

“We could have dropped the body off at a preparation store,” Marlot said as they maneuvered it through the door to Trembor’s house. “The one I use would have given us baked pies in exchanged for a few chunks of it.”

“Baked good?” Trembor studied his wolf over the elephant’s slumped body in amusement. “You would have taken baked goods over straight meat off the bone?”

The wolf rolled his eyes, ears folding back. “I’ve told you before. I don’t see a point of doing the baking myself, but I can enjoy well baked and seasons meat.”

Trembor smiled. “Well, let me do this for you.” Their first kill as mates, his first time preparing a body for his mate. He realized that for him this, more than the signing of the contract, was the proof they were mated.

“You have a table?” They had to move sideways for the body and them to fit through the hall, and even then, the tusks added a scratch here and there on the opposing wall. “Your kitchen is kind of small.”

“It’s not the massive one my dad uses, but it gets the job done.” He leaned the body against the wall before the kitchen door. “Hold it there, I need to take it out and set it up.”

“Sure, leave me holding the body. What if the enforcers show up?” Marlot cursed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“It’s okay.” Trembor pulled the folded table from the pantry and let his breath out, focusing on keeping his voice light. “At this point, I’m more worried about Barany showing up to tell me something wrong again.”

“Any indication of when it’s finally going to be over?”

“Soon, I hope.” With one end on the floor, he unfolded two legs, locking them in place. “The papers are filed, they just have to reach the judge, but the queue isn’t short. There’s only one signatory judge for criminal cases.”

“Why don’t they have more?”

All legs extended, Trembor tested the table for wobble and adjusted it. “The more signatory judges, the more chances you hit one with a different interpretation of contract laws, which is what the dismissal of my case is, basically.”

“Everything’s a contract, it feels like,” Marlot said as Trembor took his side of the body and they maneuvered it into the kitchen, having to bump the prep table out of the way, then move it back into place with a foot. As Marlot had said, Trembor’s kitchen was small.

The body overhung on one side, and Trembor studied it. That was an added complication he hadn’t expected. He’d need Marlot help as he worked to adjust it. He took the prep knife out of its box, along with the edging stone, and made sure it was sharp. He couldn’t imagine how his ancestors had done this back when all they had were claws and maybe sharp stones.

He turned and stopped. Marlot had pulled himself on the counter and sat cross-legged on it, looking at him expectantly. “What?” his wolf asked, then looked at where he was. “Shit, sorry, I—”

“No, it’s okay,” Trembor hurried to say before Marlot dropped off. “It’s more than

okay.” He searched for the words. “It’s right.” He smiled. “It just took me by surprised how right seeing you sitting there felt.”

“You’re saying I should sit on the counter from now on?”

Trembor felt his ears heat up. “Well, when you watch me prep our food, yeah.” Marlot canted his head and Trembor’s smile broadened. He was so cute like that. “It’s not a ‘thing that was done to me’ thing. It’s a lion thing.” He motioned to the body on the table and himself. “This is where I belong. In the kitchen, preparing the kill my mate brings me.”

“We brought it in together,” Marlot said, grinning.

“Don’t interrupt. You, my mate, show me your prowesses by the quality of the kill. I, your mate, shows you my prowesses by how well I prepare it. To have you watch, judge, and appreciate what I do just makes this perfect.”

“You really take this seriously, don’t you?”

Trembor’s smile fell, and he hid it behind focusing on the body. He opened the jugular and began cutting the skin. “After Gorrek, it took me years to able to be intimate with another male and really enjoy it. But I could never feel myself being their mates. Definitely not with another lion. I’d sort of resigned myself to being alone when you came around.”

The blood from the cuts added to that from the jugular, flowing into the channel and into the reservoir that was the bottom of the table. “I think it was how vulnerable you seemed that let me overcome that last hurdle. You were so out of your element when you weren’t focusing on finding clues to Ruxul’s whereabouts that there was no way you could hurt me.” He didn’t react to Marlot’s mumbled.

“If only.”

He cut the skin off the muscle and rolled it up, pleased that there was barely any red on the underside of the leathery skin. “I’m as much to blame for how it happened.”

“I’m the one who screwed up.”

“I could have told you about what Gorrek did to me. It would have helped you understand why I reacted the way I did. I could have been more attentive to your behavior,” he continued before Marlot could protest. “You putting your foot down over my desires isn’t something that happened out of the blue. I saw you do it in smaller ways, pretty much from the first time I met you. I just shrugged them away as being a quirk of your personality.”

“You’re putting a lot of the blame on yourself.”

Trembor looked at the body. He couldn’t just push the overhang onto the table, the skinned part would be what hung and it would bleed on the floor. Not a lot, but enough. Adapting was what being mated was about. “Cupboard above you has the paper. You’re going to have to do your part because I have to start cutting out the meat before I’m done skinning and bleeding the body.”

Marlot dropped from the counter and took out the roll.

