cock. As zhey wrapped zheir cool hands around it, Leone whimpered a high-pitched plea.

Ash slurped Leone into zheir tight, salivating mouth. Once inside, Ash used the tip of zheir prickly tongue to circle figure eights around Leone's head while eagerly sucking.

Leone tightened zheir fists as zhey tried not to scream out in pleasure.

Ash continued sucking as zhey moved zheir own hands down to zheir crotch to give zhemsself a hand job.

Between muffled moans, Ash swallowed more of Leone.

Leone thrust deeper into Ash's throat, where it was so warm and tight Leone felt zhey were going to burst.

Ash's sucks got harder and harder. When zhey moaned, audibly now, vibrations rattled down Leone's cock.

Leone could barely hear Ash, zheir ears thumping so loudly with zheir own heartbeat.

They came together. Simultaneously. For the first time. The room spun, and elation filled Leone, exorcising everything else. The only thing left behind was Ash—zheir overflowing passion for Ash.

Leone slipped out of Ash's mouth with an audible *plop*.

Ash and Leone had fucked many times before, but never had Leone felt so close to Ash that zheir own selfhood was in question.

Leone was going to comment—say something about the grandness of the moment they just shared, but as zhey opened zheir eyes zhey found Ash already standing up with zheir pants on, grabbing paper towels to clean the mess.

"I need a drink," Ash said as zhey wiped Leone's cum off the bathroom floor.

Leone rubbed zheir temples. Zheir familiar sadness had already crept up, replacing the high. "Yeah. I can go for a drink."

The first time Leone met Ash was at a costumed sex party. It was supposed to be insanity themed, so Leone simplified zheir previous Harley Quinn cosplay to the essentials. A red and black catsuit and matching jester hat, scarlet lips, and highly blushed cheeks.

It was totally a narcissistic joke. Leone didn't expect anyone to approach zhem to rant about Batman at a sex party. Geekdom wasn't exactly what the space was advertising. Yet, when Leone entered the party, the first costume zhey noticed was Ash's.

Ash was leaning on an exposed brick wall, wearing blood-red lipstick, zheir septum piercing, a green, cropped wig, a long, purple jacket, and satin, Batman boxers.

Harley Quinn's Joker.

Leone dashed right to zhem. It wasn't love at first sight as much as want to talk to you all night at first sight. To Leone's delight, Ash rolled with it.

In the middle of their conversation about the ways insanity built up Gotham City's metaphorical infrastructure, a narrow-faced woman in a black miniskirt and dark-violet corset came up to them. She proposed having a threesome.

"Um, you're really cute—no you really are—but we are kind of in the middle of something," said Leone.

"Oh, yeah." Ash nodded. "You. The cutest. We just... we just are getting to the really good part... of our, uh, conversation."

The woman left, confused, but not too upset, as Leone caught her making out with another woman shortly after.

"Maybe we should get out of this party? You can come to my place. For some pizza and *Batman: The Animated Series*?" suggested Ash.

Leone eagerly agreed. The hangout quickly turned into pizza, cartoons, and a blow job, and such began the foundation of Leone's friendship with Ash.

Their dynamic was enjoyable for a very long time, until, suddenly, it wasn't. Until their beer-soaked rituals, the midnight of sharing their other sexcapades, became painful. Until it became more like an exchange of punches and kicks than comradeship. Ash would recount another one of zheir fucks, and Leone was forced to nod, in mock interest, even though each graphic descriptor burned like a penance. Zhey were left wondering if zhey were more or less significant than Ash's other partners. If zhey mattered at all.

Leone refused to ruin the friendship with romantic tension. Even if, as the days passed, Leone increasingly longed for less and less space between them.

Shortly after their fuck, Ash handed Leone a spiked lemonade from the bar countertop. "So, how does it feel to be one year old?"

"Dirty. No one-year-old should have access to as many genitalia variations as I have." Leone took a deep sip of zheir drink as zhey let the moment marinate. The sex with Ash was potent, and zhey wanted to talk about it, but it wasn't exactly an appropriate conversation to have when Ash was on the clock. "But you know, I'm not exactly against dirtiness."

"Oh, I know. I've seen you. At the pro-dirty rallies. With the Make Filth Not War picket. Very dashing." Ash was rubbing the countertop again, cleaning fresh spills.

“Yes, because you’re very squeaky clean yourself. The last time I was at your place, you were being double teamed in your own kitchen. Watching you felt like a bubble bath.”

“I’m still pissed off about that. I literally got so distracted, I burnt my *pollo a la brasa*. Ugh, my mother is probably cursing me from the heavens.”

“For burning the chicken or being double teamed?”

“For burning the chicken, without a doubt. Every time I burn one of my Mamá’s recipes, I can hear her ordering God around. Telling Him to reconsider ever allowing me into His kingdom. I can practically hear her scream.” Ash smiled.

