

Marlot's old office was in the back of the enforcer's building, which was next to the council hall. When Marlot had been the town's investigator, the enforcer was a badger named Gromlik. He'd been a protector in his youth and had come back after his time there scared and sour. He hadn't liked Marlot, but he'd respected the office.

With Banerik now holding the position, the wolf would have nothing but trouble from him. Fortunately, he wasn't there. A civet stood as Marlot and Trembor entered.

"You must be the investigator the council called in." Even in her enforcer's uniform, she barely looked out of the academy.

"I am. Are you Jivis' daughter?"

She frowned. "He's my uncle."

"So you're Anagel's daughter then, Naria?"

"Am I supposed to know you?"

"No, but I'd met your mother a few times at meetings before I left town, she mentioned you. I'm Marlot Blackclaw."

Her face brightened. "You're Keliss' son? I should have realized it, you have his fur."

"So your parents also drag you to the administrator's meeting?"

"Not so much now that I'm training to be an enforcer."

"So you're taking the courses?"

"I don't need to, Banerik's teaching me."

With an effort of will, Marlot didn't roll his eyes. Instead, he moved past the three desks. He had no idea when there had been three enforcers here. The door on the back wall to the left opened to his old office. It smelled stuffy, and everything had a thick layer of dust.

"No one's bothered cleaning it?" He asked over his shoulder.

Naria pulled her gaze away from Trembor. "No one's ever needed it."

"There hasn't been any unclaimed death in five years?"

"I think there's been one or two, but enforcer Tuff handled them."

"Shouldn't it have been the local investigator who did that?"

She rolled her eyes. "We don't need her help."

Trembor opened his mouth, but Marlot shook his head. This had to be tough on the lion. Things were done in such a different way from the city. Marlot went to his old desk and ran a finger on it, making a line in the dust. It tickled his nose, but he was able to keep from sneezing.

Someone sneezed in the doorway.

"You weren't kidding," Trembor said, "there's five years of dust. It's going to take a day to get it all out."

"I don't think it's worth it. This computer is the one I got the council to buy

when I became an investigator. It was running slow by the time I left. I don't think my pad would talk to it."

"You want to drive home and get yours?" Trembor asked.

Marlot thought about it, it would be an excuse to get out of the town, if only for a while. "No, it'll just delay our investigation. We can use Na'ego's office, he'd bound to have a recent computer, and it'll put us close to his body."

Trembor moved away from the door, rubbing his nose. "We can get set up now and call Jaxca."

"Before we go, I want to check the cages. You have the list Arlion gave us?"

Trembor brought out his pad, adjusted it, and handed it to Marlot, who showed it to Naria. "Any of them in the cages?"

"These two," she indicated a lizard and an older coyote. "The yote's been in the cage since last night, the comodo dragon the day before."

"Where are their possessions?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Na'ego's things were stolen, I need to know if one of them has them."

"I don't know if I should give you access to that. No one outside the enforcers is supposed to touch anything in lockup."

Trembor indicated he wanted his pad back. "Can I send you a document?" He asked the civet.

She took hers out and after a moment nodded. "What is it?" she asked once her pad confirmed the receipt.

"It's a list of enforcer regulations. You should familiarize yourself with them. Section eight deals with Registered Investigators. Paragraph three states that any Registered Investigator in the pursuit of an investigation has the legal right to any files, or evidence, as it pertains to said investigation." He pulled out his ID and showed it to her. "We're Registered Investigators. We've been tasked with looking into the unclaimed death of Na'ego. The two in the cages are part of the suspect list. We need access to their possessions to determine if they had anything to do with his death."

She remained frozen, staring at the lion.

Marlot moved behind her. "Things like this are why you should take the courses, on top of what Banerik is teaching you."

She looked at him.

"Now I'd like you to give me access to the lockup."

She swallowed and went to a wide locker. She unlocked it and moved away. The only things in it were two plastic bags. He handed one to Trembor and emptied his on the unoccupied desk.

ID, a crumpled map of the area, paper, so it had to be out of date. A tightly wrapped packet the size of his thumb. He sniffed it and moved away. Narcotics of

some sort. A few rags containing rotting meat. Nothing that Na'ego would have on his person.

