

Unedited Story

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Repressed, that was the exact word Lexi Pride would use to describe herself. She was certain her friends felt the same way, why else would they purposefully exclude her from their planned outing at club Reign's annual Masquerade Ball. Well, she'd just show them she could be as sultry and decadent as the renowned event was reported to be.

Zeke Knight was just along for the ride. After all what hot-blooded shifter would miss the opportunity for a night of debauchery with one or two willing humans, certainly not him. The last thing he expected was to find the woman he wanted to bind himself to for all eternity.

Chapter One

Acceptance.

She reached the final creed of the twelve-step mantra in a matter of seconds.

"I'm sorry Lexi. We just didn't think, that is, it just didn't seem like something you'd..."

Her friend's explanation trailed off but she didn't need Kayla to finish the thought aloud. It was obvious what the other woman was thinking; it was a collective belief among all three of her friends. There was no need to sugar coat things. They thought she was uptight. Who could blame them? If something acted and quacked like a duck, how else could it be described? She, Lexi Pride, definitely *fit* the bill of a prude, with a capital P.

"It's fine Kay," she forced a smile she didn't quite feel, dropping the elaborately decorated invitation back on the counter where it first caught her attention. It landed on top of three similar invites. There was one card for each of her friends; Kayla, Robyn and Jamie, respectively.

"Hey, I'm not all married to the idea of going anyway. So if you rather we did something else on Saturday night instead I'm game and I'm sure Robyn and Jamie would be too." Kayla continued.

The suggestion was a sweet gesture, but Lexi knew it wasn't true. From what she'd heard over the

years Reign's Masquerade Ball was the event to end all events. People jumped through hoops to get tickets and spent months preparing for the occasion. There was no way she would be so selfish as to ask her friends to give up an evening of fun to accommodate hermit like life style.

"Don't even think about suggesting such a thing. There's no reason you all shouldn't go."

"Really, it's no biggie." Kayla shrugged nonchalantly.

She had to give her friend and "A" for effort for such a valiant attempt at sounding convincing.

"Girl please, try selling the lie to someone else." Lexi caught the guilty look Kayla tried to conceal as she moved about her kitchen retrieving mugs for the coffee she'd just finished brewing.

"You sure? It's been a while since we've all gotten together to do something."

"True, but I want you to go. Just make sure to have fun enough for me too." *Somebody needs to*, Lexi added silently.

She saw the way Kayla paused before turning to her with two steaming mugs in hand and a broad, almost conspiratory, smile on her face. Lexi was certain whatever was on her mind would be a doozy.

"How about I do you one better. Why don't you come with us?"

"Me?" Lexi sputtered certain she'd heard wrong.

"You said it yourself, you need to have some fun. Why not at a masquerade ball where anonymity will be par for the course? You could really let go and explore the tigress I know is buried within. Besides, it would shock the hell out of Jamie and Robyn and you know how much I'd enjoy that."

The look on her other friends faces upon hearing the news alone would be worth the adventure. But could she really do it? Sure there was no rule that said she had to participate in anything, but she'd definitely be exposing herself to some questionable behavior, to say the least. Kayla waited patiently

for her response but Lexi could read the anticipation on her face. At thirty-three the most adventurous thing Lexi had ever done was call in sick at work to be the first in line to purchase her favorite author's latest novel. The book had been well worth the white lie and docked vacation time. The ball, on the other hand, was in a league of its own. She had to admit, it was...tempting. Attending the affair would prove to everyone she could be equally outgoing. More importantly, she'd show herself there was more to life than the safe little bubble she lived in. Maybe it was time for her to break out of her shell.

Lexi shook her head as if her friend's suggestion would dissolve in the action. It didn't.

"It's probably too late to get an extra ticket. I heard them talking about it being sold out on the radio weeks ago."

Kayla's grin grew, if that were even possible. "You just leave it up to me"

"And I don't have a thing to wear."

This time Kayla cocked her head to one side. "Hello! I'm going to act as if I didn't hear you just say that. Honey, I've turned out red carpet outfits in less time."

A fashion designer by profession, Kayla could do just what she promised. Lexi had observed first hand how resilient her friend was under pressure. Everything she turned out graced the front pages of glamour magazines and kept the A-listers calling her.

