

Stepping Out For A Breath Of Fresh Air

Keith the llama sidled up to the bar and slid into one of the barstools. He got the bartender's attention and ordered a red wine. He didn't want to drink any more of the awful beer that Danny insisted on buying by the pitcher. Truth be told, he just didn't want to be here at all. He was only out to support that dumb leopard. His friend who had volunteered to take all of the new students out for a pub night.

It was going to be a mess. Keith turned to look at Danny, refilling glasses for the new students who were of drinking age, and rolled his eyes. Danny had asked him to come as some example of someone successfully going into their last year at the university, but none of the new students cared about that. They wanted a party. Keith still felt like he needed to stick around and make sure things didn't get wildly out of control, but he didn't need to dive into the chaos. He could have a relatively quiet drink at the bar while Danny played drinking games in the back of the bar. This place wasn't really Keith's scene. He was much more at home in a quiet cocktail lounge with low jazzy music where he could hold a conversation.

The bartender slid Keith's drink across the bar to him, and Keith dropped some bills on the bar. He took a sip of his drink, and took a deep breath, trying to relax a little and ignore the mayhem that Danny was trying to corral behind him. He hoped he wouldn't end up with too much of a hangover tomorrow for the first day of classes.

He took another sip of his drink, and out of the corner of his eye he saw an older lion at the end of the bar that was peering at him over the rim of what looked like a double whiskey. Keith took another sip of his drink, and looked over at the lion, but he had already averted his eyes to something behind the bar. Keith took the time to get a bit of a look at him. He was wearing a sharp black suit with a thin black tie, and a pair of small square glasses were across the bridge of his nose.

Keith turned back to his drink and took another sip, trying to keep the lion in his peripheral vision. Any time a large carnivore takes that much of an interest in an herbivore, it's worth being wary. Every so often, he caught the lion peeking at him again, trying to be subtle about it. Keith had definitely not had enough to drink to drop his guard around a predator like a lion.

Keith stood up and walked away from the bar to join Danny for just a moment. He grabbed the leopard by the shoulder to get his attention. Danny

turned to Keith, his eyes slightly unfocused and glazed with the amount he'd had to drink.

"Keith!" Danny slurred. "Helluva party, eh? Having a good time?"

Keith leaned up to speak into one of Danny's ears, "Hey, there's a lion guy at the bar who keeps looking at me."

Danny's expression immediately changed to anger. "You need me to go punch him for you, man?"

Keith pinched the bridge of his muzzle between his eyes. "No, Danny. I just wanted to let you know. I've got a plan, but if you lose track of me, lion at the bar, black suit, square glasses." I'll text it to you, too.

"Okay, Keith! I'll keep my eyes open!" said Danny, sliding effortlessly back into party mode. Keith didn't suspect he'd even remember having this conversation in five minutes. He pulled out his phone and sent the text to Danny with the same information he had just told him.

His plan was to go around the other side of the bar to come up behind the lion and watch him a little more in secret, then talk to one of the bouncers if he seemed to be hunting for some vulnerable herbivore.

But first he needed to use the washroom. Keith pushed his way through the crowd to the bathroom which was mercifully empty at the moment. He relieved himself, and while he was washing his hands, the washroom door opened.

Square glasses. Black suit.

Keith felt a moment of panic being in an enclosed space with a carnivore that had been staring at him just a few minutes prior. His heart was racing, and he suddenly wanted to run as fast as he could back to his dorm room.

Except the lion was between him and the door.

The lion raised his hands and said softly, "Hey, just... it's okay."

Keith jumped, and recoiled as the lion's movement showed off all of his claws. "Stay away from me! Are you here trying to hunt for some herbivore to devour? Is that it? Is that why you were staring at me?"

The lion folded his hands in front of him, trying to look as non-threatening as he possibly could. "No, please. I don't want any trouble, I'm sorry I was staring at you at the bar, I didn't mean anything by it."

Keith felt himself calming down a little. The lion was obviously a large carnivore, but he was slightly hunched over, making him look a little smaller. Less threatening. He kept his hands folded politely in front of him, his claws hidden. "But you were staring at me at the bar. What's your deal? Why did you follow me into the bathroom?"

