

Marlot felt a hand on his shoulder and he went for it with a growl. Teeth bit empty air and he glared at who had touched him.

A female rabbit was still backing up, eyes wide, flexing her hand. "Sir?" her voice quivered. "Are you alright?"

Marlot turned and took a step toward her, teeth still bared and something squished under his foot. He looked down and frowned.

"Sir? I'm medic Irdalim, I think you might be in shock. Can you tell me your name?"

Marlot looked at her and blinked a few times. Why was a medic here? He opened his mouth, but he couldn't think of something to say.

"Sir? I need you to tell me your name. Who is that?" She pointed behind him.

Marlot looked at the iguana over his shoulder. A body? Right, yes, of course. He was an investigator. That had to be an unclaimed body, except that didn't feel right.

He tastes blood in his mouth. He wiped at his muzzle and his jacket sleeve came away covered in it. He didn't think it was his, he didn't feel hurt. The rabbit was still talking.

"Shut up," he barked. Something wasn't right. The body wasn't unclaimed, it was his. Why had he killed him? He'd been chasing someone. Cristan, that was the name. He'd hid here. He and Trembor had..

"Trembor!"

Marlot ran by the medic. She yelled at him, but he ignored her. He took the stairs two at a time, didn't slow as he turns and almost fell.

Around the building, he saw a bobcat, labrador, and a bull kneeling around the lion. Marlot saw the medic patches on their jacket. "Get away from him!" They looked at him and immediately scattered.

He fell to his knees next to Trembor. His left shoulder was bandaged, but blood was slowly seeping through. His leg was held straight by a splint.

He took the lion's right hand and nuzzled it. "Please be okay. Please don't die. Trem, I..." He swallowed hard and stared at Trembor's chest moving up and down. He didn't want his lion to die, he couldn't die. But what if? He tried to keep his mind from going there, but the image of Trembor's body being put in a freezer formed.

He'd never told him. In the years of working together and everything they shared, He'd never once uttered those words. This could be his last chance.

He kissed the hand. "I... I love you, Trem," he whispered. "Please don't leave me."

"Love you too, Marl," Trembor replied softly. Marlot looked at him and the lion smiled. "Good, you got that asshole." He winced as his left arm moved a little but fell back to the ground. He panted for a moment, then smiled again. "I'm not ever leaving you, but I

need you to do me a favor."

"Anything!" Marlot would do whatever it took to keep Trembor with him.

"Let the medics do their jobs," Trembor crooned.

Marlot looked around to see the three of them standing a few feet away, fear and concern fighting on their face. He placed Trembor's arm back down and kissed him gently before standing.

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Marlot followed the ambulance to the hospital and was behind them as they pushed the gurney into the evaluation department.

"I'm sorry Sir, but you can't come in. Only family is allowed past this point." An orderly said. He was an otter, not very big, but he talked with confidence.

Marlot wasn't going to be separated from Trembor. He grabbed the otter by the collar and pulled him close. "He's my mate."

The orderly swallowed, looking from Marlot's eyes to his muzzle, then nodded. "You need to wash off first, sir."

The wolf deposited the orderly to the ground and found a washroom where he cleaned up as best as he could. Blood had dripped inside his shirt and dried there. When he pulled it open, he winced as fur tried to leave his chest.

When he stood at the window of the room where Trembor lay, medics busying themselves around him, one was putting a cast on his broken leg. Marlot couldn't hear what they were asking, but Trembor answered with nods and shakes of the head.

Marlot almost burst in when one of the labradors prodded Trembor's shoulder and caused him pain. He knew what they were doing was needed, but the need to protect his lion from them almost overwhelmed him. His claws dug into the window frame as he held on to it to keep himself still. More holes to an already pockmarked piece of wood.

The labrador stepped out of the room.

"Is he okay?" Marlot asked.

"He's in good condition, but the bullet is still in his shoulder. We've called for a surgeon and he'll be here in the morning."

Marlot nodded and looked through the window again.

"They're finishing cleaning the wound, and once it's bandaged again, he will be moved to a room."

"A single."

"You understand that isn't covered by his policy."

"I'll pay for it."

"Very well. I'll have the arrangements made."

Ten minutes later, Marlot followed as two orderlies wheeled the lion to a room. They helped him on the bed and gave him pain killers.

"I'll help him undress."

The orderlies left.

His hands were shaking as he unbuttoned the lion's shirt.

"You know," Trembor whispered, "I've never done it in a hospital room."

"Don't," the wolf cringed. "Don't talk about that, not here, not now." tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Hey." Trembor placed his good hand against Marlot's head. "I'm okay. I'm going to be fine."

"I'm... I'm afraid, Trem. I said it, and I'm afraid I'm going to lose you as I lost him."

"I'm not going to die. Marl, this isn't a serious injury. I'll be out of here in a few days at the most."

"I know. I'm sorry." He wiped the tears away. Before he could go back to undressing him, Trembor kissed him passionately.

