

Scarlet

The hem of her scarlet cape fluttered in the early morning breeze. She settled the hood more snugly over her head against the chill, breathing deeply of the rich, loamy scent of the forest the wind brought with it. The wicker hamper bumped softly against her hip as she made her way deeper into the dark sanctuary of the trees.

The sun was high enough to filter through the upper branches when she arrived at the tiny clearing she'd been aiming for. The mossy fallen log near its edge proclaimed the reason for the opening, still sufficiently devoid of new growth to permit space for her to lay out her hooded cloak like a blanket before setting the hamper on it.

She took several carefully wrapped parcels from the hamper, the waxy paper crackling as she removed it to reveal a couple wedges of cheese, a rustic loaf, and a small crock of butter. She positioned the cheese, bread the butter to one side of the cloak that was acting as a picnic blanket before she removed a basket of fresh fruit, apples and grapes, from the hamper and set those closer to her. Last to appear was a bottle with a pair of rustic clay mugs.

Though the sun was higher in the sky, the day was still a bit cool and she shivered slightly after sacrificing her cloak as ground cover. The warm, moist gust against her neck was all the more shocking for the day's chill. It was immediately followed by the brush of wiry whiskers ticking up and down her neck.

She yelped and slapped at the tickling source, but the reflexes of the predator behind her were more than adequate to snap his muzzle away before the blow landed.

She turned to face a muzzle full of shining teeth and gleaming fangs. "Naughty! Bad wolf! You know how I hate getting tickled!"

The lupine smile widened as he replied, "Of course. That's why I do it! I've got to maintain my reputation as the 'big bad wolf', after all." He stepped forward and took a seat beside her. She laid her arm across him and leaned against his solid, furry form.

"You're certainly a big wolf, but you may need to work harder on the 'bad' part. At least with me. "

"Have a care, sweet lady," his voice roughed with a little growl. "I know where _all_ your ticklish spots are, and I have many ways of triggering them." The tip of his tail twitched across her back, trailing between the hem of her blouse and dress, drawing a quick gasp as its fur brushed over bare skin and sent another wave of tickles across her nerves.

"Quit!" She swatted again, trying to catch his fluffy tail but he twitched it out of her reach.

"You started it, questioning my 'badness' like that," he replied with a chuckle. "And what about our little meetings, eh? Taking goodies to grandma? I imagine you've told your parents not a thing about your little detours on the way, have you? About how a young lady was 'accosted' by a big, bad wolf after she'd turned her ankle on a wayward pinecone while walking the path?"

"How that self-same lady, instead of screaming, fighting, trying to run, thanked a forest 'monster' for his inquiry as to her health, offered him food from her hamper, and asked politely if he'd help her on to her grandmothers?"

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“What ever would your parents and their friends in the village think of me, a big, bad, predator waylaying innocent young ladies to rob them of their victuals, “ he sniffed eagerly at the cheeses before him. “Or demanding itchy fur be scratched and petted before releasing her from durance vile?” The wolf sighed contentedly as her fingers scratched behind his ears.

“Oh, I’m sure the villagers would be most concerned, maybe even rioting, storming out with pitchforks and torches to protect my virtue and granny’s comestibles from you. Your reputation is certainly secure with them.”

“For my parents, perhaps not quite so much. They were raised by granny, after all. And she would never come after you with torch or fork. She really looks forward to your visits!”

“And I to visiting her,” the wolf agreed. “She’s a sweet and caring lady. And she bakes the most delicious fruit tarts.” “He looked disdainfully at the fresh fruit beside her. “You may enjoy your fruits fresh from the vines, but I prefer mine properly baked, jellied, and pastry wrapped.”

“You certainly do!” the formerly scarlet-cloaked lady agreed. “I still remember that day when you first helped me to granny’s house. She was so thankful! And when she found you liked her baking, how she fed you! I’ve never seen any beast eat so much. I though you were going to explode!”

Wolf’s ears dropped and he looked away in embarrassment. “Truthfully, I thought I might too! She kept offering one more treat. More cookies, another muffin, ‘have another bowl of cobbler or it’ll just go all mushy and I’ll have to throw it out’. Your granny is dangerous! There’s no telling her ‘no’!”

“I thought my poor belly was going to pop! I’d never seen it so big!”

“From the look of it’s size now, “ she said, giving his round, plump tummy a hug, “You’re still having trouble saying ‘no’. You’ve been putting on weight. Your tummy is definitely a lot bigger than when I first met you.” She grinned and poked a finger in his rounded middle.

“Rrwoof!” he growled threateningly, snapping his jaws around her wrist, but tenderly, the bright, sharp teeth barely denting her skin. He drew her hand away from prodding his bulging tummy, then released her and gave her wrist a lick. “I still have some pride, you know.”

“As you should!” she agreed. “Any predator who feeds well enough to keep himself so plump has to be a very successful predator indeed! Besides, “ she returned her hand to his belly, not poking this time, but stroking the soft fur and rubbing happily over its round curve, “I like rubbing and petting your belly. Its very soft and comforting.”

Wolf let her hand continue its ministrations, closing his eyes contentedly. “Is that why you always bring me such delightful treats, like these rich cheeses and butter, and that fluffy, toothsome bread?” Are you trying to make my belly bigger, so you’ll have more to stroke?”

“Ah! You have ferreted out my secret!” she agreed with a laugh. “And I don’t plan on stopping until you are the biggest, roundest wolf there ever was!”

“Don’t forget baddest,” he reminded, chuckling at her joke.

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“Right! So very bad! And I will have your big, bad, belly all to myself to rub and pet and cuddle and hug whenever I want, along with all the rest of you. So why don’t you lay down here so I can rub and hug it properly. And I’ll feed you all my cheese and butter and bread.”

Wolf sprawled out on her cloak, rolling over on his back to give her best access to the creamy fur of his rounded belly. She fed him bites of cheese and buttered bread as her hand stroked the soft fur of his middle. Wolf’s tail swung in lazy, contented arcs across the scarlet cloak.

“And when we finish here, we can bring granny all the baking goodies I have left in my hamper, “ she told the wolf, feeding him another bite. “And who knows? Maybe I will be able to convince her to feed you until you’re just about to pop again? I’ll tempt you with another bite, and another, until you have to refuse or explode. I wonder, now that your belly is larger, how much bigger it will be this time? I can’t wait to find out! Then I can hug and pet all of it!”

Wolf’s tail stilled and his eyes opened wide in alarm as he gazed at her face, wondering if perhaps he wasn’t the bad one here after all. She didn’t notice, however. As she sat on the scarlet, hooded cape, fingers entwined in the soft fur of his round belly, she was looking off at something only she could see, and smiling.