

“You moved the body?” Trembor yelled at the assembled councilors.

Marlot kept his reaction to himself, crouched next to the outline someone had painted on the floor. He couldn't tell anything from it. That was why no one was supposed to touch a body until the Registered Investigator had gone over it. They had even cleaned the floor, Marlot could smell the cleaners used, the ammonia making his muzzle crunch up. He looked up on hearing movement.

“You had better watch your tone, young male,” An elderly lynx replied, moving from behind the curved table. “We don't have to tolerate such impertinence. If you need to address me, you can call me Councilor Tuff; Arlion Tuff. And who might you be?”

The lion glared down at the lynx. “I'm Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane.” He showed his ID.

Marlot remembered the lynx, although the last time he'd seen him, his fur had still been gray. Now it was white. Councilor Tuff was the spokesmale for the council. He was stubborn and set in his way. Trembor wouldn't get anything from him.

“And what are you doing here, Investigator Goldenmane?” the lynx asked. “I only asked Marlot to come deal with this.”

The lion looked over his shoulder at Marlot, ears canted to the side. The wolf stood. Asked? Arlion had demanded that Marlot come back home, he hadn't asked. When Marlon had said no, the lynx had contacted the City Controller and somehow gotten him to order Marlot.

Technically, the Controller couldn't give Marlot orders, the position of RI was no longer part of the city, it hadn't been for a few decades, but the bull had made it clear that he would consider it a personal favor if Marlot did it, and that he would be very cross with the wolf if he didn't.

They'd only stopped by their respective places to get a few changes of clothing and did the three-hour drive to the one place Marlot had promised himself he'd never go back to.

“Trembor is my partner,” Marlot said.

“Partner? Aren't you able to do the work on your own? Maybe the city is too much for you and you should come back here.”

Behind the table, the other councilors nodded and murmured among themselves.

Come back? Absolutely not, but when he spoke, he kept his tone neutral. “We share territories. It benefits both of us.” He indicated the outline. “You realize that it's illegal to move the body before the Registered Investigator had released it? We're within our right to lodge a complaint.” Now that it would do any good, the council would be the ones hearing it.

The lynx waved the comment aside. “Maybe if you'd actually done what I

told you, when I told you, you could have examined it. What did you expect us to do? Let it stink up the place for three days while you made up your mind?"

"Don't you have a local Investigator?" Trembor asked before Marlot could.

The wolf was preoccupied keeping his ears from folding back and looking away from the councilor. Every instinct was telling him to submit, that the lynx was his superior, but after experiencing the city, and deciding to stay there, he'd promised himself he would never submit to someone who hadn't earned the right. Now it was proving difficult for him not to fall back on the old habits of doing as told.

"We have a local Investigator. It's Marlot."

"He released his contract when he moved to the city."

"That's irrelevant. We needed him, so he's here."

Yeah, that was typical of them. If they thought something was one way, how it really was didn't matter.

"Leave it, Trembor," Marlot said as the lion's ears folded back and he opened his muzzle. He glared at the wolf, but he closed his muzzle. "Can someone at least tell us what happened?"

"How should we know what happened? Malbereth found Na'ego's body there when she got in."

Marlot looked at the group of eight councilors still seated and found the cougardeess at the left end. "Can you describe exactly what you saw?"

She straightened. "What? You don't feel the pictures we took are enough?"

Marlot used the anger as being question burn away the desire to look away from her glare. They had called him here, \*he\* was in charge of the investigation, not them. But he didn't bother arguing, he wouldn't get anything from her if she didn't want to talk.

"What happened after she found the body?" Marlot asked Arlion.

"She called me, I came, saw Na'ego lying on the floor there, by the table. He had a gash on the head and a large pool of blood around it. I confirmed he was dead."

Marlot's stomach grumbled, breakfast had been hours ago. He looked back to the outline, which was a good two feet away from the table. Trembor was examining the table's edge, sniffing at it.

"Was there blood on the table?" he asked.

"What does it matter?" the lynx asked in exasperation.

Marlot shook his head at the lion. Trembor glared at the lynx, but stayed silent.

"Then what did you do?"

"I called Banerik."

"Banerik?"

“He’s the town’s enforcer.”

Marlot stared at the lynx. Arlion had made Banerik enforcer? He’d made Jonaly’s—He couldn’t think of that now. He forced his breathing to calm.

“What did your grandson do?”

“What do you think?” the councilor asking in annoyance. “He recorded the scene, then he took Na’ego’s body to his clinic and put him in the freezer.”

“Your enforcer moved the body?” Trembor asked.

“Na’ego was the town medic,” Marlot said before the lynx could do so in a way that would insult his partner. “With him dead, there isn’t anyone to move him. Do you have the recording? Or will I have to get it from your grandson?”

Arlion took out a data slate and handed it to Marlot. “I also added a list of the likely suspects.”

Of course he had. If they’d already decided who the prey was, why even bother forcing him to come?

“Did you have to bring him?” the lynx asked in a low tone.

“He’s my partner,” Marlot replied, not bothering lowering his voice.

“You used to be able to work on your own.”

“I work better with him,” Marlot replied, unable to keep some of his anger from his voice this time.