Leone wasn’t sure if the tipsiness was already in play or not but Ash was emitting a seductive glow. Leone could have stared at zhem forever. “So, when can we start celebrating?”

“You mean we haven’t yet?” Ash raised one of zheir fuzzy eyebrows. Shortly after, a sudden *beep* came out of zheir pocket. Zhey pulled out zheir smartphone. “Well, my half shift is over. So how about now?”

Ash leaned across the countertop to ruffle Leone’s hair. “Happy Birthdayversary!”

Leone and Ash decided to head back to Ash’s place. Ash only lived a few blocks away, and Cotopaxi was starting to get stuffy. Zhey also kept a fully stocked bar in zheir apartment.

Ash mixed Leone and zhemself matching cupcake-pink cocktails. They tasted like bubble gum wax rolled in rock candy.

“Whelp. If I’m gonna get diabetes, this is the way to go,” said Leone from the patchwork couch that centered Ash’s small studio.

“What do you want to do tonight? Want me to host a party? Or would you rather chill, one on one?”

“I don’t know. Would hanging out with just me be boring for you?” Leone pursed zheir lips. “I mean it’s fine. We can have a party.”

“What was that about? Weren’t we just fucking and laughing about?” Ash took a deep sip of zheir drink. “You aren’t boring to me, Leone. I always have fun when I’m with you.”

Leone used to feel so *relaxed* around Ash, like zhey could say anything because zhey had this amazing, unconditional support system. Zhey used to be able to just exist as Ash's best friend and be overjoyed, not filled with the bitterness that had come to plague zhem.

But now, every conversation with Ash seemed like a trap. Leone never knew exactly what Ash meant or was implying.

What did the sex they had earlier that day mean? Leone felt like zheir molecular composition entirely merged into Ash's. Did Ash really not feel it?

"Want to do shots?" Leone asked.

Ash eagerly filled two shot glasses with a caramel-hued liquor.

They took their shots quickly. The harsh bitterness rattled in Leone's throat, but after a strong inhalation of Ash's stale apartment, it went away, leaving behind a slightly blurred room, pumps of joy, and a craving for nicotine. "Oh, man. I need a smoke."

Ash got up and fumbled to the kitchen counter, grabbing a box of cloves and a light. Zhey were gone for just a moment, but Leone was overcome with the space between zhemsself and Ash. It seemed so... perverse. Like there should never be any space between them.

Before Leone realized Ash was heading back, zhey found zhemsself nibbling on a black clove, Ash leaning in to light it. Leone took a deep breath in and slumped into the vibrating high of the cigarette. "I think I'm already drunk."

"No shit. Hey, it's only your birthday once. Sort of. Do you celebrate both birthdays?"

"I celebrate all my fucking birthdays. Queer birthday. Vagina-popping birthday. Half birthday. I'm the Mad Hatter in a dress."

"And you're so, so handsome in a dress."

Leone smiled. Zheir cock twitched. Usually fucking Ash sated Leone for a few days; however, this time zhey were already ready to ride zhem all over again. "Man, I'm getting addicted to you."

"Careful now. Could turn into a sap fest."

Leone drooped zheir shoulders forward. "Is that bad?"

"No, it is chill, I'm just playing. Actually, there are some sappy things I've wanted to tell you." Ash reached a hand toward Leone's shoulders, lightly massaging the developing knots.

Ash kept on saying things, but Leone couldn't follow. Zhey became distracted by Ash's long, umber throat. For the first time, zhey saw the small pulsations in the veins of zheir neck. The movement hypnotized Leone, pulling out a new craving.

Leone wanted to consume Ash. Bite by bite, nibble by nibble, until there was nothing left.

Zhey growled, a deep throat-rattle, and Ash jerked away from zhem. "Leone, are you okay?"

Ash's concerned voice bolted recognition into Leone. That was Ash. Zheir best friend; zheir crush. A human being. Certainly not food.

Leone took in a deep breath of the musty apartment. Composure quickly realigned zheir spine, returning Leone to a more sober reality. Leone was not shy to darker sadomasochistic fantasies, but never was zheir lust so compulsive. Zhey weren't sure what just happened and didn't have the vocabulary to even hint at it without Ash thinking zhey were entirely insane. "I'm sorry... I think I need to drink more... I just can't relax. I'm not chill like you."

"I like the way you are." Ash paused. Zhey looked Leone up and down. "Do you really think you should drink more?"

Leone shrugged. "You've seen me function with a far higher blood-alcohol level before."

"True, but... I never saw you ignore me completely. That was kind of important stuff, Leone... It's hard for me to talk about romance..."