The lion blinked and replied, "Follow you? You disappeared from the bar, and I finished my drink. I was going to use the bathroom and leave. My friends ditched me, and I'm bored."

Keith shook off his wet hands and grabbed some paper towels from the dispenser, trying to calm his breathing. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little on edge. My friends have all but ditched me too, and I'm sure you understand why I might be a little nervous getting stared at by a carnivore at a bar."

The lion nodded again. "My apologies. Please, let me make it up to you. Can I buy you a drink?"

Keith stared at the lion, still unsure.

The lion shrugged and moved over to one of the urinals. "It sounds like we're both bored, so we might as well have a chat."

Keith smirked. "Hard to have a conversation in this place with that terrible pop music at full volume."

The lion chuckled a little and replied, "I know a nice little cocktail place nearby. No ulterior motives, I promise. I just want to apologize for making you uncomfortable."

Keith shrugged a little. "Fine. It sounds like more fun than what I was doing anyway. I'll meet you out front."

The lion smiled politely. "I'll be out in a minute. The name's Alan, by the way."

"Keith. Nice to meet you."

Keith tapped Danny on the shoulder again. The increasingly drunk leopard turned and leaned heavily against Keith. "Hey, buddy! You havin' a good time?" the leopard slurred.

Keith leaned in close to Danny's ear and said, "Seems like you've got things under control here! I've got classes first thing tomorrow, so I'm going to split!"

Danny leaned back and gave Keith a double thumbs up, wobbling back to the table where the slightly raucous first-years were drunkenly trying to learn the school song. Keith rolled his eyes and walked out of the bar into the slightly cool early autumn air, and leaned against the building, waiting for Alan.

The lion appeared after a couple of minutes. "Huh. You actually waited."

"Let's just say that it wasn't my scene in there, and I'm... intrigued. Please, lead on, I'm always looking for a new and comfortable cocktail spot."

Alan smiled and nodded, and beckoned for Keith to follow him. "So, if it's not your scene, what were you doing there?"

Keith shrugged. "A friend of mine was ostensibly in charge of the chaos going on in there, and he asked me to come along. Turns out my presence was superfluous, so here we are. Your friends ditched you, you said?"

Alan grunted, his grin replaced with an annoyed grunt. "Yeah. Fucking Frank chasing tail and wanted me as his wingman. Turns out I was superfluous too, so he and Andy left me at the bar alone while they went off to hook up."

Keith smirked. "The way you describe it sounds like a familiar dance. Why humour them if they keep doing it to you?"

Alan shrugged. "They annoy me, but they're my closest friends. We're a pretty tight-knit group, and I've known them forever. You don't throw your friends away because they're sometimes thoughtless." The lion pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped one out. He paused in his walk long enough to light it, cupping his hands against the cool breeze, and took a long drag. "Besides, he's spent plenty of nights playing along with my follies." He offered a cigarette to Keith.

"No, thanks." replied the llama. "That's fair. I guess I'm like that with Danny sometimes. We've known each other for a few years now. I'm sure at some point we'll get to that point instead of me just always doing favours for him."

Alan chuckled. "Well, you must have some kind of fondness for him if you keep doing him favours. Are you a couple or something?"

Keith was lost in thought and answered carelessly, "No. Besides, he's straight." He stopped walking when he realized what he'd said. He cleared his throat and quickly added, "We're straight, um... we're both straight."

Alan blew out a cloud of smoke and laughed. "Not out, yet? That's fine, my lips are sealed." He took a final drag from the cigarette and tossed it into a sewer grate before he opened the door to a small cocktail bar, inviting Keith into the low-lit interior. "Here we are."

Keith stepped into the bar and looked around. High backed banquettes and low tables with real candles in jars on them. Low jazz music was playing, and the few patrons were relaxed and chatting quietly. Alan invited Keith to join him at a quiet table in a dim corner with a good view of the ample back-lit bar. "First round's on me. What do you like?"

Keith slipped into the bench seat and said, "Nothing too strong. Do they make a good Old Fashioned?"

Alan grinned. "They make a great Old Fashioned. Be right back."

Keith watched as Alan walked over to the bar. The bartender was another lion who greeted Alan with a handshake that seemed more friendly than businesslike. Alan said something to him and he looked over in Keith's direction before returning to say something to Alan and they both laughed.