"Well?"

Maybe Kayla was psychic, she had to be because her face lit up well before Lexi gave her answer.

"I'll do it. Who knows, I might even come back with my own tale to tell."

"Na-ah girl. Rule number one, whatever happens at the ball stays there. Now, while you're still in such an agreeable mood why don't I tell you about the outfit I have in mind for you."

Zeke wasn't a particularly patient creature, a fact he freely admitted. Those who knew him respected his wish for brevity, understood his desire for quick, sound resolutions in most matters. Why his younger brother would force him to endure the confinement of an airplane by abusing a promise oath was beyond his comprehension. Not only did he hate being trapped in the metal encasement like a sardine, he detested the length of time it took for him to fly from his beloved Alaska to traipse to the hot climes of southern California. He bit back a growl of disgust. How could a self-respecting Arctic shifter ever call L.A. home?

After five years touring the world his sibling finally purged the nomadic bug from his system. Unfortunately, he had decided to permanently relocate outside their homeland. As if that weren't enough, he recently informed Zeke he'd fallen head over heels for a woman whom he refused to give any details about until after the two met. To Zeke's further irritation said meeting would only occur if he agreed to come to Los Angeles.

He shifted in the too small seat stretching his long legs out into the narrow aisle. The construction of the craft definitely hadn't factored in a man of his stature. At six-foot five inches and close to three hundred pounds Zeke Knight was far from a little man. A fact one of the male stewards seemed to remind him of each time he tapped Zeke's shoulder about keeping the aisle clear. He'd already been warned several times by the effeminate attendant but silently dared the toothpick of a man to say anything else to him. He was restless, and becoming increasingly more irritated with each passing moment.

"First class my ass. A child requires more leg room than this," he grumbled loudly for any and all to hear.

“Count yourself lucky that you have an aisle seat my friend.” Dirg’s clipped response reminded him that he wasn’t alone in his discomfort. It was true what they said about misery enjoying company, at least partially. “Your brother’ll get my fist in greeting for this journey.”

“You’ll need to stand in line.”

“Stand? Ha! Only if my legs regain circulation.”

Zeke snorted. “Remember, it was you who encouraged him to travel.”

“If I suggest something like that to another of our youth-”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have a fist ready for your mouth. Although I believe this experience will serve as enough of a warning to you in the future.”

“Now I see the wisdom in your commandeering me for this, and here I thought it was to prevent you from dragging that wayward cub home.”

As much as Zeke hated to admit it, he had brought Dirg along for just that reason. He would need the added voice of reason to prevent him from trying to force Lane to return with them. His brother’s decision to become a city dweller didn’t sit well with him. His kind belonged on the open range, not in jam packed cities which offered no privacy to shift into their bear form. Lane wasn’t the first to abandon their homeland. It was becoming harder to convince the youth to stay, especially the males who far outnumbered their women. Their already sparse community was dwindling. They were employing more and more non-shifters in various aspects of their business. Already more than half of the men who manned his fishing boats were ordinary non-shifters.

“On a brighter note,” Dirg began, cutting in on his thoughts. “Lane has promised the party we’ll be attending should yield enjoyable distractions.”

The plane shook before dipping enough to make Zeke’s stomach roll in disapproval. “It had better

A Knight's Pride

Nia K. Foxx

be the party of the century.”

Chapter Two

The rules were simple.

A. No eating

B. No quick movements

C. And most importantly it would probably be best if she kept her breathing to a minimum. Short and shallow, at best.

At least those were Lexi's thoughts when Kayla presented her with costume only an hour before the ball and rushed her into her bedroom to get ready before Jamie and Robyn arrived.

