**Fragile: Handle with love**

“Look… I know what you’re thinking, but… please? Please at least consider it, OK?”

The young vixen was at the point of pleading.

Ellis was clipping away and trimming some dude’s tail, and Sam was preening a vixen’s ears whilst Edie dealt with the phone-call they’d all been dreading. In fact, they’d done moon-land-claws to work out who’d be the unfortunate soul to handle it. Moon sure beat claws, that was for pawsdamned sure! Poor Edie. Trying to convince the bitter and prejudiced families to come together for what was supposed to be something special was like pulling teeth!

“Paws alive, what a bunch o’…” She paused, clenching her paws in frustration, trying not to say what she desperately wanted to say, “… oooo they make me so mad!”

“Oh honey, whaddya’ expect?!” Ellis crooned with a rather flamboyant sigh, swishing his short tail in a curt, taut nonchalance.

“Yeah I know, El’, but come on! It’s their anniversary for paws’ sake!”

This frustrated trio worked at Prongright’s Furdresser, a half-up, half-under place stuck in a terrace between the wolven grocery chain, Silvers, and the accountants Sly and Stone VLLC. No matter its working-class Scent Code in the fox-majority city of Panatara, it was known for its friendly atmosphere and non-judgmental staff. Prongright’s belonged to a sheep-vixen couple, Justin and Heather, who’d inherited the business from a long line of ovine owners. Gosh, they’d had it since Justin’s father had retired in 1999. It was a wedding gift to them both… that was even if Justin senior hadn’t enjoyed knowing his eldest lamb was marrying a traditional ‘enemy’ of the Ovic State. The whole family had shunned the poor guy in fact. That was not that Heather’s mother and father had reacted any better.

None of them spoke, none of them had met… and none of them had a desire to change any of that any time soon.

The stigma of being a ram married to a vixen had never left them. Their wedding photos had been taken by the minister. No one else turned up, or at least none of them would show up if the others were gonna’ be there. So petty! Twenty years on and it was still the same!

Justin and Heather had been secondary school sweethearts. The bullying had started there, evolving into full-blown racism once they set hoof and paw into the big wide world. It was for this reason that they’d remained cubless. Neither wanted their progeny to go through the hell they’d experienced.

Justin had clopped back from his lunch break and his trip to the bank… that poor ram worked his bellrope off for this place. It showed in the scars on his Roman muzzle, in the sun-shot colour of his brown-white wool and the tired eyes hiding behind a pair of steel pince-nez.

“Hey J-J!”

“You got somethin’ special for Heather?”

“Shhh, jeez! She’ll… she’ll hear.”

“Let’s take a look ya’ silly ol’ ram!”

Surrounded and accosted by his eccentric employees, Justin’s cloven paws relinquished the bags he’d been carrying. Inside one was the most beautiful tail ribbon with twenty natural crystal drops that would settle in her fur so wonderfully. It would be perfect for their anniversary.

“Oh paws alive, that’s…” Sam waved her paws in front of her muzzle, trying to stop the tears coming, “Justin, you ol’ romantic you! That’s beautiful, man.”

The vixen hugged him, her tattooed forepaws bringing an amazing reverse camouflage as they ‘matched’ with his classic Jacob wool mottles.

“An’ wot’ about this one? Oh wow!” Ellis being Ellis hadn’t been able to resist looking in the other… and if it made *him* blush, paws only knew what he’d seen!

“No! Not that bag!” Justin nearly pronked from his position to stop Ellis from snoopin’, “That’s… uh… private!”

“Nudge nudge wink wink… I’m with ya’!” The fox replied with a sly smile.

Whilst all this was ‘going down’, Heather was downstairs and none-the-wiser, working through the finances on her laptop whilst grabbing a worm or two from the walls. Easy snackability! Her nose or ears may not have picked up the banter upstairs, but her eyes kept lingering on the calendar, a little pyramid of cardboard on her desk that had a single date ringed in red marker.

Her tail twitched, wanting to curl lower, knowing that their anniversary would be just another day, that their loved ones wouldn’t…

“Hi love!” Justin came clopping down the steps to their cosy cavern, the light of Heather’s work lamp striking the silvers and coppers of the earrings that strung from his clipped ears.