Keith didn't feel alarmed by it. He did feel surprised that he didn't feel alarmed. Alan at least seemed friendly to him, and the conversation on the way here made Keith feel like maybe he was gay too. Is that what the staring at the bar was all about? Was this older lion coming on to him? Keith guessed it made sense the way he was talking to him. Alan had guessed correctly that he wasn't out yet. Keith hadn't told a soul.

Alan walked back to the table to find Keith lost in thought. He put the drinks down, looking at the llama with his delicate features and slim build. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off of the llama at the other bar, even though he didn't normally date herbivores. But Keith had looked so

intriguing. He slipped onto the plush bench next to Keith and smiled kindly at him. "There you are, one Old Fashioned. Cheers!" He raised his glass to Keith.

Keith blinked a couple of times, and smiled back at Alan. He picked up his glass and clinked the rim against the lion's, and took a sip. The drink was indeed delightful. "Wow, your bartender friend really knows his stuff."

"Yeah, Jonah is a young up-and-comer in the mixology scene. He's going to own his own place someday and it's going to be big." Alan took a sip of his Manhattan, and watched the flickering candle flame refracted through the cut glass of the rocks glass and the clear brown liquor broken up by chunks of crushed ice. He loved the way a cocktail looked in this light. He looked at Keith again, and watched the candle's flame dance in the llama's big amber eyes.

Keith caught him staring again. "No ulterior motives, hmm?" he said with a grin. "The look you're giving me right now might not be predatory, but it feels like you might want something from me."

Alan cleared his throat and took another sip of his drink. This llama really was something else. He was showing no fear to an obviously larger carnivore. The more he learned about him, the more intrigued Alan was. "Well, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself, Keith?"

Keith relaxed into his seat and shrugged. "What you really want to ask me is why I'm not out yet, right?"

Alan waved the notion off with his free hand. "That is none of my business if you're not interested in sharing. Everyone has their own reasons and circumstances, and I'm not about to lecture someone for not wanting to be out. It took me years to feel comfortable with it."

"Even with your old friend Frank?"

Alan laughed. "Especially with Frank. The longer you know someone the harder it can be. You have that friendship for so long and you don't want anything to change. But change is good sometimes, and if they're real friends they won't see you differently. Or, they'll see you differently, but they'll still see you as the same animal."

Keith pondered for a moment and turned his glass a few times on the table, watching the flickering candle light through the cocktail. He said quietly, "I'm worried my dad won't approve."

Alan sighed and nodded. "I can relate to that. And my dad didn't. Not for a long while. But eventually he decided that he'd rather have his son in his life than to be angry at me forever. It gets better, though. It did for me, at least."

Keith kept his eyes on his drink. He was suddenly full of questions. "Were you already out at my age?"

"It's not a race, Keith." he put a heavy hand on Keith's shoulder. "Where I was at your age and where you are now are not relevant to each other."

Keith nodded, and looked up at Alan again. The warmth of the lion's hand on his shoulder was pleasant, and Keith was feeling a little braver after the couple of drinks he'd had. "So... I haven't been really dating or anything for a while, so forgive me if I'm being oblivious, but have you been flirting at me all night, and I'm just too stupid to get it?"

Alan smiled warmly at the llama, and slid his hand up and down his back, gently. "Listen, Keith. You're an attractive young man, and yes, I've been coming on to you a little, but just because I'm attracted to you and bought you a drink doesn't mean you owe me anything at all. I definitely don't want you to feel that way. Besides, you're the most interesting new person I've met in a long time."

Keith chuckled a little, and took another sip of his drink, then leaned a little into Alan's touch. "Well, maybe I want to flirt back, but I'm just terrible at it."

Alan scanned the room quickly. He picked this table because he knew it was private. He could see Jonah at the bar, but none of the other patrons, and he knew Jonah wouldn't interrupt anything. He looked back down at Keith, into those big expressive eyes, and lifted his other hand to gently run the back of his fingers along Keith's cheek. "Well, why don't you let me take the lead, then? You just need to tell me no if I take anything too far, okay?"

