

Trembor stared at his wolf as the car turned right. “Marl?” He called again. “Our room is in the other direction.” Marlot didn’t react. Other than that swearing, and the occasional growling, he was lost in his head. At least he was aware of the road enough to keep them on it.

He drove them back into town and parked before the council building. Marlot got out without a word, and Trembor hurried after him. He looked around for trouble, but only one couple was out right now, and they weren’t paying them any attention. Everyone else had to be eating.

Instead of going up the stairs to the main entrance, the wolf went to a door near the end of the building. Trembor looked through the bay window as he walked by and saw a counter with a young-looking tiger standing behind it. ‘Clerk Office’ was stenciled on the frosted window in the door.

Marlot headed to the counter.

Trembor checked the table against the wall, with pamphlets on how to properly register for a driver permit. Another on the town regulation as to which types of vehicles were permitted on the roads.

“Welcome,” the clerk said in a cheerful tone. “How can I help you?”

“I need a mating contract.”

Trembor’s head snapped up.

“Of course, what duration?”

“Lifetime.”

The tiger smiled before bending down. “You and the miss are serious then.” Papers rustled. He stood and handed Marlot the paper. “I hope it is a joyful occasion and not something you’re forced to do because you got her pregnant.”

The wolf placed the paper on the counter. “You have a pen?”

“Of course.” The tiger pulled a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt and handed it to the wolf with a flourish.

Marlot read it, filled in a few spaces.

“You know,” the tiger commented, “It’s customary to have your future mate with you while you fill the form.”

Marlot grunted non-committally, then signed it.

He slid it toward Trembor.

The lion looked at him, then the page and back to the wolf. “Are you sure?” It took an effort for him to keep his voice steady.

Marlot nodded.

Trembor looked it over. It was a standard contract, no different from when he’d studied them in the basic law class he’d taken. In the space for the penalty, if either party broke the contract, Marlot wrote ‘none.’ He’d entered the date, and where they were. The only space left was for the other mate and the witness to sign.

Trembor found his hand was shaking as he pulled his pen from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Wait a minute,” the clerk said. “The witness can’t sign this before your mate has.”

Trembor steadied his hand and signed his name. He looked at it, next to Marlot, and had trouble believing this was happening. He slid the contract back to Marlot, then dried his eyes.

The wolf flipped the page and pushed it to the clerk. “Your turn,” he said, offering him the pen.

The tiger looked at him, confused. He looked at the contract. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“You’re the witness,” Marlot said.

“What? Is this a joke?”

“No. Now take the pen and sign it.”

“What? No. I’m not putting my name on this. What are you trying to do? Make a mockery of mating?”

Marlot reached across the counter, grabbed the tiger by the collar, and pulled him close. The tiger squeaked as the wolf bared his fangs.

“I’ve had a really bad day so I’m not in the mood to deal with your narrow mindedness. Your job, that of town clerk, is to officiate and witness document signing. So do your fucking job.” He shoved the pen in the clerk’s hand.

“Absolutely not. Let go of me. I’m a town official, you can’t treat me this way.”

“Witness the contract, and I’m going to let you go.”

“I said no. You might as well release me, there’s nothing you can do that’ll convince me to put my name on such a farce.”

“Fine, then give me your ID.”

“My—? Why do you want that?”

“So I can pay your tax. I missed dinner and since you’re not doing your job, I’m going to make use of you in another way.”

The tiger’s eyes went wide, and if Trembor hadn’t been certain his wolf was serious, he would have laughed. The tiger fumbled with the pen for a moment, then signed on the witness line.

Marlot gently deposited him down. He smiled. “Good, now, you’re going to scan it in and send it to the registry.”

“I can’t.”

“I’m not leaving here until you’ve sent it, and I’m getting hungrier.”

The tiger looked at Trembor, who shook his head. This was between the two of them, he wasn’t getting involved.

“You don’t understand, the—”

“I don’t care. You send it, I leave. You don’t I eat you.”

The tiger gulped audibly.

Trembor couldn’t believe the reaction he was seeing. Sure, the tiger had to be in his early twenties, but he acted like he was prey. No predator would ever bow down like that. They’d fight.

The tiger scanned the contract, then with a few keystrokes, sent it. When he handed the paper back to Marlot, it was shaking. Marlot smiled.

“Have yourself a good night.” The wolf turned and left. Trembor gave the tiger his friendliest smile and followed him out.

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Marlot lay on the bed, looking at the contract. His emotions were all over the place, but this he knew was a good thing, although—

“You know, they’re probably going to void the contract as soon as they find out about it.”

“Can they do that?” Trembor asked from the bathroom.

“They’re the council, they can do whatever they want.”

“But it’s in the registry now.”

“The clerk didn’t exactly sign it of his own free will. Contracts signed under duress can be contested.”

“By one of the parties involved, not an outside agency.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them to invent a reason.”

Trembor was silent for a moment. “Maybe it’s for the best if they do.”

Marlot sat up. “You don’t want to be mated?”

Trembor appeared in the doorway, brush in his mane. “Of course I do. You know that. I wouldn’t have signed it otherwise. I’m just thinking of my parents. They are going to be livid when they find out we got mated without a ceremony.”

“They can throw us one when we get back to the city.”

“You can be certain of that. My moms are going to go crazy setting it all up.”

Marlot looked at his lion. He really was his now. If the council annulled the contract, he’d just get another one in the city. Trembor beamed at the idea of his family arranging the mating ceremony. Marlot felt the tears coming. Why couldn’t his parents have been like Trembor’s?

Strong arms held him. “It’s okay,” Trembor said.

“I shouldn’t be crying,” Marlot sobbed. “I should be raging at them for the way they treated me.”

“They’re ignorant. They can’t see how wonderful of a male you are. I know it hurts to be treated like that, but remember you have another family. One that loves you exactly as you are.”

Marlot sniffled and untangled himself out of the lion’s arm to blow his nose.

“Thanks.”

Trembor put his brush away and climbed into bed. Marlot tilted an ear. The lion pulled him close. “You’re more important than my mane.” Marlot held his tongue and snuggled against his lion.