Leone's ears perked up; zheir heart dropped into zheir gut. "Oh... Sorry. I mean, I really didn't hear you. I mean, fuck. Let's talk about it. I want to talk about it."

"Don't know. Just tryin' to say I'm drawn to you, Leone. Increasingly. Day in, day out. And I thought it was the same with you..."

"Those are actually my exact thoughts. Increasingly drawn to you, increasingly impressed by you. I never... I didn't realize you felt the same."

Ash stared at Leone with a grimace. "I've never seen your eyes so dilated before. How do I know you aren't just saying that because you're drunk?"

"I... We don't have to talk about this right now. We don't have to talk about how I couldn't have outed myself today if I wasn't with you—Without you, I

couldn't do so many things. I think you know... you know that isn't a drunk confession. Whether you admit it or not..."

"Honey, you crunked." Ash kissed the top of Leone's forehead. "Me too, I think. I'm glad we're crunked together."

Part Two

The next morning, Leone awoke to a throbbing pain pushing at the back of zheir scalp, down zheir neck, and into zheir chest. Zhey squeezed zheir eyes together and soft tears slipped out. “Holy fuck...”

Leone rubbed zheir swollen face with zheir hands, as a way to distract zhemself from zheir headache, with the consequence of a new pain. A sharp burn radiated from the center of both zheir palms.

Unsure what state zheir hands were in, or zheir entire body, Leone opened zheir eyes to take a look—only to immediately regret that small gesture. Zhey were hit with a blaring light so bright that, for a split second, Leone was sure it was the flames of Hell. But as zheir eyes adjusted to the brightness, zheir surroundings seeped in, and Leone realized exactly where zhey were.

Across from Leone was the same windowsill zhey spent many lazy mornings people watching and reading in the sunlight when zhey were growing up. The same fire trucks zhey heard every morning from pre-K to high school *zoom zoom* zooming by. The rest of the room was bare from anything remotely nostalgic. Leone had wrapped up all of zheir old furnishings and decorations when zhey moved out of zheir mother’s apartment a few years ago. Even the bed zhey woke up in was humorless without zheir old superhero sheets.

The hangover’s shrilling pain made it too difficult for Leone to recall the sequence of events that led to zhem waking up hungover, at zheir mother’s house.

On the windowsill, there were three plastic water bottles and a handwritten note.

Bebe mucha agua y ve a dormir. Hablamos esta noche.

—*Mamá*

Leone eagerly followed the instructions. Zhey took a deep gulp from the first bottle, enjoying the sweet taste of chilled water. Leone poured the second bottle on zheir heated forehead, letting the water drip down, soothing zheir scratched-up palms.

The hangover wasn’t cured, but it was chilled off enough that Leone could attempt to recall the previous night.

Alcohol swirled through Leone's vision, blurring and brightening Ash's apartment, like a string of Christmas lights. Nude bodies were contorted around every nook and cranny of the studio, each radiating their unique perfume of sweat, lube, and pheromones.

Ash was leaning on zheir kitchen counter, mixing zhemsself another gin and tonic, giving Leone a perfect view of zheir perky, umber ass. Leone could barely recall what happened next, but somehow, Leone ended up grinding against Ash's legs. A warm vibration buzzed through zheir veins, like zhey were already balls deep, but zhey were barely even getting touched. The feeling was thick and warm, growing zheir dick and easing zheir mind.

Ash stretched zheir neck backward as zhey arched into Leone's humps.

A strange thought hit Leone: what would it be like to eat Ash? came up again. The curiosity turned into a pressing hunger as zhey let zhemsself take a small taste.

Zheir cock hardened as the salty, wet blood poured into zheir mouth, and Ash's long, high-pitched howl filled the room.

Everything blurred after.

Ash was surprisingly strong, as zhey pushed Leone into a chilled, metal enclosure. Leone whimpered, wet nose pushing against narrow bars, until zhey passed out.

And then... nothing. Then just waking up, here, at zheir mother's house, with a killer hangover.

"Wait—what the fuck? No. What the fucking fuck? Did I—did I try to eat Ash?" Leone could only meditate on that question for a split second before zhey snorted. Zhey pulled the carton of slightly smashed cloves out of zheir sewn-in bra and lit one up.

Okay, if that happened, that would be the worst punch line. Nothing to laugh about, but it was so left field, it had to be the dreams of a deranged drunk. Ash was probably in a ball somewhere, so hungover zhey wished zhey were eaten. Zhey were probably texting Leone minute-by-minute updates on zheir hangover status.

Leone patted zhemsself down, looking for zheir phone, but nada. Zhey searched in zheir shoes, under zheir bed, on the windowsill, but no phone. Zhey patted zhemsself down once more, just in case, and that was when Leone's hazy,

morning-after brain finally realized—they were in a dress in zheir Mamá’s house.