Keith looked deep into Alan's eyes, and nodded, his heart beating fast. He felt nervous, but he couldn't resist the thrill that ran up his back. He hadn't felt brave enough to try to flirt with guys before, so he had just kept his secret to himself, and now here was someone who had seen right through him, and was reaching out. Keith guessed that Alan was probably about ten years older than he was--somewhere in his early or mid 30's. And he was a

carnivore. Keith had always been a little nervous around big carnivores that he didn't already know well. But Alan certainly didn't exude malice or anything. He leaned his cheek into the lion's gentle touch.

Alan sidled a little closer to Keith, the hand on his back slipping around him, and gently coaxing him closer. The llama was obviously nervous, but genuinely curious about what the lion was about to do. Alan slid his fingertip under Keith's chin and tilted his muzzle up just a little, and pressed his lips to the llama's for a gentle kiss.

Keith's mind was reeling. He'd kissed girls before. Back in high school and in his first year at University. But they'd all been herbivores. And girls! Now he felt the heat and strength of this lion pressed against him, and those warm, soft lips hiding sharp and vicious teeth. He could taste the whiskey Alan had been drinking, and he could smell the scent of cigarettes from the lion's fur and clothes. Keith sighed softly and reached up to gently tangle his fingers in Alan's mane, and pressed his lips back against the lion's, closing his eyes.

Alan closed his eyes, hugging Keith close, feeling his slight frame pressed against his chest as they softly and gently made out in their seat. He pulled back after a moment, tracing his fingertips softly down the lines of Keith's neck.

Keith panted a little as Alan broke the kiss. He was reeling from the feeling of his instincts telling him to flee while at the same time his body was telling him that he rather wanted more of that. He ruffled his fingers through Alan's mane under his chin and sighed. "So... how well do you know the bartender exactly, and is there a back room in this place?"

Alan grinned craftily down at Keith. "Join me where the washrooms are in two minutes."

Jonah grinned at Alan. "I mean sure, it's super quiet tonight. Good thing you didn't bring him here last night, we were hopping. Just use the employee washroom, and make sure you lock the door."

Alan grinned back. "Thanks, Jonah. You're the best."

Jonah chuckled. "Look at you, making out with cute boys in the bathroom like a teenager."

Alan scowled playfully and growled, "Listen here, you little shit." They both laughed, and Alan said softly, "He's... not out yet. Going to try to keep this discreet is all. Also, don't want to get you in trouble for the optics of a big carnivore making out with a smaller herbivore in the back of the bar."

Jonah shrugged. "Meh, no trouble on my end. They don't pay me enough to be a bouncer anyway. But speaking of trouble, here it comes."

Alan turned around to see Keith walking confidently up to the bar. The lion took a moment to get a better look at the llama. He wasn't tall, but his slim build made him seem taller than he was. The long, slim neck helped, too. He was dressed sharply, but casually. A plain green pastel dress shirt tucked into casual khakis. Keith walked up and leaned on the bar.

"You mix a hell of a drink, um, Jonah was it?"

Jonah beamed at Keith. "That's me! Glad you liked it." He leaned in to Alan's ear and whispered softly, "This one seems like trouble. Good trouble, though."

Alan chuckled and looked down at the bar for a second, and smoothed his tie down his chest. He had to admit, he felt about as nervous as a teenager right now. He looked at Keith again, and the llama looked back at him. Nervously? Expectantly?

Was it anticipation he saw in those beautiful eyes?

He cleared his throat and invited Keith to follow him, and led him towards the staff bathroom behind the two doors indicating the public ones. He flicked on the light and pulled the door shut, turning the lock on the door handle before turning back to Keith.

Now that he was here, Keith felt nervous. He swallowed and realized that he had allowed himself to get into rather a precarious position. Alone in a locked room with a big carnivore. He looked up at Alan who was smiling at him kindly. Once again, he saw no malice or dark intent in that honest face. The expression was beguiling. He took a step forward and put his hand gently on Alan's chest. "You bring guys here often?"

Alan huffed and brought his hand up to softly stroke his fingertips along Keith's cheek. "To the bar? Yes. To the back room? No."

Keith nuzzled his cheek into the lion's touch as he took another half step closer. "So what makes me so special?"

Alan leaned down to Keith. He could feel the llama's warmth, and the smell of liquor and fruit on his breath. "I don't know, yet. But I'm interested to find out." and he pressed his lips to Keith's again. He felt the llama's body melt against his, his slim chest pressed against his own. Alan growled quietly into the kiss, and slid his tongue against Keith's lips, and was rewarded with the herbivore's tongue playfully dancing with his own.

