

The rhinoceros at the reception desk looked at them. “Do you have an appointment?” she asked, glancing at the screen.

“We’re not here for treatment,” Marlot replied, placing the refrigerated box on the desk. “I’m dropping this for Jaxca. I called him to let him know.”

She looked at her screen, then typed something. “Yes, there it is. I’ll give it to him. Have you already made arrangements for how we’ll be contacting you when he’s done with it?”

“Yes, he’s going to call us directly.

Trembor had placed the call while Marlot drove, explaining they only wanted Jaxca to extract the sample and get it ready for testing. They would take it to the lab themselves. He couldn’t do it while they waited, or tell them when it would be ready. He’d try to take care of it between patients, but because of how busy he was, it might not be until the end of the day.

Marlot looked into the waiting room before leaving. Almost twenty patients were waiting for their turns, mostly prey, with three predators seated among them. Private clinics didn’t benefit from being ‘no predation zones’ like hospitals were, but sick people tended not to think about food. And if someone decided they wanted to eat one of the other patients, well, that was what the rhinoceros was there for.

“Breakfast was a while ago,” Trembor comments. “I could eat something, how about we head to the office? There’s meat left from what you brought in at the start of the week.”

“Sure, and we can catch up on things while we wait.”

The drive there was uneventful. He checked the office’s lock as he got out of the car, and as expected, it was unlocked. Hela’han was there to take calls pertaining to their ongoing cases. Not that Marlot expected there were a lot of them. The older the case, the fewer people cared, especially once the three month waiting period had passed. Once they received the benefits, it was amazing quickly they forgot about the dead.

While the benefits didn’t come from his pay, it was applied against his productivity rating, as a way to encourage him to find the killer so the government could get its money. Marlot only had three bodies in his freezer, Trembor two, and only one of each was so old the odds of finding the killer were almost null.

He entered, then stopped. There were two elephants at the reception desk, where he expected one. One was Hela’han, leaning against the wall, her large gray ears having a flushed hue. That had to be caused by the other elephant who had his trunk under her unbuttoned blouse.

Trembor cleared his throat, making the two of them, and Marlot, jump. “What do we have here?” he asked, grinning.

Hela’han stepped away from the male. Flustered, she buttoned up, then

straightened her blouse and dress. “Mister Goldenmane, Mister Blackclaw, I wasn’t expecting you back today.”

“Who’s your...friend?” Trembor asked.

Marlot studied the male and found himself growling. He was a little taller than she was, his ears were smaller, his tusks about a foot and a half long and his skin a little darker. He was dressed casually in black canvas pants and a white cotton shirt and a tan hide jacket. He looked back at them with a nonchalant air that the wolf didn’t like.

“This is Jesden, he’s a...friend.”

Marlot stepped toward him, eyes narrowing.

“Please don’t eat him,” Hela’han pleaded.

Trembor grabbed his arm. “Easy there, maybe you should find out what’s going on before doing something drastic.”

The interruption was enough to get Marlot to calm down a little.

“I’m sorry,” Hela’han said, her trunk jittering all over the place. “I know this is inappropriate behavior.”

Trembor chuckled.

Considering some of the things the two of them had gotten up to in their office these last few months, they couldn’t judge her. But that didn’t mean Marlot wasn’t going to judge him.

He disengaged his arm from the lion’s grip and stood before the bull elephant. He acted calm enough, like having a predator this close wasn’t a big deal. Marlot breathed in the elephant’s scent.

He was nervous, but there was more behind that and he took his time cataloging them. He wasn’t particularly happy at what he smelled. He looked at him again, noting his callused hand, broad shoulders, and overall solidity. Marlot judged him to be in his mid-twenties.

“Let’s get something straight,” the wolf said, his voice calm. “I can smell your intentions toward her.”

The bull nervously looked at Hela’han. When he looked back to Marlot, he no longer had the air of nonchalance about him.

The wolf smiled, showing teeth. “So I want to know, just how serious are your intentions? Are you just into this so you can have some fun? Or are you going to treat her with respect?”

The elephant swallowed. “I’m serious, Sir. Very much so.”

Marlot looked at Hela’han, who nodded, having grabbed her trunk and holding it still.

“Good.” Marlot took a step back. “Her safety is in your hands now. You better make sure no harm comes to her. I’d hate to have to hunt you down.”

The bull’s head bobbed up and down so fast Marlot worried it would break

off. He edged along the wall toward the door. Hela'han accompanied him, and they interlaced trunks.

"Is it safe for me to come pick you up after work?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "I'll call you when I'm done." They pressed their forehead together for a moment, then he left.

She walked to her desk, not looking at the wolf or lion. "I am so embarrassed you had to see this," she said, sitting down.

"It's no big deal," Trembor said. "After all, you've seen us kiss."

Marlot's ears folded back against his will as the comment brought to his mind the moment when Trembor and he had been kissing and in the process of undressing each other. Fortunately, only their shirts were off when Hela'han entered their office with reports from the case they were working on. But she'd been as embarrassed about it as Marlot had been.

Hela'han was also blushing now. "It isn't the same thing, Sir."

"Isn't it?" The lion asked with feigned ignorance. "I wouldn't know, I'm not familiar with elephant courting behavior. How about you, Marl?"

Marlot shook his head, as much to clear the embarrassment as to answer.

"I promise, it will never happen again, Sir," she said earnestly.

"that's good." Trembor smiled. "But if it does, I think you can rest assured your big brother over there won't be so quick to react." The lion leveled his gaze on Marlot.

"It won't, I promise." He thought about what he'd smelled of the male. "I think he's a good male. How long have you known him?"

She beamed at the approval, but her trunk grabbed her pad and moved it back and forth. "I knew him when I was younger, but I hadn't seen him for years until two months ago." She smiled wistfully and her trunk calmed.

"I'm glad for you," Trembor said. "Is there anything that needs immediate attention? We're probably here for the rest of the day."

"No, Sir." She then typed a command and looked through what came up. "No, everything's quiet."

"You know you don't have to call us Sir, right?" the lion asked as he squeezed her shoulder. "You've worked for us for long enough. I'm Trembor and he's Marlot."

"Yes, Sir," she answered.

The lion shook his head in amusement and grabbed Marlot, pulling him into their office.

"Remember, Hela'han," the wolf said, grabbing onto the door. "If he gives you any problem, call me and I'll deal with him." Trembor pulled on his arm and with a yip Marlot lost his grip on the door frame.

The door closed, and the lion held him in his arms. "I can't believe you're

still embarrassed about kissing in front of her,” he said, nipping at his neck playfully.

Marlot gasped. “What she caught us doing was a little more involved than just kissing.”

“Was if?”

With a growl, Marlot turned them around and loudly pinned the lion against the door. “How about I remind you what we were doing?”

It was a good thing their office was soundproofed.