

Marlot knocked on the frame of the open door and poked his head inside the small office. "I hope you don't mind," he told the large bear behind the desk. "I told the officer at the front desk I was an old friend of yours." In reality, all he'd done was show his ID; as an RI, he had the right to come and go from enforcer stations.

"Marlot!" she exclaimed, a wide smile on her muzzle. She pushed herself away from the desk before standing, shifting it forward a few inches in the process. "Where have you been hiding, and why has it taken you so long to come and visit?" She crossed the space separating them and hugged him. He was minuscule in her arms, she towered over him by more than two feet.

He hugged the grizzly back, his arms unable to reach around her back. A minute later, he said. "You're going to have to let me go eventually, you know?" He couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him.

"No, I don't." Was her deadpan reply.

"Actually, I'm going to need him back." Trembor was still in the hall, looking in at them, and trying not to laugh.

The bear looked him over with a calculating gaze. "And you are?"

"RI Goldenmane."

She frowned. "Goldenmane?" She released Marlot and fixed her gaze on him. "Don't I remember you mentioning that name a few times? Way back when you were still visiting on a regular basis?"

Marlot's ears folded back in embarrassment, and he looked at the floor. "It's only been a year," he mumbled.

"uhuh? A year without a visit from my favorite wolf. How do you think me and my family have been feeling, abandoned like that?"

Marlot looked up, worry marring his features. He hadn't thought they had... The grin plastered on the grizzly's muzzle made him roll his eyes.

"You're too easy, Marlot. You need to learn to relax. So, what's the story with the two of you?"

Marlot glared at her for a moment before smiling. "We worked together on that hunter case."

She looked from him to the lion and back. His smile widened. "I'm glad you became friends. You don't have enough of those, I keep telling you wolf. You can't just hang out with those two techy. you need lots of friends."

"Actually, we work together." Trembor's tone was serious. "We figured we could accomplish more if we pooled our resources and territories." He wasn't sure why he felt the need to justify it. He normally didn't care who people took the news of two RI working together.

She gazed at the wolf and lion thoughtfully before smiling again. She took a step back, bumping the desk back in its place and sat on the edge, making it creaky painfully.

"So, does your partner even know who I am?"

Marlot looked away in embarrassment again. He took a breath.

"Trembor, this is Bahamel Strongbone. She arrested me almost as soon as I set foot in the city."

"For what?" Trembor's tone was more alarmed than he liked.

"Participation in an unregistered house of pleasure," the grizzly answered.

Trembor stared at Marlot in dismay. "You never told me." What could his wolf had been doing in such a place?

"With good reason," the wolf mumbled, ears plastered against his skull and looking at the floor.

She backhanded him lightly, but he still staggered a step. "Oh, stop being embarrassed about that." She smiled at Trembor. "We have him in a cell for two days before we questioned him, and it was a good six hours before he mentioned he was an RI. He scared the shit out of half the department when he said that. The other half shit their pants when we confirmed it was true. They thought he'd been hired by the higher-ups to see how well we were doing our jobs. There's always corruption when you give people power," she explained at Trembor's questioning expression.

"What were you doing in an illegal pleasure house?" Trembor didn't like that the knowledge Marlot had gone to such a place hurt him.

Marlot sighed. "I'd gotten a tip Ruxul was hiding in it." He waved the comment away.

Relief washed over the lion. "Then why didn't you tell them that?" His tone was harsher than he'd intended.

Marlot glared at him. "oh, I don't know. maybe it was because I'd just arrived from a town where the RI isn't supposed to make waves." Then his lips tightened, exposing teeth. "They were the law, and I wasn't. That's all I knew."

"Alright," Bahamel interrupted before Trembor could reply. "let's stop this before it turned into a full-fledge lover's spat."

Marlot spun to her, fear in his eyes, but she was squeezing back in her chair.

"Now, as much as I appreciated the visit after all this time, I doubt you're here just to reminisce. What's this about?" If she noticed the wolf's expression, she didn't react to it.