Keith felt the fur on the back of his neck stand up from the sound of that growl. It sent a tingle down his back that was thrilling, exotic. Instincts be damned, he loved it. He reached up to wrap his fingers up in the thick mane at the back of Alan's head, gripping the thick and soft fur as they kissed. He felt Alan's hands slide down his back and pull him closer against his muscular frame, and Keith didn't resist, letting the bigger animal guide him.

Alan panted through his nose. He could barely believe he was doing this. He growled again, feeling Keith's body shiver a little, accompanied by a quiet moan that let him know he was doing something right. He cupped the back of Keith's head in one of his big hands, and then turned cautiously, pressing the llama against the wall. The back of Keith's head bumped inelegantly against the corner of a shelf. Alan pulled out of the kiss for a second, still panting, and said, "S-sorry about that."

But Keith was having none of it. He grabbed Alan's tie and tugged him back into the kiss. He had never let go like this before in his life, and it was liberating. For just a moment to feel like he's not in control. To let this big carnivore lead him for a while. Keith had never felt more free.

Alan shrugged himself out of his suit jacket and managed to hang it, one-handed, on the hook on the back of the bathroom door. He growled softly again as Keith started to tug his tie off. The lion slid his hands up Keith's chest and started to unbutton his shirt, while Keith did the same to him, tossing his tie onto a shelf over the sink. Their lips barely parted for the entire operation.

Soon, both of their shirts were open, and Alan's big broad hands ran over Keith's chest while Keith's delicate fingers tangled in the lion's thick, soft fur. Alan pulled back a little to look down at the smaller animal, the beautiful thick soft wool over his chest and belly, his lithe and slim frame. The llama was so pretty, and Alan huffed quietly.

Keith looked up at Alan, still panting, and smiled. He leaned his head forward and nuzzled gently against the lion's chest. He kissed the warm, soft fur and let it slide against his cheek. It was a luxurious sensation. Keith realized he'd come out of this absolutely stinking of lion, but he was well past caring at this point. He felt Alan's broad hands sliding over his shoulders and along the curve of his slim neck, and he responded by sliding his fingers through the lion's fluffy belly fur. Keith's tongue teased softly at one of Alan's nipples, and the lion gave a quiet gasp, followed by a moan as Keith gave it a gentle nibble.

Alan clenched his teeth as Keith teased him. He arched his back a little and hissed through his teeth at the gentle pressure of herbivore teeth around his nipple. He gripped Keith's shoulder tighter, trying his best to be careful of his claws, and gave a low growl in his chest.

Keith shivered once again with that growl. He pressed his chest against the thick fluff of Alan's belly, feeling the lion's muscles through the fur. He gently kissed at Alan's chest again, then was caught by surprise when the lion slipped his hands under Keith's arms, and lifted him effortlessly to sit him on the counter next to the sink.

Alan took a half-step back, looking at the breathless llama in front of him. His wool was ruffled and his shirt was hanging open, half-off of one shoulder. He leaned in again to press his lips to Keith's, and his big paws drifted down to Keith's thighs. It may not have been predatory instincts, but something was certainly awakening within Alan. He slid his hands up to Keith's waist and started to fumble with the llama's belt.

Keith panted and pulled back. "W-wait... no, wait..."

Alan's hands froze, and he stepped back. He was also still panting a little. "S-sorry... that was too far." Alan took a deep, steady breath and ran his fingers down his own chest, smoothing out his ruffled fur a little.

Keith looked down into his lap, and folded his hands together. "I-I... I don't want to break the mood or anything, but... I don't know if I'm ready for..."

Alan cut him off. "No, please, no do not feel bad about stopping things. Breaking the mood is better than me breaking a boundary that I shouldn't. Trust me, I've... um... I've been where you are. I wish I'd had the confidence then to do what you just did."

Keith looked up at Alan, staring into the lion's eyes. "I'm sorry."

Alan smiled, his lips curling up. Those two words said so many things. "It was a long time ago."

Keith took a deep breath and looked down at himself. "So what now?"

"Well, I hope you'll give me your number so we can stay in touch. As friends at least."

