

As soon as he stepped out of the restaurant, Trembor stopped moving. At the other end of the block, a group of males and females were harassing a young silver furred wolf who was wearing a woolen pelt tied to his chest and arms. The lion could hear the tormentors braying as they shoved the wolf.

Trembor took a step toward them, but Marlot grabbed his arm.

“Don’t,” the black-furred wolf said. He had a pained expression on his face.

“What’s going on?”

“He was caught sleeping with someone from the communes, a sheep by what they have him wear.”

Trembor stared at him, then back to the commotion. “They’re treating him like that because he had sex with a hew?”

“We don’t mix with the communes here.” Marlot pulled him toward their car.

“Don’t tell me you find that acceptable.”

The wolf looked back and quickly looked away. He shook his head. “I don’t, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“You could go there and tell them to stop.”

“And the moment I leave they’ll start up even harder.”

“How long is that going to go on?”

“Until he decides to leave. He’s branded now. He was caught with a sheep, so he’s going to be treated like one.”

“That’s horrible. Just for sleeping around?”

“No, for getting caught. Everyone in this town’s done it, but to be caught is a social death. He’s going to be ostracized, bullied.”

“His parents?”

“They aren’t going to help him,” Marlot spat.

“How can they not do anything to protect their son?”

“They’ll tell themselves they did all they could. They told him not to do it; if he did; not to get caught. Now, he has to live with the consequences. This town is hard on those who can’t follow the rules.”

“How did you manage to survive?”

Marlot gave a bitter laugh. “I left. He’ll leave too.” He sat behind the wheel.

Trembor looked back at the silver furred wolf. His shoulders were hunched, his head low. He might be crying, Trembor couldn’t tell. He looked as if he was barely of hunting age.

Trembor had been the victim of cruelty as a cub at the hand of other cubs, it was something cubs did, he’d done it too. But these weren’t cubs anymore, they should know better than to treat someone else that way. They should have been taught better.

The urge to intervene was strong. He even took a step forward.

“Trem, please don’t,” Marlot said through the open window. “It isn’t going to help,” he added when Trembor looked at him.

Reluctantly the lion got in the car.

By the time Marlot pulled away from the curb, the young wolf was running, the others following and jeering. None of the adults intervened. More than a few nodded in approval.

Only a few hours here, and Trembor already hated this place.

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Marlot drove for five minutes, then pulled off on the side of the road. They hadn’t come across a house for most of the drive. There was a small ditch, then the grass rose to a hill with trees at the top. Marlot walked toward them, shoulders hunched.

“This was our favorite spot,” the wold said when they were almost to the top. “He’d chase me between the trees, I’d have to climb them to escape him, but I always ended up falling out, and he’d catch me. I was amazed at how strong he was.”

He looked among the branches, the leaves had turned golden and red. He reached up and ran a claw along a low branch.

“His name was Magerlo Whitepad.” He sighed wistfully. “He was two years older than I was, and he was my everything.”

“You and he were mates?”

Marlot shook his head. “I was twelve. What I felt for him wasn’t carnal, it was the adoration of a cub for someone who was everything I wasn’t. He was tall, strong, and he cared about me, even before he said it, I knew. He kept Banerik and his ilk from bullying me. He taught me how to fight. It’s something else we did here. He’d let me win once in a while, and I’d pin him to the ground, feeling strange as I did it. I was less than a year from my first heat.” He looked up again. “It would have been amazing to experience that with him.”

He was silent for a long time, looking at the leaves dance in the wind.

“What happened?” Trembor asked softly.

“We met up here, like we’d do. We ran around, we lied on the ground. He held me, and I held him. He said that once we were older, we’d leave this town. We’d go to the city, and we’d be happy, together. I was so happy to hear that. I nuzzled him, then I nipped his neck. He did the same to me, and it felt wonderful. There was none of the need that first heat brings, I could simply enjoy our closeness.” He lowered his gaze to the trunk.

Trembor saw the crosshatch as Marlot ran a hand over it.

