

The first thing Marlot did, as soon as he left the town, was look for a car washing station. It took longer than he would have liked, the first one being on the outskirts of the city, and it wasn't an automated one. He didn't care; he wasn't driving in the city with all those slurs on his car.

He and Trembor took their time scrubbing the car, ending up in wet clothes, when the lion doused Marlot in water, and the wolf returned the favor by dumping a bucket of sudsy water over his head. The ensuing water fight had lifted Marlot's spirits, and they stayed buoyant even after they were done and some markings were left on the car, but at least none of the words were legible anymore. He was going to have to get the car repainted to remove all evidence of his time in the town of his birth.

Then he headed for Jaxca's clinic.

Parking, he saw the tax kiosk and was reminded of the ID card in his pocket. He sighed, stepping out of the car. "We're going to have to go back to the town."

Trembor canted an ear questioningly. "I thought you wanted to let Arana handle it."

He showed the card. "We left the body in the freezer in my haste to get out of there. I'm not leaving that for one of them to find and eat."

The lion frowned, then shrugged. "At least we won't have to deal with anyone, just go in, get it, and leave. Let me know how much it cost, I'll cover half."

Marlot shook his head. "My kill, my expense." He turned and took a few steps, only to be stopped by Trembor's arms around his chest.

"Hey, we're mated now. No more of this is mine stuff. It's our kill. We'll have to set up a joint account to pay for our kills."

Marlot stiffened at the thought of sharing his hard earned money with someone else, then relaxed, it wasn't just anyone else he'd be sharing with. He smiled and leaned back against Trembor. "This being mated thing is taking for getting used to."

The lion kissed the side of his neck. "You entered into it of free will, under witness. You better get used to it."

Marlot turned and gave his lion a quick peck on the lips. "I will." Then he turned and stepped to the kiosk. He inserted the card, and after a moment the information on his kill came up, confirming what the tax representative had given him. The amount appeared, and the kiosk offered him payment options. He stared at one of them.

"Trem, look at this. They're now offering loans right at the kiosk. That's crazy."

The lion shook his head in disappointment. "I guess it was just a question of time until the government saw how much money there was to be made with those.

The lending agencies will probably fight it.”

Marlot paid from his account. “Are they going to be able to win? With the money chests the government has, they can get away with offering lower rates.”

“There’s bound to be something controlling how much they can undercut the interest. We can ask my dad next time we see him.”

Marlot had to indicate he wasn’t returning his kill’s possessions. He hadn’t thought about it then and had thrown them away. With how Longlegs had tried to kill the sheep, he didn’t particularly care if his family didn’t get those back, but he would have liked the small discount on the kill.

By the time he was done, his pad buzzed and he saw Trembor had transferred half the cost to his account. He almost refused the transfer, having a moment of possessiveness over his kill, but then shook the thought out of his head. He was mated now. To a wonderful, patient and living lion, he was going to get used to this.

When he put his pad away Trembor was smiling, almost smirking.

“Hey,” Marlot said in a moment of defensiveness. “I’ve been single all this time, don’t expect it to happen overnight.”

The lion put an arm over the wolf’s shoulders and pulled him along to Jaxca’s clinic. “I’m not. I’m just enjoying the idea that from now on, what’s mine is yours.” He paused. “Which means I finally get to give your new nephews and nieces your pad number.”

Marlot groaned. “Please don’t. I don’t think I can survive having them badger me with questions that early in the morning.” After that first time, when he’d picked up Trembor’s calls while the lion was in the toilet, it was two days before he stopped jumping anytime the lion’s pad buzzed.

“They’re just cubs, they’re inquisitive and full of energy.”

“I know that, but there are hundreds of them. And some of their questions were uncomfortably personal.”

“There’s only fourteen of them.”

“No, I’m pretty sure you’ve miscounted. I had to answer at least that many calls by the time you got back, and even you said more of them usually called.”

“That’s because after you answered Issa’s call, she let everyone know you were there and they all wanted to get to know you.”

“A few wanted to know if we had sex.”

Trembor chuckled. “Yes, some of them are far too mature for their age. You’re not uncomfortable around them now that you’ve met them, are you?”

“Are you kidding? I’m terrified.” He grinned. “They ganged up on me, hundreds of them, dragged me to the ground and it was pure luck I survived the encounter.”

Now Trembor smirked.

“No, they’re fine,” Marlot relented. “I was just overwhelmed when your sister sent me to the attic to entertain them. I did feel like prey being sent to the slaughter, and your mother wasn’t happy with me when I left them unattended.”

“My mom?”

“Well, one of them, the severe one.”

“Sarene. She’s the family’s protector, so yeah, she wouldn’t have liked knowing you couldn’t handle the responsibility of looking after the cubs. Were you able to explain the situation to her?”

“Not really. She laid into me. I’m pretty sure she would have kicked me out of the house if I hadn’t...”

“Hadn’t what?”

Marlot sighed. “Look, I didn’t mean to snap at her, but after she was done calling me a coward, she started bad-mouthing you. I lost it then. I don’t think I made a very good first impression on her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

Marlot shrugged. “I didn’t want to be the one to ruin your family dinner, and she didn’t bring it up while I was there. When we left, I just figured it was for me to deal with. To show her I was worthy of you.”

Trembor tightened his hold. “First, you don’t need to prove that to anyone, least of all her. Second, you stood up to her, so she’s going to respect you. She’s done it to everyone my siblings have brought to the dinner. She’s ended quite a few relationships. She sees it as her job to make sure you’re made of stern enough material to be there for us. You’ll see, she won’t give you any trouble next time.”

Marlot rested his head on his lion’s shoulder. “I don’t care if she does. If she’s the price I have to pay for spending time with the rest of your family, cubs, and all, I’ll happily pay it. You met my family, so you know what I’ve had to put up with growing up. You’re is so much better.”

“I won’t argue with you.”

The door to the clinic opened, forcing them to move so the cow could exit. She took one look at them and quickly moved away, never turning her back to them.

“Maybe we should stop standing here and go in,” Trembor said.

With a theatrical sigh, Marlot disengaged himself from his lover’s arm. “I suppose we should.” He gave the cow a wide smile which made her move faster. And they went in.