Keith grinned in response. "Worried what dating an herbivore might do to your image as king of the beasts?"

Alan scowled and muttered, "Ugh, how I hate that phrase."

Keith put his hands up. "Sorry! Sorry, I didn't know it was a sore point."

"But no, I'm not worried about my image. You are definitely the most interesting animal I've met in a long long time."

"Well, then you'd better give me your phone," said Keith, holding his hand out.

The two animals exchanged numbers and did their best to get straightened out and dressed. Happily, nothing had been torn during their escapades. Alan stuffed his tie into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and slipped it back on, then opened the door for Keith and they returned to the bar.

Jonah couldn't hide a grin as they came back to the bar. He held up a bottle of bourbon and asked, "Shots?"

Alan laughed, and Keith shrugged. "Sure, why not."

They llama and lion clinked glasses and took their drinks. Keith was less used to the harsh liquor, and coughed once as he put the shot glass down on the bar.

Jonah cleared the glasses away. "You didn't leave a mess for me to clean up back there, did you?"

Alan laughed. "No, nothing. Though it might smell like llama back there for a few days."

"I'll just spray the air freshener stuff. Another drink for you two?"

Keith pulled out his phone and checked the time. "Oof. It's late. Thanks, but no, I really need to be getting home." He walked up to Alan and leaned up to place a gentle kiss on the lion's cheek. "Stay in touch now, okay?"

Alan smiled. "You bet I will. It has been my pleasure meeting you, Keith. I hope I'll see you again soon."

"Me too. Have a good night, Alan. You too, Jonah. Hope to see you soon." Keith was smiling as he walked out of the bar, and grinned all the way back to his dorm.

Keith's phone woke him up the next morning. He groaned a little and sat up in bed. No hangover that he could detect, but he wished he hadn't felt too sleepy to take a shower last night. He could still smell Alan all over himself. He smacked his lips a couple of times and dragged himself out of bed to get ready for his morning classes.

Even after a shower and a fresh set of clothes, he felt a little nervous walking the hallway to his first class. Could people still smell lion on him? He had scrubbed himself well in the shower, so hopefully not. He still felt a bit like a rebellious teenager, hooking up with carnivores in back rooms.

Keith shrugged to himself and pulled out his phone. It hadn't even been twelve hours, he wasn't expecting to hear back from Alan, yet. He entered his first class of the day, and took a seat in the lecture hall off to the side near the front. He was occupied getting his notebook out when the professor walked in, and started introducing himself.

"Good morning, class. Welcome to a new semester at Galdona."

Keith blinked and froze. He put his notebook on the desk in front of him and looked up at his new professor. His new lion professor.

"You have got to be kidding me," he said softly to himself.

Alan took care of a few housekeeping items at the top of the class, and then delved into his lecture. He spent most of his time at the boards, his eyes only ever briefly sweeping across the lecture hall, but not really looking. After he'd

laid out the broad strokes of the material they would be covering in the class, he turned finally to face the students. "Any questions?"

A few hands shot up, and he addressed them. He looked off to the side where a tiger had a question about exam timetables, and Alan started an answer but became distracted about halfway through. Two rows behind the tiger was a familiar face. Alan cleared his throat as he thought to himself, "You've got to be kidding me."

As class ended and everyone filed out of the room, a few students came up to the front with some last questions for their new prof. Alan could see Keith hovering around the edge of the group, and stayed as it thinned out, until they were alone in the huge lecture hall.

Alan cleared his throat. "Well, this is awkward."

Keith laughed a little. "Is it? I hadn't noticed. Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I had planned to move to the evening lecture on this course anyway."

Alan cocked an eyebrow, and Keith laughed. "Not because of you. I had planned to before to balance my schedule a little, and I was dragging my feet, but now I'll definitely get it done."

Alan grinned and handed Keith a card. "Well, if you ever need some help with the material, here are my office hours."

Keith took the card, letting his fingertips brush the back of Alan's hand. "Thank you. I'll be sure to keep that in mind." He paused for a moment, looking up at Alan, then cleared his throat and said, "So, what are you up to on Friday? I'm thinking of going to grab a cocktail. I recently found this great little spot."

Alan grinned wider and replied, "Sounds great. I wouldn't dream of missing it."