“We did this as our way of making the promise binding. I dug my claws in, then him. We’d always be together, like they are.” He wiped tears. “If only it had been.” He fell silent for a moment. “A few days after this, I was done with my

classes, so I was running toward home when I saw a commotion near the council building. The academy is on the other side of town, you couldn't see it from where we were parked."

He rested his forehead against the tree. "As I got closer, I saw a bunch of adults forming a ring. In the center I saw first Banerik, then Pratson, Malik'ian, and Lirarn. I only noticed Margelo, curled up on the ground, when Pratson kicked him in the stomach."

Marlot shuddered.

"I was stunned. I didn't understand what was going on. Margelo had gotten into fights with them before, but this was different. Arlion stepped into the ring. He kicked Margelo too, and none of the adults did anything. Arlion spoke loudly, proclaiming that this was what came of a male raising his tail for another male. I found out later that Banerik and Pratson had come across Margelo and one of the bulls from the commune having sex. No one ever said, but I expect they killed the bull right there.

"I wanted to go to Margelo, to protect him as he'd protected me, but I couldn't move. Arlion told us to watch him, to let him be a lesson for us all. That a male's place was by a female. The five of them kicked Margelo again and again. After a moment, the other adults joined in. Margelo's father was one of them. His own father was part of the group that killed him."

Marlot looked at Trembor, anger in his eyes. "That's how I know he isn't going to do anything for his other son. That toothless coward is going to let this town destroy him like it destroyed Margelo."

Trembor stood there, his mind in turmoil. He opened his mouth, but before any words left it, Marlot continued.

"He looked at me, toward the end. He was pleading, he wanted me to do something. I ran. I ran away as fast as I could. I didn't stop running until I was home and I buried my face in my mother's chest. She held me, crooning that she knew. All I could say was that it had been horrible." He paused and dried his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was cold. "She said that I was right. It was horrible for a male to sleep with another male."

"Marl—" Trembor reached for his wolf, but Marlot flinched away. Trembor was appalled that a cub had to go through that, had to see that, and then not receive any comfort.

"Who paid for his death?" Was all Trembor could think to say.

"No one," Marlot spat.

"What?"

"No one paid. They made a celebration of it."

"He was fourteen, there's no way he was of hunting age. Killing someone under age is a crime."

Marlot snorted. “And who was going to claim the revenge? His own father was one of his killers.”

“But the system would notice his death. Did they fake his life to cover his death up?”

Marlot shook his head. “I looked into it when I became an RI. As far as the system knew, Margelo was of hunting age when he died. Someone went in and changed his classification.”

“That’s impossible.”

“This place runs according to its own rules. They don’t care about the law, just that things go the way they want it.”

“The city can’t be okay with that.”

“The cities don’t want to know. They don’t want anything to upset the distribution of vegetables. So so long as what happens here stays here, they don’t sniff the air.”

“Marl, I am so sorry.”

No wonder his wolf had had such trouble with their relationship.

“The last time I saw Margelo was when I told him I loved him.”

“Marl, I’m not him. That isn’t going to happen to me. You know that, right?”

The wolf took a deep breath and rubbed his face. “I want to believe it, but if we’re not careful; if anyone here suspects we’re lovers, they will descend on us and tear us apart.”

“They can’t do that. For one thing, I won’t let them. For another, they couldn’t hide our death, they’d have to pay our taxes, we’re not cheap.”

“Maybe not, but they have the city budget to cover that. They wouldn’t even have to increase the prices. Trem, I need you to be careful. I know how much you’ve enjoyed touching me, I love it too, but we can’t do that anywhere someone might see, even if we think we’re alone. It’s too dangerous.”

Trembor didn’t hesitate. “Alright. It won’t be easy, but I’ll keep my hands off you. Maybe we should find lodging so you can rest.”

“No, we need to settle into my old office and start working this. The quicker we start, the faster we are going to be out of here and back to our lives.”

Trembor nodded.

Marlot turned back to the tree and placed his hand on the crosshatch. “We made it out, Margelo,” he whispered. “I just wish you’d left in a different way.” He was silent for a moment, then he started down the hill.