Zhey were in a dress in zheir Mamá’s house, and zheir Mamá left a note saying she wanted to talk to zhem about something. Best-case scenario here, it was a conversation about eating zheir best friend. “Fucking fuck fucker fucking a fucking fuck.”

This realization brought on a thick weight that Leone was more than familiar with. It was, by far, not the first time Leone felt the heavy anchor of guilt that zheir mother placed on zhem. Neither Leone’s gender, sexuality, nor non-monogamy fit into zheir mother’s traditional Peruvian ideals.

Leone opened the window, where the same old, rusty fire escape zhey grew up on was, but before zhey could follow old habits and escape down the wishing well, zhey heard a familiar whomping laugh echo down the halls.

Ash.

Leone didn’t run to the family room where the noise was coming from. Zhey more slugged along, at the slowest pace zheir body could possibly conceive and still be considered moving. The absurdity of zheir conservative, Catholic mother getting along with Ash was pulling Leone, but that was it.

And then it got weirder.

Leone peered into the living room to find Ash, Sara, and zheir Mamá eating pancakes, laughing merrily.

The living room was filled with mismatched furniture Leone’s mother had collected at various tag sales. Ash, Sara, and Jasmine, Leone’s Mamá, were sitting, side by side, on a lemon couch. Facing them was a pearl love seat.

Jasmine, had curly, red hair, and matching scarlet, square-shaped glasses, and the same tanned olive complexion as her children. She kept on taking breaks from her short stack to pull out photos from a huge photo album Leone had never seen before. And Ash would nod and nod, as if it were zheir own relatives in these books.

“Holy shit! Have we been incesting?” Leone blurted, to zheir immediate regret.

Jasmine’s bubbly, smiley face collapsed into a pointed scowl. Even stranger, Ash looked away, toward the ground, in an obvious avoidance.

It was Sara who spoke up. “Morning, Leone.”

“Wait—Leone? Who’s Leone?” asked Jasmine. She gestured toward Leone. “Is that what this is? Leone?”

“Leone is me and I am ‘this,’ so…” The tension built up in Leone’s gut again. Zhey looked into Ash’s eyes for help, but Ash was avoiding zhem. There was a gauze on Ash’s cheek, graduating from pink to maroon. “Fuck. Ash. What happened to your face?”

Ash looked at Leone with soft tears budding at the edges of zheir eyes. All the joy and happiness zheir face displayed, only minutes before, long gone.

Leone’s memory came back to zhem. Zhey could practically taste the rust flavor of blood—*Ash’s blood*—all over again. “Did I—did I bite you?”

Ash brushed zheir hands through zheir fauxhawk but said nothing. Zhey looked up to Jasmine for support. Jasmine whom zhey only just met. Jasmine who was staring at Leone, with knotted eyebrows and pursed lips.

Leone felt toxic. Zhey circled the room. “How did I do that to you?”

“Better question is how can you walk around my house in that dress?” Jasmine spat.

Leone buckled zheir lips. It was so much the better alternative of popping out wearing nothing other than yesterday’s panties. Zhey no longer had any clothes at zheir mother’s house, so zhey couldn’t change. The last time zhey slept over was over a year ago. The most frustrating part of this spectacle was that Leone wasn’t even feeling feminine anymore. If it was a normal day, zhey would be lounging home in zheir masculine clothes right about then. Most certainly, zhey felt nothing like the hard-femme, riot grrrl act the dress had become, with its rips and tears from the previous night’s rough-and-tumble. Here zhey were, forced to come out when zhey weren’t even ready, and zhey still felt like zhey were caught in a lie.

Ash narrowed zheir eyes, jerked zheir jaw. “What about you, Jasmine? You really aren’t going to tell zhem? You’ve kept this straight-up dangerous secret and you’re upset over a dress?”

“I know.” Jasmine sighed and rubbed the corner of her temples. She pulled out a photograph from the photo album and handed it to Leone.

The photo was of a deep-black, nearly purple, leopard walking toward the photographer with a leaning swagger.

Leone was confused. “I don’t—”

“You know the leopard in that photograph. That leopard has birthed, dressed, fed, and cleaned you.” Jasmine covered her face in her palms, her breathing loud and nasal. “So, I’m not exactly human. None of us are...”

“I need to sit down.” Leone slumped into the pearl love seat that faced the couch. “I guess I’m supposed to be like all *ooh* or *ahhh* but, honestly, Mamá, you aren’t making any sense at all. You’re saying that even though you are sitting, upright, with human skin, eating fucking pancakes, you’re a leopard?”

“I know. I know, I’m not making sense—I just... I’ve been stalling this for my entire life. I’m not ready.”

“We don’t always get to choose when we come out about who we really are,” Ash said.

A familiar warmth crept through Leone, easing zheir anxiety. *Thanks*, zhey mouthed to Ash.