Weighing the silvery, shimmering, but stretchy, material in her hand Lexi doubted there'd be any rushing the process of tucking herself neatly into the outfit. Eye balling the garment wearily she couldn't help but wonder who Kayla had in mind as she made the cat suit...correction...tiger suit for her. Granted she wasn't what anyone would call rubenseque but neither was she Olive Oyl thin. Lexi liked to think of herself as a perfect meshing of the two. Curvy in all the right places, with a healthy dose of hips thighs. She what guys leering referred to as thick, growing up. Not that it had ever done her much good because her social skills had always been painfully lacking when it came to showing attraction to the opposite sex. Her reaction to men continued to baffle her to that very day. Dealing with males in her daily job as a loan officer was no problem, however the moment any showed her the tiniest bit of interest her brain would go on a permanent vacation and leave her gaping like an idiot. As an adolescent she combated the awkwardness by spending her free time with a book planted firmly in front of her face instead of participating in the everyday teenaged activities that would put her in social settings with men. In college she'd met Kayla, Jamie and Robyn who refused to let her spend four years of her life closeted away in a tiny dorm room. Thanks to them Lexi had enjoyed a relatively

active college experience, at least by her standards. While she attended dances, and sporting events with her more boisterous friends she felt content to meld into the background and live vicariously through them. As an adult while the friends remained close, their careers and personal lives had a tendency to cut into any girl time leaving Lexi to fall back into old habits. Countless Friday nights had been spent curled up with book, having a solitary meal alone or simply enjoying a movie. It was a routine she was quite comfortable with and one in which she hadn't deviated from until now. Lexi held the sleek material in front of her while. Scrutinizing her reflection in her full length mirror. She hoped Kayla wouldn't be too upset when her creations was split right down the center.

A minute later Lexi stood in awe at her transformation from dowdy loan officer to sex kitten... correction tigress. Wow! In her wildest imagination she never fathomed looking like she did at that moment. The silvery material of the suit clung to and molded every dip and swell of her body, looking like a second skin. She twirled in the mirror, looking over her shoulder to get a better view of her backside. Impressive, if she could say so herself. Kayla added a curvy, yet amiable tail, which she was certain would draw attention to her high rising derriere. Lexi felt the beginning knotting of nervousness in the pit of her belly at the thought. Absently reached for the costumed tail and began to play with the silver and white ball of fluff at its tip. Why such an inconsequential bit of material would have a near instantaneous calming effect on her was unfathomable, but it did. She eyeballed the fluffy material curiously before blinking at her mirrored reflection. Hoy shit, could it really be so simple. A bubble of happiness took the place of her earlier nervousness, spreading immediately through her body like quick silver. She suppressed a laugh at her recent discovery but continued to bask in the light of a new found freedom. The true test would come tonight. For good measure she smooth the fur like ball once more before letting it drop, well not really drop so much as it actually seemed to float behind her suspended in the air by Kayla's ingenious craftsmanship. Whatever combination of padding she'd used

allowed the tail to stand in curved defiance of gravity...not to mention making it very accessible for her nervous fingers. Lexi twirled one final time smiling appreciatively at the way the silver covering complimented her dark, sienna coloring.

Unnecessarily she smoothed the neat chignon Kayla had fashioned at the top of her head and plucked the two curly tendrils that dangled perfectly on either side of her face, and stopped just below her earlobes. For a bit of dramatic flair a streak of glittering silver had been applied to one side of her hair.

She really did look good and felt, surprisingly, confident in her new persona.

“Are you going to stay in there all night?” Kayla called from the living room.

I could, Lexi thought becoming narcissistic with every passing moment.

Her newfound ego indulged in a bit more stroking at Kayla’s reaction when she finally emerged from her bedroom. The astonished look on the shorter woman’s face was priceless.

“Damn Girl!”

“You like?” Lexi twirled while reaching for her tail to end with a dramatic flourish and bow.

“I don’t know if we’ll be able to keep the hounds at bay tonight. They’re going to be tripping over themselves.

Obviously Kayla was exaggerating, still Lexi’s belly did a little flip and heat infused her cheeks at the very idea.

“Hardly, there’ll be plenty of women in costumes ten times better than mine. Case and point.” Lexi eyeballed her friend’s skimpy harem costume that left little to the imagination and would surely have most men vying to sample her perfect physique.

“Fine don’t take my word for it, wait until Robyn and Jamie get a load of you.”

A short time later, the two women in question reactions only mirrored Kayla’s own. As Kayla pulled the monstrosity of an SUV – she inaccurately named Bug – into two parking spots Jamie’s astonished shriek at seeing Lexi’s transformation still reverberated through her mind.