“Hi” She stretched and yawned as he came over and nuzzled her, the smell of chlorophyll, cinnamon and lanolin wafting to the nostrils. It had been a busy day for the ram. Heather watched as he wandered past and put the grocery bags on the kitchen counter, his polycerate handsomeness caught in the last beams of sunshine from the skylight, “We uh… we got an invite to some kind o’ conference next week.”

“Next week?” Justin turned as he was loading the fridge, his cloven paws full of grass shakes, cured chicken slices and other tasty treats, “Next week when?”

“Thursday. Our anniversary.”

The ram didn’t answer, but his sigh was tail-breaking.

“But guess who’s up for an award?”

“That’d be us.” Justin didn’t even look up from the fridge as he replied, nonchalant cos’ he was fed up with being kicked across the horns whenever he was down, whenever he just wanted to spend some time with his mate, “Of course it is.”

That last sarcastic mutter was directed away from his beloved, but boy oh boy was he done with this! Being recognized was nice, don’t get ‘im wrong. But paws alive it’d just be nice to be recognized as ram and wife for once… that’s all. Nothing more. He didn’t want to feel unsafe any longer.

They dropped the subject and the evening wandered along as usual. By about seven, Justin and Heather were chillin’ on the sofa beneath their shop (Just’ was a huge fan of “Breaking Baa’d”), whilst their employees were hard at work, sat with crossed paws in the middle of the black-white tiled floor and kept warm in the light of a cheap bottle of Vulpic whisky, the glows of their cellphones and the wag of well-intentioned trickery.

Amongst a myriad of customers and regulars, Ellis had reached out to a good friend, Corsten Rednall of folk-rock artists Davadno, and the guy was super stoked to attend. He was an expert at the Vulpic Harp, Heather’s favourite type of music… but the girls took their colleague’s eagerness with a pinch of salt. The teasing continued through to the following morning.

“Ahh you just wanna’ see ‘im drench ‘is tail in oil!” Edie rolled her eyes and clipped away at a collie pup’s ear floof.

“Between you an’ me…” Ellis padded over and put his paws gently over the youngster’s ears, making him giggle… but he was truly too engrossed in his phone to pay attention to the adults, “…yes! But *on* the record, Heather loves ‘is music. I did it for her, sweetie.”

“Suuuuure you did!” The vixen murred with a doubt-loaded sarcasm, waving him away from her young customer to restart her grooming.

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The Earth-Builders Local 1829 had a subterranean venue in the Dawnstreak area of the city, snug and rugged beneath a local supermarket. It was perfect for the celebration.

Ellis, Edie and Sam had spent ages convincing their bosses that they could manage the shop whilst they were away. What Justin and Heather didn’t know was that most of their regulars had spread the scent that it was a party, a celebration of their love… and the list was growing by the minute!

“Paws alive, love. Are we in the right place?” The ram clopped nervously down the steps, hoof in paw with his mate and squinting those slit-pupil eyes through the darkness.

“Hm. No lights, nothin’… hang on a sec.” It was then that Heather reached sideward, feeling her paw across the inside of a door to find the switch, “Aha, there we…”

“SURPRISE!!”

They were stood clung to one another as the shock hit them, friends, regulars and employees alike leaping from the chairs and tables in this underground hidey-hole.

“Heheheh paws alive, you almost gave me a heart attack!” Justin shook his head and laughed, clutching his right hoof to his chest.

“Ah come on old man!” Ellis hugged him, before doing the same with his mate, “You deserve this! You both do. Happy twentieth!”

“I knew you were up to somethin’!” Heather wagged her paw in jest at her flamboyant employee.

El’ simply swished away with an evil grin on his muzzle.

With hugs and congrats out the way, everyone helped themselves to the array of nibbles on offer, customers young and old padding up to offer their congratulations to the happy couple; but blood and scent family were conspicuous by their absence. It didn’t bother Justin as much as it did Heather. She’d only come to know how single-tailed her family was when she started dating a sheep.

Wishing hadn’t made the situation better and she was tired of calling and crying, begging for them to accept her and be a part of her life. She could lose herself in this comfortably strange feeling for now.

There was lots to distract the hungry partygoer. There was paw-food like raw chicken bites, jerky and sticky insects in a bacon-caramel drizzle; whilst for the Ovine crowd, there were fried grasses, flower petals, acorn smoothies and dried sloes. It was a bevvy of deliciousness that got maws watering in these most humble surroundings.

With the walls adorned with the photos of decades of dedicated diggers, the warmth of still eyes looking on from their past accomplishments gave support and love from a lost distance.