“You, me, Sara—we’re a clan of leopard shapeshifters. Think werewolves, but like, wereleopards. This was one of the main reasons I left Peru. Connecting with another shapeshifter brings out our monster, and there are a lot of shapeshifters there. You weren’t suppose to shift, last night or ever. I’m sorry for not telling you earlier, Marco. I was trying to protect you. But it wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t had sex.”

“I don’t know what you are saying, Mamá, but there is one thing I do know. I’m not Marco. I’m Leone. I’m *androgino*. I use gender-neutral pronouns and... fuck it, I like the way I am.”

“You like the way you are? Your *disobedience*, your sexual immaturity, is why you shifted. If you did what I said, kept your virginity, you wouldn’t have bitten your friend’s face.”

Leone combed zheir hands in zheir hair, lightly growling. Zhey closed zheir eyes, the urge to leave zheir mother’s house, never to come back, battling zheir urge to stay, get closer to Ash, and apologize over and over again for something zhey didn’t even understand.

Before Leone could go either way, Ash spoke up.

“I’m sorry, Leone.”

“What?” Leone’s eyes popped open. “I’m the one that hurt you. After... after last night... after everything we’ve been through together... I *hurt* you. I’m sorry. Fuck, I don’t understand, but that doesn’t mean I’m not really sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry for turning you. I should have told you I was a shifter.”

“Oh.” Leone wished zhey could just shrug that off, but zhey couldn’t. The secret hurt like a cigarette burn right in the center of zheir chest. Zheir mother betraying zhem was expected, but Ash? Ash was supposed to be the one person that zhey could rely on, especially after their last time making love together.

Coldly and robotically, Leone got up from zheir chair and headed to the door. Zhey had lied to so many people, zheir entire life, and felt so much skull-crushing guilt for it. Turns out the entire world was lying to zhem as well. It was a malnourished feeling, depleted of hope for honest, intimate relations, with no desire to go forth and make them.

Zhey got to the front door without interruption: Jasmine and Ash glued to their seats with agape mouths and an inability to act through their guilt.

It was Sara who ran to Leone and went out the door with zhem.

“Way to defend me, sis. You barely said anything at all,” Leone said from the hallway.

“I—I just found out too. Leone, she was lying to me too. We were lying to each other. All this time, I worried and worried that she would see through my false virginity. Meanwhile she goes to the Amazon every year to get freaky with shapeshifters. It’s just...” Sara sighed. A piece of gold shimmered in her hand. “There was one more thing Mamá didn’t tell you. This piece of gold—it will help you shift back.”

Leone needed to go home. Zhey didn’t even want to change into masculine clothes anymore. Zhey didn’t want to *present* at all. Zhey wanted the isolation of zheir own home to confirm the few things zhey understood about zheir self-identity.

The neighborhood surrounding zheir mother’s house had changed greatly from when Leone was living there. Leone recalled the days where zhey could sway through this district with wide arms, but now zhey could barely stretch. The streets were clogged, shoulder to shoulder, waist to waist, with business suits.

Leone attempted walking to the downtown bus, but zhey kept pausing in temporary paralysis, like zhey were a buffering video, too lagged down with guilt, anxiety, and confusion, to load. Zhey felt so much, the simple act of continuous movement became an impossible task.

Zheir mother barely even acknowledged zhem. How could animal shifting be more respectable than gender-variant identity?

And then there was Ash—zheir wounded face was stapled to the back of Leone’s eyelids. Disgust curdled in Leone’s stomach. Zhey were already angrier at zhemself than anyone else. What right did zhey have for walking out? Whether zhey were conscious when it happened or not, *zhey* were the attacker.

One of these abrupt stops was interrupted when three businessmen pushed Leone to the ground. The scrapes on Leone’s palms reopened with a harsh sting and the piece of gold slipped out of Leone’s grip. Zhey looked upward, through zheir matted hair, at the three snickering faces of freshly shaven white men, all in three-piece suits. They looked like they were only slightly younger than Leone.

A lankier gentleman, in the center, gave Leone an exaggerated wink. “Watch where you’re going faggot. No. I’m sorry... *maricón*.”

His posse laughed.

Leone leaped to zheir feet, looming over zheir attackers. The men flinched at Leone’s sudden movement, which helped Leone raise zhemself even more. Leone leaned in, as if zhey were going to kiss that bigoted mouth, but instead whispered, “Go fuck yourself.”

Suddenly, a crinkly gray static coated Leone’s body.

The three guys took a huge step back. Their cowering bodies were like swaying a piece of steak in front of a rabid animal’s face. Leone could barely suppress the sudden urge to attack them. But before zhey could, the men evaporated into the crowd.