It was Trembor who spoke. "We're wondering if you've come across a rapist who doesn't leave any sort of evidence behind."

Her eyes darkened. "Get in and close the door."

Trembor complied, but stay by the door, concerned by the hardness in her tone.

"What's your interest in this?"

Marlot sat in the only other chair. "have you heard about the Aiden Spottedfur case?" He was relaxing. She hadn't actually noticed anything between him and Trembor. Her comment had just been an off-hand remark. Too close for his comfort, but innocent.

She thought about it. "Arcas' vice president, right? You're

investigating her death?"

The wolf nodded. "Our examiner determined she was raped, but there aren't any traces left behind, no fur, semen, or even sweat on her."

Bahamel drummed her fingers on the desk. "No, it can't be him. this doesn't fit his pattern." she was talking to herself.

"So you do have a rapist?" Marlot asked.

She nodded. "A serial rapist. We've been able to keep that out of the news."

"Will you let us look at the files?" Trembor asked.

She stared at him in surprise.

"What?"

"You asking for permission? I was expecting you to demand I hand over the files to you."

The lion chuckled. He could do that, when it related to a case an RI was working on, his authority superseded that of the enforcers. "I came up through the enforcers before becoming an RI. I know the value of maintaining a good relationship with your department instead of barging in and making demands."

Her smile was warm. "It's nice to know there's at least one," she looked at Marlot, "two RIs who keep that in mind. Too many of them seem to think we work for them."

"Power can corrupt anyone," Marlot commented. Because of how things worked in his hometown, he'd never known he had that kind of power, and it tempered how he used it.

Bahamel carefully extracted herself from behind her desk. "Come on, I'll show you what we have."

She led them through the building. Passing a row of large screens on a wall, Marlot stopped and stared at the only one showing an occupied room. They were interrogation rooms, and the vids were to ensure the enforcers questioning suspect didn't get carried away.

Marlot looked at the grizzly in the room standing, hands on the table between him and the seated badger dressed in dirty clothes. He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but from the body language, he could imagine there was a growl of anger under the words.

"Ba," he called out to the bear who had kept walking, Trembor next to her. "Is that Belric?" He'd only met him once, two years ago, and he'd grown since then, but the resemblance was still there.

Bahamel came back and looked at the screen. She smiled with pride. "yes, it is. It took until the youngest, but one of mine finally followed in their mama's footsteps." She watched him work fondly for a moment before starting back to where she had been headed. this time Marlot followed.

It had been an interrogation room before being turned into a small command center. The camera was still there but disconnected, the two chairs weren't there and four boards and a filing cabinet had

been added.

Pictures of females hung on the boards, over thirty by Marlot's estimation. Each picture had a number printed on the bottom, each one matched the number on one of the files laid out on the table.

"Just how long has this monster been doing this?" Marlot felt sick.

"Officially we're saying five years, but I think he's been at it longer." She tapped a picture of an otter. "She's the oldest case we have, her rape was five years ago. But even with her, his methods are already established. she was drugged, raped, and hardly remembers any of it."

"What drugs does he use?" Trembor picked up her file.

"Raspazill. It's a simian sleep aid," she added at the lion's confused expression. "it's available over the counter without a prescription. It's species specific, in this case only for simians, with any other species it causes disorientation and drowsiness even in small doses. At three times the prescribed dose it interferes with short-term memories."

Trembor snarled. "So he drugs them, does whatever he wants and they don't even know about it?"

"So do, at least they remember enough to know something was done to them. Not everyone is the same. these females had to have a higher tolerance to the drug. There are almost certainly more females out there who don't even know they were raped, or are too afraid, or ashamed, to come forward.

"What are the pharmas doing about the drug?" Marlot had to work at it, but he was able to be calmer about it than Trembor was.

"They have warnings on the package about the serious side effect for non-simians, but we can't get them to pull it off the shelves without telling them why. If we were to tell them a rapist is using it, the newsies would get wind of it, report it and within minutes we'd have a panic on our hands."