"Nothing here," Trembor said.

"Same. It's possible Na'ego's killer stashed his things."

"You know, without his ID, we could technically pass this along to the missing person's bureau," Trembor offered.

"And it would take them five minutes to identify him. Everyone in town knew Na'ego. Then the council would just scream at me for bringing an outside agency in. Let's just act like we did that already, and they bounced it back to us."

Naria watched them, clearly not following the conversation.

"This is another reason to take the courses," Marlot told her. "They'll teach you about inter-agency dynamics. Believe it or not, there are more than just the enforcers out there."

"There's the protectors," she said.

"And the MPB," Trembor said. "as well as the census' bureau, [find other agencies]. Each is mostly independent from another, but every so often we have to work with them. If that happens to you, you want to have any idea what each can and can't do. I don't think your current teacher knows what that is."

Marlot placed the items back in the bag and resealed it, before putting it back in the locker with the one Trembor had looked at. He indicated she could lock it.

"I need to see the suspects," Marlot indicated the door leading to the cages. "Please unlock the door."

She did so without hesitation.

Beyond it was four rooms made of bars. The cages where the enforcers put who still needed to be processed.

"What are they in there for?" Trembor asked.

"The komodo was found behind the restaurant. He hasn't stopped shaking since."

Marlot pushed his muzzle between the bars and took a deep sniff. "She," he said.

Naria gave him a confused look. "Female, no male." He was pretty sure. He was only in his second month of non-mammal scent identification, but they'd spent the first one on reptiles, identifying gender was one of the simpler things to do.

"Has she eaten anything?" Trembor asked.

"A bit of meat, he—she has a water bowl." She indicated the bowl next to the bench the komodo was stretched on. "It looked like she drank some."

"If she'd been like this for two days, she's coming down from something hard."

"There were narcotics in her possessions. Have you logged and identified

it?”

The civet shook her head. “Enforcer Tuff wants to let her go as soon as she’s better.”

“Has any medic seen to her?” Trembor asked.

“He’s dead.”

“How about the commune medic?” Marlot had a hard time remembering his name. “The ram, Blunthorn?”

“What would he know about this?”

“More than any of us,” Trembor said. “You don’t want here to die in your custody, that makes you responsible for her death. I doubt her tax’s all that high, but you’d still have to pay it.”

“Something else the course will teach you.” Marlot looked in the other cage. The coyote there was eying them wearily. His clothing was ragged and he stank. “How did you get that?” He indicated the splint on the coyote’s arm.

“The ram medic fixed up my arm.”

“How did it get broken?”

“I was on the other side of one of the fields. I was just passing by, I didn’t bother anyone. I didn’t even go to any of the towns. This jackal stopped me. He accused me of trying to steal from the town. I didn’t steal anything.”

“He’d be one of the Pointed clan?” Marlot asked Naria.

She nodded. “A lot of the protectors are from that family.”

The coyote snorted. “That was no protector. I know protectors, that wasn’t one.”

Marlot brought up Na’ego’s picture on his pad. “Have you met him?”

The coyote moved closer and squinted before shaking his head. “I stayed away. The only people I saw were prey working the fields, and I stayed away from them too. I know what towns like this do to anyone they catch poaching. I didn’t touch anyone.”

“Don’t release him until I say it’s okay. I need to confirm when he was in the fields.”

“Yesterday and the day before that. I was in Low Valley before that.”

“The town or their fields?”

The coyote sat down without saying anything.

“2 days isn’t enough time to get from their town to the other side of our fields. What did you eat while you traveled?”

The coyote glared at him.

“Don’t let him go until I tell you.” He had to have poached somewhere. He could call Low Valley and find out if they had a dead farmer, the coyote couldn’t have eaten the whole body, but if they did, they’d want him, and he probably wouldn’t survive the punishment.

Marlot was torn, everyone had a right to hunt, but the way the communes were set up depended on the farmers being protected. If they couldn't feel safe, they'd leave.

At least he didn't have to deal with that right now.

"Let's go get set up," he told Trembor, and they left the enforcer building.