Growing up, Leone had hated this neighborhood because, at that time, it was covered with crosses and subsequent Catholic guilt, but at least it also came with delicious Peruvian desserts like *piononos* and *huevo chimbo*.

This—this was definitely worse.

Rage vibrated through Leone. Zhey tried to get even closer, ready to fight them right back, but strangely found zhemself crouching on all fours, even though zhey couldn’t remember readjusting to that posture. Unnerved, Leone looked downward at zheir body and jumped in shock.

Rosette-shaped patterns stained Leone’s new, slick fur, their visibility graduating, depending on whether they landed on a black patch of fur or

golden. A long curvy tail stood upright, communicating something that zhey didn't even know. Zheir body, long and robust, was cemented to the ground by four fluffy paws. Zhey raised one of these paws to zheir face, feeling narrow temples, a strongly defined jaw, and long whiskers puffing from zheir cheeks.

The hoard of people around zhem had dissipated into a panicked crowd, desperately attempting to escape Leone's presence.

The dark thoughts infiltrated Leone again: the ravenous fantasy of letting loose, chasing that crowd, jumping on a body and devouring it whole. But, unlike earlier, Ash's wounded face kept on glitching over zheir hungers.

Leone retracted, scooped into zhemself, unsure what zhey should do but knowing zhey needed to do something. All zhey knew about shifting back was that the gold had something to do with it.

Leone nuzzled into the piece of gold. It shimmered, shimmered, the only thing glistening on the grungy city sidewalk.

The street was filled with screaming pedestrians, most of which were backing further and further away from Leone. Their crescendo volume created a pressure in Leone's chest.

Tears oozed out of Leone's golden cat eyes, wetting the piece of gold. "I wish Ash was here."

"Where did the leopard go?" Leone looked up at a gaunt-faced pedestrian calling out to zhem from across the street.

Leone proceeded, homeward bound, squeezing the piece of gold in zheir fist so tightly zheir nails kissed white curves into zheir golden palm. Time moved slowly, and exhaustion set in. Leone tightened zheir fist even more, to keep zhemself awake with the additional sting.

As soon as Leone closed the front door to zheir apartment, zhey stripped out of zheir dress and panties. Zheir soft, brown cock dangled into the new airy space, until Leone's thighs framed it when zhey plopped right onto zheir tiled floors, too tired to even crawl into bed.

Zhey opened zheir fist to examine the gold piece, more relaxed now that zhey were in the sanctity of zheir home. Leone tried to read the inscription, but it wasn't written in Spanish or English. The only thing Leone could understand was the sun carving, which shimmered, shimmered, shimmered, even though Leone's apartment was dim.

Leone understood little of anything, but knowing that the combination of longing for Ash and having this piece of gold would help zhem keep human and stop zhem biting someone's face off was comforting. And zhey had more than an abundance of Ash longing.

Nuzzling zheir head into zheir upper arm, body curled into a ball, it wasn't long before sleep took over Leone's energy-depleted body and mind.

Leone woke up with many of the same questions zhey had before zhey passed out, but also with the same longing for Ash zhey had always had. Leone sighed. The whole reason zhey were never honest about zheir true feelings was because zhey were afraid of ruining their friendship. Well, their friendship was officially traumatized with new, unexpected tensions. Zhey might as well be more honest. Could things possibly be worst?

Leone pulled up a chat window on zheir laptop, sending Ash a message.

Leone: Did I leave my cell at yr place? zhey wrote mad casually, like yesterday was just another party, not urmmm the lived definition of a shitshow... lol

Leone smiled, seeing Ash's immediate '...' animation next to zheir name, indicating that zhey were writing something back.

Ash: Yr cell ish here! Come over and pick it up! zhey said with smooth ease, in total ~~*chillness~*~*, like zhey weren't spending all day refreshing chat, waiting for this moment...*

Leone: !!! Be right there~

Ash's building was pale pink, blending in to the rainbow of buildings on Colores Street. Leone let zhemself loiter outside of Ash's apartment for a second, to build up momentum. It was only seemed like yesterday that zhey rushed into that building, Ash at zheir side, barely even making it up on the stairwell. They both were so rambunctious, making out and groping each other as they inched into Ash's apartment. They were so excited to be passionate about each other.

Leone's chat with Ash *was* lighthearted but things were so tense at zheir Mamá's house. What if this meetup turned into a fight?

Leone didn't want to fight. Zhey wanted zheir best friend back.

Actually, even that wouldn't sate Leone's loneliness, but it was a lot better than not having Ash at all.

Leone hit the buzzer to Ash's apartment and then shouted zheir own name into the intercom.

No turning back now.

Or really fucking awkward if zhey turned back now.

Ash was sitting on the couch, patting a spot next to zhem. A blushed medical gauze was taped to zheir cheek.