Marlot turned when Trembor growled.

The lion was by the boards looking at a picture of a young lioness. Marlot went to him and took his hand. "Trembor, she isn't our case."

The lion didn't respond.

"Trem," he tried again, his voice softer, "we can't help her."

The lion glared at him. "She can't be older than Alasa," he snapped.

"I know, but we're here for Aiden. Bahamel," he nodded in her direction, and she suddenly looked anywhere but at them, "is already doing everything she can for them."

Trembor's glare lasted a moment more before the anger dissolved. "You're right, thanks." His hand reached up, almost cupping the wolf's cheek. He had a moment of hesitation and then Trembor rubbed the bridge of his own muzzle instead. He took a deep breath and

turned to the grizzly. "Alright. tell us about his patterns."

Bahamel leaned on the table, making the metal whine under her mass. "Let me start by saying I really hope your body isn't one of his victims because he's never killed before. If he's escalating to include death with the rape, there's no way we're going to be able to keep that away from the newsies."

"If it helps," Marlot said, "there's a possibility the death wasn't planned."

She let out a sigh. "Let's hope. He likes his females young, in their very early adulthood, although he has gone after a few older ones. The only exception is simians. He hasn't raped any."

"So he's aware the drug doesn't work on them," Marlot commented.

"What's his hunting ground?" Trembor asked.

"That's proving difficult to discern." She flipped one of the boards over and showed a map of the city. each victim was marked on it with a numbered pin. "Because of the drug, we can't be sure where the rape took place. We did our best to compensate, but even then, as you can see, he covers half the city."

Trembor nodded and looked at the table again. "I'm not seeing any files on suspects. Where do you keep them?"

She pointed to the filing cabinet. "We had to lock them up. The harshness of the crimes sent

She pointed to the filing cabinet. "We had to lock them up. The harshness of the crimes sent one of our officers over the edge and he exacted revenge on who we thought was the most likely suspect at the time. Now only the task force has access to them." She punched a code in her pad and the cabinet clicked. She pulled a stack of files out. "These are our current suspect."

Marlot and Trembor split the pile.

The lion read the first two quickly, then on the third, he stopped at the picture, frowned, and quickly looked through all the other files. when he looked up Marlot was giving him a similar puzzled expression.

"Why are there only reptiles?" Marlot asked.

"They're the most likely species to have done this. They don't shed as mammals do so they don't leave fur at the scene, they also don't perspire so they don't leave sweat on their victim, so scent trace is more difficult.

Marlot's blood grew cold as what Bahamel said sank in. He looked at the map. The furthest North East the victims reached was the financial district. He walked to the map.

"Trem, what's the iguana's address?"

Trembor looked at the wolf for a moment, ears canted quizzically. he pulled out his pad and looked it up, giving it to Marlot.

The wolf traced the road on which the iguana lived. It was a straight line from the financial district to the southwest of the

city. He cursed under his breath as he saw a cluster of pins in that area.

"Give me the closest intersection to his building." But even before Trembor gave it to him, he already had his finger at the middle point of the corridor. This time his cursing was loud.

"What?" Trembor joined him.

"I've been blind. I never even considered reptiles."

"What are you talking about?"

Marlot turned to face him. "It fits. He doesn't shed, and he knew Aiden. She would let him in since she had no reason to fear him, after all, she used to dominate him. He's strong enough to break her neck. It has to be him." He didn't wait for Trembor to assimilate the information, Marlot ran out of the room.

The lion's eyes grew wide as he understood. He turned to chase after his wolf, but Bahamel grabbed his arm.

"Him who?" she demanded.

"Cristan Hardtalon," he answered. "he used to be one of Aiden's boy-toy."

She nodded but didn't release him. She pulled him closer and looked him in the eyes. "You take good care of Marlot, so you hear me?"

Trembor nodded and she let him go. He caught up to Marlot as he was getting in his car. The lion sprinted and barely got in before it was peeling out of the parking lot with a screech.