

Trembor groaned as he got out of the car. “Let’s not to that again, ever.” They’d pulled the foam mattress off the three examination beds and had stuck them together on the floor of the waiting room. It had been the only room large enough for the two of them to stretch out across it.

The sex had been enjoyable, although they had ended up on the hard floor a few times. The mattresses didn’t want to stay in place. And the same happened while they slept. After the second time Trembor woke up falling between two of them, he stayed on the floor, and his back was punishing him for it.

Marlot nodded, wincing as he stretched. “Maybe I should drive to the city and buy us one of those portable mattresses.”

“Don’t they sell that here?” Arana asked, already out of her own car, a large all-terrain model.

“They won’t sell me anything.”

She snorted. “This is ridiculous, what kind of people are these? That they hat you just because you love another male?”

The wolf tilted an ear. “The same kind as in all the other towns around here.”

“No, I can tell you none of them would treat you this way.”

“Really? How many male lovers have you come across in any of them?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it with a frown.

“I’ll grant you they might not be as extreme about it as here, I certainly hope this place is the only one this radical, but the overall mentality spreads far. They’re isolated and have been doing things their own ways for centuries. They won’t change unless someone forces them to, and none of the cities want to mess with them and risk a vegetable shortage.” Marlot grumbled. “That’s how Arlion got the city controller to have a talk with me.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” she said.

“No reason you would,” Trembor said. “It isn’t like we go around announcing we love males. Even back in Orventon, where no one cares about that anymore, we mostly keep it to ourselves.”

Marlot’s ears had perked up while the lion talked. Now he turned to him. “Did you say, males? Plural? Did you not read our mating contract? There was an exclusivity clause in it.”

Trembor smirked. “No there wasn’t. It was an off the pile version, and you didn’t add any clauses to it. And you know very well you’re the only male for me.”

Marlot pursed his lips. “I don’t know, you did say males just now.”

“I was generalizing. Do you think I’d have been exclusive to you for the last three years if I wasn’t going to be now?”

“Just to be safe, when we get back to the clinic, I’m going to add the clause in.”

Trembor’s eyes went wide. “Are you looking to have my dad invalidate our

contract? You can't make changes after it's been signed."

"If you initialize the new clause, he won't know."

"Marl, he was a lawyer. The first thing he's going to do is pull it off the registry, the change isn't going to be in that one."

"Right. I hadn't thought of that. I wouldn't want to force him to work like that, now that he's retired. When we get back to the clinic, I'll just tear it apart. We can get another contract when we're back in the city. You said your parents would want a large party."

Trembor laughed, shaking his head. "It doesn't work that way and you know it. There's still a copy in the registry."

Marlot snorted. "That's easily fixed."

"Okay, that's enough," Arana said. She looked from one to the other. "Is it always like this with the two of you?"

Trembor threw his hands in the air. "I wouldn't know. I've only been mated to him for a full day by now. Until not too long ago, I couldn't even get him to hold my hand in public."

"Oh, that hurts." The wolf put a hand on his heart. Then he sobered. "But now you know what I put up with that made me like that."

The lion nodded and looked around. They parked a few houses from Lamia's. He and Marlot would stay here while Arana talked with the sheep. He pulled up the collar of his jacket. The wind had picked up, and it was cold this morning. Even the sheeps walking about had extra layers on.

"If I leave you two alone, am I going to come back to find out eating the other?"

"Or course not," Trembor said.

"Yeah," Marlot added. "We're not like that." He paused. "I only eat him when we're in private."

The lion coughed, and the buffalo stared at Marlot. Trembor couldn't believe his wolf had just said that, in front of someone else.

Arana shook her head. "Just don't.... Just behave. I don't want someone to call that enforcer." He walked away.

Trembor stared at Marlot, who grinned at him. "Where did that come from?" the lion asked. "You've never been this blatant about our sex life before."

"I have no idea," Marlot answered. "The words slipped out before I even thought about what I was saying. I think giving this gigantic 'fuck you' to the council and this place removed some of the self-censorships I've been imposing on myself all these years."