“And I was just saying we both played a part in what happened,” Trembor said. “We shouldn’t forget that, but we can’t obsess about it.” *Not with the little time we have*

left together. He looked at Marlot's back, wishing he was strong enough to not need him. To have cut ties with him entirely. Hurt him once and know he'd never do so again. But he needed his wolf to be able to continue. Without him, Trembor wasn't sure what he'd do. And he couldn't tell him what he was doing. Unlike what Serene thought, Marlot would throw himself in front of whatever was coming, and Trembor couldn't even envision a second without Marlot in his life. Nikal had shown him how desperately he needed Marlot.

He could thank the hunted for that, if nothing else.

His wolf turned and smiled, then chuckled. "The meat's not going to cut itself with you gazing at me. At least probably not without taking pieces of you off at the same time."

Trembor focused on the body again, happy Marlot had misinterpreted the look, and that the scent of blood was heavy enough for him not to pick up on his mood. He cut off a meal size chunk and passed it to Marlot, who wrapped it and put it in the cooler. Each time his wolf moved behind him to reach the cooler, he paused while they touched, and Trembor soaked in the sensation. Memorizing it.

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"What do you do with the leftovers?" Marlot asked, indicating the skin and wrapped fat.

"My parents have friends in the leather industry, we sell them the skin, the fat I drop off at a collection place near here. A charity runs it; they use the money they make selling the fat to try to break up the packs and get those cubs integrated within society." His hands clean, Trembor took two glasses and filled them halfway with blood from the spout on the table.

"Going fresh, I see," Marlot commented as he placed them on the counter.

"Not even one drop of preserver," Trembor replied, taking out the bottle of alcohol.

Marlot caught his hand before he poured some in the glass. "Don't, please." The second word felt like an afterthought.

"It's just a bit of alcohol," Trembor replied, more amused than offended at Marlot's reaction.

"It's a bit of alcohol you've added to your drink every time I've been with you." He paused and when he spoke again, there was a hesitation to his wolf's voice that concerned Trembor. "Do you really need it to stand being with me?"

"No, of course not. It's just that those last weeks have been stressful, and it's helped me relax." Had he really added alcohol to his drinks that much? He couldn't have. Only after those especially stressful days.

Marlot pushed the hand away from the glass. "Then let me help you relax instead of that, okay?"

Trembor hesitated, and in that recognize the forming habit. That he felt the alcohol would work better than time with Marlot told him he'd been depending on it too much.

“Sorry.” He capped the bottle and put it back in the cupboard. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like you weren’t enough.”

Marlot pulled him against him. “I know. I’m just making sure I communicate more, instead of letting the stress do the talking for me.” He nuzzled Trembor’s neck and for a full minute, he let his wolf nibble on it.

“Are you going to make me relax before or after eating?” Trembor asked with a sigh.

Marlot chuckled. “After. I’m going to need a full belly for what I plan on doing to you.”

“Oh, really? Then let’s bottle the blood, clean the kitchen, and eat. So you can impress me with your prowess.”

“I thought my hunting was how I did that.”

Trembor groped his wolf. “The male is expected to demonstrate his mating prowess too.” He gasped as Marlot returned the favor.

“Don’t think yourself too much the female in this relationship. I expect you to demonstrate your prowess just as much, if not more, than I will.”

“After eating,” Trembor said, stroking the hardening member under the wolf’s pants.

“Definitely after,” Marlot answered, unbuttoning Trembor’s pants.

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Naked and leaning against the cabinet, Trembor sighed, feeding a piece of meat to his wolf, who had his head on his lap. They were going to have to clean the floor, since they’d jostle the table hard enough to spill some of the blood in the reservoir, but he didn’t care.

“And I can’t believe someone would do that,” Marlot said. He’d talk about the body he was investigating. How the wolf had let himself be killed just to draw attention to people taking advantage of the system. “What do you think could make someone do that?”

Trembor shrugged. Love, he thought. Duty? A desire to make sure others didn’t suffer as he did? Were they the reasons he was planning on dying the way he was? Or was his justification simpler? Anger. Anger that they’d dared put their claws in his brother, his family. That they were trying to pull the cubs into it.

“Trem?”

“Sorry,” He forced a smile. “Basking in the moment.”

“Basking in me telling you about my case?”

“In you being here, on the floor with me. In me feeding you.” He offered the wolf another piece of meat. “In us being taking by each other enough, we made a mess of my kitchen.”

“And each other.”

“That just means I get to lick you, again.”

Marlot tilted an ear. “I’m dessert?”

“You are an entire meal. One I will never get enough of.”

“Good thing you can have me as often as you want, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Keeping the smile was thought, but at least not the scents of sex were added to that of blood to distract his usually too attentive wolf.

“I think I’m going to have dessert first,” Marlot said, before turning and licked Trembor’s groin.

“There’s enough room for us to stretch out on the floor and enjoy it at the same time,” Trembor said.

By the time they were done enjoying multiple version of dessert, they had added blood to the floor by jostling the table some more.