With the lion undressed and sleeping, Marlot sat on the chair to wait. To avoid having to look at his hurt lion, he took out his pad and started on the report.

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Marlot woke with a start, and just grabbed for the pad slipping out of his hand when the door opened. He expected one of the medics, maybe the surgeon, but instead a mature lioness walked in, followed by a younger version of herself and two cubs, one male, and one female, around six years old. They smiled at him as she stood on the other side of the bed and Marlot felt dread form at the pit of his stomach.

A male lion entered and Marlot stood, placing his pad on the bedside table. There was no mistaking the family resemblance, but that wasn't why he stood. The male was the patriarch and radiated power in his posture. For a moment Marlot felt like he was back home, before one of the town's councilors again.

The lion studied him with piercing eyes for a moment. Marlot felt himself become smaller under that gaze.

"The officer said you are the one who killed the male who did this to my son." The lion kept his deep voice soft.

"Yes sir." Marlot tentatively took the offered hand.

"Thank you. If there's ever anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask. You avenged my son, that almost makes you family."

There was a chuckle from the bed. "A little more than almost, dad."

"You're awake!" The younger lioness draped herself over Trembor, hugging him.

Trembor took in a sharp breath. "What's the shoulder sis."

She jumped off as if she'd been burnt. "Oh, I'm so sorry!"

The two cubs decided it was now okay to climb on the bed and sit at the foot of it. They looked at Trembor, then Marlot, and whispered something to each other.

The older lioness placed a hand on Trembor's. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, mom." He smiled at her. "I can barely feel the bullet."

His sister's ears folded back. "Sorry," she whined.

The older lion cleared his throat, and the rumble reverberated around the room, to the amazement of the cubs. "What did you mean by what you said?"

"He's the one."

Marlot felt the dread intensify as they all looked at him.

"But he's not a lion!" exclaimed one of the cubs.

Marlot didn't have the time to decide if he should flee. Trembor's father wrapped his arms around him and held him tightly.

"Welcome to the family. My name's Torim, but you better get used to calling me dad."

The wolf couldn't say anything for a moment, then all the would come out was. "Yes, sir." He could see the two lionesses beam at him.

"Why don't you two go hug your new uncle," Trembor told the cubs once his father released Marlot.

"Can we get his pad number?" the female one asked, extending her arms to the wolf.

"No."

Marlot gave him a questioning look as he hugged her.

"I'll explain later."

Marlot hugged the other one. Then it was Trembor's mother and sister. After that, he excused himself and left them alone.

He leaned against the wall opposite the door and tried to stop shaking. He had been terrified of their reaction to Trembor's announcement, but he had been ready to defend him. He had been willing to take them all on.

He hadn't been prepared for their easy acceptance.

"I thought they might chase you out." Bahamel was sitting on a bench a few feet away. "How did it go?"

He composed himself. "It went okay."

She studied him for a moment. "Do they know?"

"Know what?"

"About you and the lion."

Marlot stared at her, then looked for the closest exit. It was with a lot of effort that he kept himself from fleeing.

"How? How did you find out?"

She smiled. "Marlot, honey, I'm not blind. You all but screamed 'I love you' back at the station when you got him to focus back on your case. Then there's Cristan. You killed him for hurting your partner. You're normally more professional than that."

It took a moment for Marlot to realize she didn't have a problem with their relationship. He flopped down next to her.

"Have you found out where he got the gun?"

"No. We've contacted the protectors, but we might not find out. They're pretty closed-mouthed when it comes to their arsenal. My

guess is they're going to confiscate it and not tell us anything."

"Can they do that? the gun's involved in a shooting."

"There's no one for your partner to press charges against, so it's not going to be needed in court. Cristan's dead, so there's nothing to investigate there. And they're the protectors. If we piss them off who's going to protect us if another country attacks."

She closed her eyes and leaned back. "At least I'll be able to close that rapist's case now. We found a box filled with female undergarments near his body. I'm willing to bet we'll match them to his victims without troubles."

She took Cristan's ID card from a pocket and handed it to him. "Do you want us to keep the body for you?"

He took the card and turned in his hand. "Eat it, or burn it. I don't care." He reached for his pad but remembered it was in the room.

She hugged him. "I'll donate it to a shelter." She stood and ruffled his head fur. "Don't wait until you need me on a case before dropping by again," she said before walking away.

Marlot watched her leave. He wasn't shaking anymore, but that didn't comfort him. Bahamel had noticed. Who else knew? he'd been so careful about how he acted around Trembor. At least he thought he had been.

He leaned back and started laughing. Did it matter anymore who might know? There had been three medics present when he told Trembor he loved him. He had no idea how many people had been around when he told that orderly he was his mate. And Trembor's family knew and had accepted him, just like that. No one struck him down for loving another male.

His laughed died down. Maybe Trembor was right, maybe there really was nothing wrong with being who they were.