"And you were joking about tearing up the contract, right?"

"Of course I was. I'd never dream of destroying it."

Trembor smiled. "Just making sure. You've never joked about our

relationship before.”

The wolf shrugged. “I was too scared of having it taken away to joke about what we had. You saw how I was when I thought Hela’han had figured out I spent the night at your place. Anytime I was close to you I wanted to lean against you or take your hand. But I was sure that if one person noticed us, we’d be killed.”

“Even after, once you say you loved me, you weren’t exactly demonstrative.”

“Just because I’d realized it was okay for others to know I loved you, it didn’t mean my fear of being killed for it went away. But now that we’re mated, and that I showed that down the council’s throat. Now that we faced the townspeople and scared them off. What do I have to worry about? If they try anything, I’ll just beat them down.”

He took a breath and looked up. “Or, I’m just riding the high of finally shaking this town out of my fur, and tomorrow I’ll be back to being scared.”

Trembor saw the worry in his wolf’s face and he went around the car and took him in his arms. “If that happens, then we’ll go from there, and built up our life together until you aren’t afraid anymore.”

Marlot hugged him back. “Thanks, Trem.” His pad buzzed, and he took it out. “It’s Arana, she wants us inside.”

As they reached the house three cars raced down the road, with young predators howling clearly rejoicing at something. Trembor tilted an ear questioningly at Marlot, but the wolf shrugged.

Inside the small house, they found Arana pacing before Lamia, whose face was a mask of determination.

“She won’t tell me,” the buffalo huffed.

“I won’t ruin him,” the sheep stated.

“You realized the coyote who attacked you yesterday was sent by him?” Trembor asked.

Lamia nodded nervously. “I’ll take care of it.”

“How?” Marlot asked. “There’s nothing you can tell him that will convince him your baby isn’t a threat to him.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“What do you mean?” Arana asked. “I’ve seen what the predators around here think of you, of all the farmers. You aren’t people, just tools used to get vegetables out of the ground.”

Lamia didn’t say anything.

Trembor couldn’t work out what she meant either. He saw Marlot shake his head and rub the top of his muzzle.

The wolf sighed. “You won’t be able to find anyone willing to abort it. You’re too far along. It’s a crime for someone to kill the baby you’re carrying.”

Trembor gasped. Then realized Lamia had said something. “What did she say?”

Arana frowned. “She said that no one needs to be involved.”

“What does she mean?”

The buffalo shook her head. Trembor looked to his wolf.

“I’m not sure. There were stories of herbs a female could take if she didn’t want to be pregnant anymore. Some of the males who slept around at the Academy talked about them. I never paid attention since by the time I was done with my first heat, I had no intention of being in a bed with a female.”

Lamia looked away.

Trembor knelt before her. “You can’t do that,” he said gently. “You aren’t wired to end a life. Just wait, the baby will end itself.”

“I can’t wait,” she whispered. “So long as it keeps growing, I’m putting him in danger.”

Trembor knew she didn’t mean the baby. He looked at Marlot. “There has to be another way. We can’t let her go through with it.”

“Why not?” Arana asked. “It’s her body.”

Trembor stood and looked her in the eyes. “She’s prey. If she kills it will destroy her.”

The buffalo snorted. “Don’t kid yourself. We can kill.”

“You’ve done it?”

“What do you think?”

“And are you like you were before that moment?”

Arana’s eyes went unfocused, then she broke the eye contact.

“That’s what I mean. What’s going to happen to her, here? No one is going to be able to deal with it other than to kill her. We need to figure out how to find out who the father is even if she—” Trembor stood there, his thoughts pouncing after a memory, a scent that told him the answer had already been given to them.

He turned and looked at the sheep. “What if you didn’t have to give us any information about the baby’s father? Would you be willing to help us so we can find out who he is? He wouldn’t know you were involved.”

She looked up at him, confused.

“What do you have in mind?” Marlot asked.

“If we can get the results from the lab, we’ll know what species the father is.”

“But the lab won’t give it to us.”

“They might give it to the patient since the medic is dead.”