The music for the evening was provided by Corsten Rednall, the fox joined by guitarist Lester Herdil, a Blue Leicester bassist who had travelled four-hundred miles just to be a part of this happy gathering. They both gave the venue a beautifully scented life, the smell of the oils used to string Corsten’s tail hairs upwards into a harp, meeting the bittersweet tail aromas of those watching and listening. These customers, loyal employees and well-waggers were enough. This *was* their family.

They could easily lose themselves in this feeling, the purple, blue and green lights low and romantic, Justin and Heather slow-dancing to the eerie otherworldliness of Corsten’s music.

Once applause had rung out for another amazing song, punctuated by the expert barking of this very talented musician, Corsten took a break to chat with the very smitten vixen. Heather could barely believe it. He’d been a cubhood idol of hers, and to see him play the Vulpic Harp live and in-pawson was just awesome!

“Vixens and gentledogs, if…” And Corsten padded forward, out into the centre of the parquet dancefloor, “…if I may say a few words? S’more of a note of scent to this crazy world… we’re here to party but we’re also here to bring everyone together.”

It was then that he turned tail, beckoning Lester down from the stage, something vitreous in his cloven paws.

“Please accept this gift on the occasion of your twentieth anniversary. Congratulations!”

Corsten presented the couple with a bone-china heart, painted as a jigsaw of two pieces joined, their names painted on either half. Hooves were shook and paws too, smiles and wags of tails making the occasion warm and happy… even if there were still very few here to celebrate.

It was only as everyone went back to dancing, eating or just chatting that someone appeared in the doorway, sheepishly making their way in. A rather awkward silence fell on the room, making Justin turn tail and see that someone had actually made the effort… for once! It was Justin’s brother, Jacques, and his two lambs. Gosh, they hadn’t seen them – or rather, been *allowed* to see them – in years.

Following on behind was another familiar set of strangers… Heather’s mother and father, Cora and Collin. They had carried their arguing all the way from the car and down the stairs into the venue… but when they laid nose on the other side of their estranged family, they stopped in their tracks.

Distance was kept, a growl or two exchanged even, Collin seeing that Jacques had pulled his two lambs closer, ‘away from the bad fox’. It was like a ballet, played out in a darkness brought upon everyone here by way of *their* horrible hatred. This was all *their* doing cos’ before they’d ‘graced’ the party with their presence, everyone else had been havin’ a great time!

Heather’s emotions couldn’t hold out though and when she saw her mother, she padded quickly over to fall into a cuddle, crying as she did so. Justin stood back, simply nodding an acknowledgement at the ever-stern muzzle of his father-in-law. To have him just meet eyes with him was a definite improvement on before!

Even with the uncertainty and the rather frosty atmosphere between the two families – Jacques sat on a table at one end of the room, Colin and Cora on the opposite side – the frivolity quickly picked up again.

Seeing Wyn and Wallace shaking their cute tails was adorable!

“You OK, Heather?” Justin had wandered over, wrapping his paws around his mate’s waist from behind and resting his broad muzzle on her right shoulder.

“Yeah.” Heather murmured sadly, her eyes caught on the youngsters.

She braved a smile before Justin caressed a cloven paw across her slender belly.

“It’s not too late.” He murmured lovingly, “If you would want to of course.”

She was caught between fear and happiness, a shock that was unspoken but pleasant nonetheless, Heather turning and hugging her mate tight to keep anyone from seeing the tears streaming down her muzzle.

It was only then that Wyn, the prettiest little ewe lamb with chocolate cake now around her usually pristine white muzzle, wandered up to her aunt and uncle.

“Why don’t we get to see you much, uncle Justin?”

That innocent remark made the ram cast his eyes over the top of his glasses to his brother Jacques, sat fondling both hooves around a wine glass, alone and staring into the tablecloth. He looked up and it was then that he braved a smile… a compromised, surrendering smile.

This unspoken concession, evident only in the twitch of his bell-rope tail that hung down through the back of his chair, was enough for these brothers to acknowledge each other’s pain, at how long this silliness had persisted.

“Ahh I think that’s gonna’ change, youngster.” Justin crouched down and picked up his niece.

“Cool!”

And now Wyn’s attention was caught with her uncle’s mate.

“Why does Auntie Heather have red wool?”

“Heheheheh... isn’t it pretty though?!”

“Mhm. Very!”

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