Leone jerked from the doorway and came closer, fist clutching the gold piece. Zhey plopped to the spot Ash indicated, the edges of zheir legs brushing Ash's. "I'm sorry. I can scoot over."

"No. It's okay. I mean. If it's okay with you?"

Leone sighed. "I'm fine."

Ash picked up a smartphone from zheir coffee table. "Here's your phone, by the way."

Leone shrugged. "Thanks. I do need that. But you know that's not why I'm here. I mean. I'm here to apologize, again, for biting your face, and to tell you that I want us to be friends again. I miss you."

"Friends... right." Ash pursed zheir lips and breathed out audibly from zheir nose. "I mean, yeah, if that's what you want."

Friends. Leone bent to the easiness of friendship even after everything that had happened these past two days. Even after all the confessions that poured between them, Leone couldn't escape zheir fear. All zhey could do was nod, even though zheir throat dried and the corner of zheir eyes wetted at the trap of friendship.

Knees brushed knees. Breaths answered breaths. The tension that overtook the space was like a thick smog, or the phlegmy exhale of a smoker.

"You a leopard too?" asked Leone.

"Oh. I'm a lion. Urm. I can show you, if you want? I mean, I never shifted around a non-family member before, but maybe it'll be nice..."

Leone gave Ash the thumbs-up and Ash lowered zhemself to the floor, so zhey were on all fours.

Instantly, the space between them became prominent, as Leone's body ached for Ash's warmth. Zhey kept a careful watch, wanting to catch every second of zheir performance.

"Leone..." Ash moaned, right before the transformation took over.

When Ash shifted, it was like zhey were coming in and out of frequencies. Harsh gray-tone lines blurred zheir human body, until the belting roar clarified that something had happened.

The static blur dissipated, leaving behind a well-postured lion in the center of Ash's studio.

"Ash..." Leone's words tangled in zheir raspy breath. Zhey didn't want to mark this moment with something cliché and insignificant. It was so much the opposite. Ash's new cat face was surrounded by a long, curly reddish mane that extended back into golden-yellow fur. Zheir unruly hair partly masked zheir chartreuse eyes and septum piercing. Leone found it hard to digest that nearly no one else had ever seen this beautiful transformation. Ash was not *just* a lion shapeshifter, or an effeminate trans man, or Leone's best friend. Zhey were more substance than Leone could ever hope to be.

Leone wondered if Ash ever thought anything similar about zhemself.

Ash let out a string of guttural purrs as zhey repositioned so zhey were on the side, curled like a comma.

Uneasiness crept through Leone, but also something else, something much rarer. If zhey wanted to, zhey could shapeshift zhemself. Leone could attack Ash's exposed, vulnerable body in zheir violent, leopard form.

Zhey didn't want to do that. Zhey didn't want to hurt Ash ever again, but zhey could have, and Ash must have known it, after what happened the previous night. Yet, zhey were still showing Leone trust.

It made Leone lose zhemself, for a moment.

Come nuzzle with me, Leone heard zhem say, even though Ash's mouth was not moving.

Leone leaned onto Ash's belly. It was warm and soft and peaceful, like sipping a hot chocolate at the end of a frigid day. Leone closed zheir eyes and let zhemself melt into the moment. Zhey always thought Ash knew zhem better than zhey knew zhemself. Turned out there was more truth in that notion than zhey could have ever predicted. Leone was just discovering zheir shapeshifter self and Ash already had mastered zheirs.

“Ash... I don’t want to be friends. I’m too in love with you.”

I know...

Leone jerked up. “You know!?”

It isn’t your fault but there’s still a lot you don’t know, a lot you don’t understand. I don’t want to overload you with information, but there was an important piece that Jasmine glossed over. You clearly didn’t shift because you fucked a shapeshifter—we’ve been fucking for a whole year. You shifted because you fucked a shapeshifter who mutually was in love with you. That’s—that’s what unlocks it. I think the last time we fucked... the last grip of control I had for my feelings, slipped.

And I’m sorry. I’m sorry for not telling you. I should’ve been honest about who I was. Or how I felt about you, at least. I’m also sorry for bringing you to your Mamá’s house last night, in your feminine clothes. I fucked up in a lot of ways, but I want to fix it. I want...

Leone laughed. “I came here to tell you I loved you, Ash. I didn’t expect you to already know it from the inside out. Kinda ruffling my suaveness... but I find it endearing. Guess that means I’m screwed.”

Well, you know me. I’m trash. Ash’s whomping, growling laugh filled up the space, just as it had many times before, even though this time it came from a snarling pussy face.

Leone curled zheir gangly, golden limbs around Ash, who was now in human form. Their breaths mingled and their scents blended, as their nude shapes tangled into one.

Ash continued to explain to Leone some other things Jasmine didn’t elaborate on.