“You know you’re just asking for someone to key this thing one day by parking like that.” Robyn commented smoothing the too short mini skirt of her Little Red Riding Hood costume over the tops of her thighs.

Kayla shrugged nonchalantly while they made their way from the vehicle. Lexi shook her head in silence at the very “typical Kayla response.” The petite dark skinned woman maintained an air of carefree indifference about most every thing regarding others.

“Kay ladies, ready to knock ‘em dead?” Jamie asked before tossing a lock of waist length, raven colored hair over her shoulder and securing a black eye mask over her face.

Lexi had to admit it, Jamie was fierce. She’d called the get-up Dominatrix couture and there was no doubt of that looking at her black leather encased body, black wig, that hid short blonde hair, and black riding crop she carried for that added effect. She’d definitely have some submissive crazed male yielding to her that night.

The rest of the gang followed suit and secured eye masks over their face for that added anonymity. Lexi wet her lips in anticipation feeling very much like a tigress on the prowl.

Zeke shot his brother a warning look effectively silencing the ‘I told you so’ he knew was poised on his siblings lips. He shook his head in disgust as a group of costumed men hurried through the parking lot to the entrance of the club. Obviously he’d been wrong in his assertion that few men, if any would

adhere to the costumed caveat imprinted on the invitation. Zeke mentally shrugged off the matter.

Neither he, nor any men accompanying him for that matter, would adorn such frivolousness.

“Maybe this place isn’t such a good idea...” He paused in his train of thought to take in four women at the entrance all sexily clad in outfits that were meant to drive a person to distraction. They had succeeded in that endeavor. He noted as his eye zeroed in on one dark skinned female snugly sheathed in a silvery confection of sin. The outfit hugged her proportions like a second skin and Zeke’s gaze drank in every inch slowly. He was a sucker for a woman with well-defined curves and the sleek tigress sure fit the bill. His body agreed with him and reacted on a hormonal level he’d last experienced in his teens. His cock stirred in his pants making him to some minor adjusting to accommodate the growing shaft. As if sensing his slow appraisal the silver woman turned slightly to look over her shoulder, but was immediately distracted by a companion pulling her past the bouncer and into the dimly lit club, but more importantly out of Zeke’s visual range.

The chase was on.

“Hey, slow down, I thought you didn’t want to go in there.” Lane called somewhere behind him, amusement etching his voice.

Zeke spared his two companions a glance over his shoulder surprised to see the divide between them.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he commented leaving them to catch up.

He was a man on a mission. His target? One supple looking, silver clad tigress who’d just sent his libido into over drive. His purpose? Have her moaning beneath him in ecstasy all night. But first, he’d need to find out her name. It was, of course, the gentlemanly thing to do.

The club’s interior was larger than he’d expected, although he noticed some couples had already

managed to ferret out intimate alcoves for more private interactions. A hidden ventilation system was working overtime to regulate the temperature in the crowded nightclub. Zeke could hear its subtle hum in spite of the music and buzzing conversation, but it did nothing to lock out the mingled scents of ordinary humans and shifters. He had expected to see some representation of Werekind but if his sense of smell and eyesight were correct their number were substantial, especially among the female Were's. Obviously he wasn't the only one with a taste for non-shifters tonight.

Speaking of which. His eyes scanned the room for his silver tigress. He spotted her as a non-shifter male clad in a ridiculous pirate costume escorted her to a thriving dance floor. The group of women she left behind were making loud cat calls that became even more raucous when his tigress threw them a look that promised retribution over her shoulders. Zeke stiffened as the man led her into the gyrating mass of bodies and pulled her close to start a slow grind.

It was more than obvious to him that some rules and boundaries needed to be quickly established.

"Now where is he going?" Dirg asked his remaining companion as Zeke stalked across the room

"Looks to me like Zeke's intentions are pretty clear. Lets just hope the male has the good sense to back off quickly." Zeke heard his brother and Dirg's amused dialogue but didn't but didn't bother to stop. His eyes were on the man who was dangerously close to filling his hands with the plump ass of his woman.

His woman, the words resonated in his head and his body tensed at the thought.

He certainly wouldn't be having that.