For instance, the gold must be on a shapeshifter at all times. If it wasn’t, they could shift anytime they felt a large amount of emotion, ranging from anger, to lust, to love, and onward. In this sense, shapeshifting was similar to narcolepsy. The reason Ash could control zheir transformations was because zhey had zheir blessed piece of gold stapled in between zheir nostrils.

Ash offered to do something similar to Leone; zhey rocked out of Leone’s grip and knelt on a towel that lay in front of the couch.

Leone adjusted zhemself so they were sitting up, facing Ash.

Also on the towel were sterilized piercing needles, a piercing cork, rubbing alcohol, a piece of cotton, rubber gloves, a sharpie, and an earring, made out of one of Ash's spare hooks and the piece of gold Sara had given to Leone. "So, we're giving you a Prince Albert, right?"

"Oh my God. Can you stop being a dick for like five minutes? For the amount of time it takes to put a hole in me. That's all I'm asking. After that, dick away."

"Fine. I'll be a good boy for five minutes. Then it's dick, dick, dick, dick, dick."

"I'll show you dick, dick, dick. Now come up here and give my face a new orifice."

Ash put on the rubber gloves and dabbed the piece of cotton with rubbing alcohol. Zhey disinfected Leone's left earlobe.

"That's the straight ear, right? It's very, very important that you penetrate my straight earlobe. No homo," Leone joked.

Ash smiled as zhey poked the center of Leone's earlobe with the sharpie. "Have you ever gotten anything pierced before?"

"No. What should I expect?"

"Some discomfort, but less than a shot. It won't be that bad. Especially for you, actually. Fuck it, if you want more pain we should do a spanking scene after the piercing."

Leone stuck out zheir tongue. "Calm down, kitty. Let's focus on the task at hand. Piercing me without blinding me, or having to cut my infected earlobe off, or anything else horrific."

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life. That's why I'm here. Now get with it."

Ash's smile popped in zheir dimples. Zhey picked up the piercing needle and aligned it to the dot zhey made while holding a piercing cork on the other side. Once the needle was removed, Ash pushed the earring through Leone's earlobe into the cork. The ring went through smoothly, easily, a slip and a fall, like the slippery, soft texture of their love for each other.

"Welcome to the marred life."

Leone and Ash decided to celebrate zheir new relationship with some drinks at Cotopaxi.

Ash threw on a crop top and jeans. “Do you want to wear what you came here in, or do you have a different gender presentation in mind?”

Leone smiled. Zhey appreciated that Ash understood where zhey were coming from. “I’m still jiving with the jeans and wifebeater, but maybe... something feminine as well...”

Ash grabbed a stick of lipstick from zheir back pocket. “Here?”

Leone smiled. “Perfect.”

Zhey walked over to Ash’s bathroom to put on the baby-pink lipstick.

Looking at zheir reflection was unnerving, in the sense that it felt like looking at an old friend but knowing that wasn’t true.

The last time Leone checked zhemsself out, zhey were unsure if Ash would ever be zheir friend again. Now zhey were going to zheir favorite bar to celebrate zheir new, romantic relationship. “Fucking perfect.”

They left the apartment and headed down the street; the high sunbeams curled their rays around Leone’s neck and shoulders. It wasn’t long before they were drinking Dark ’N’ Stormy cocktails at the bar together.

“Let’s play shower thoughts. Like, have you ever thought about how when you move your eyes away from a book you are reading the story automatically pauses?” Leone took a deep sip of zheir drink. “It’s like whoa, no remote control needed.”

“What about this... water can’t be ice cold because if it was than it would be ice.” Ash smiled, wrapped an arm around Leone’s neck. “Game. Set. Match.”

Leone bit on zheir lower lip, trying to think of another shower thought, when zheir cell beeped. Zhey pulled it out of zheir front pocket, finding an incoming text:

Mamá: *ciao mi amorcito, mi leone. thinking of u. hope u are doing ok. i <3 u, whatever shape u are because u <3 me, whatever shape i am. right?*

Leone texted her back:

Leone: *Yo tambien te amo, whatever shape you are. Lots of love recently... Ash and I... we are together now...*

In a beat, zheir phone buzzed again:

Mamá: happy for you!! sorry, for this morning and probably so much more, but if you are androgino then i <3 my androgino, just needed to say that.

Leone: Do you want to come over next week for coffee?

Ash clutched Leone's hands, rubbing each joint. "I feel like I won a contest that I don't remember participating in. My best friend is my lover. Shit... how did we get so lucky?"

"Dunno, but if I could, I would bless Colores Street to thank it for giving me... my selfhood, you, my family..." Leone leaned back, into Ash's grip. "I think I am in love."

The End

Author Bio

NK Layne sees the world through queer brushstrokes, infinite rainbows, demonic cartoons, gory afternoons, and a veil of moss.

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