

“You think your program finally unlocked his computer?” Trembor asked as he got out of the car. Marlot had been quiet the entire drive to the commune and back. The lion was starting to worry.

“It should be,” The wolf answered distracted. “To be honest, I didn’t think his system would be this secure.”

“Marl, are you okay?”

Marlot looked at Trembor and gave him a forced smile. “I’m okay, I promise. It’s just this place, getting to me. I’m trying to figure out if there was ever anything good about it.”

A young female stopped on the sidewalk. “Marlot?” She was behind the wolf, so he hadn’t noticed her approaching, but Trembor had noticed her. He hadn’t paid her much attention, even if he thought she was related to his wolf. Her fur was brown, instead of black, but she had the same kind of long fur at the back of her head and neck, looking a little like a mane, same as Marlot had.

Marlot stiffened, then spun. “Daliha?” He ran to her, hugged, and spun her around. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be working?”

She giggled as Marlot put her down. “When mother told me you were back, I insisted she send me to check on the shipment of medicine for the commune. I’ve been stretching it, hoping to catch you.”

Marlot smirked. “Still as devious as always.” He held her at arm’s length, studying her. “Are you exercising? You look like you’ve put on some weight.”

Trembor gaped in amazement. If he’d ever dared comment on one of his sister’s weight, he’d get clawed. But Daliha just punched the wolf on the shoulder lightly.

“You know I do, but this is because Hiremoe likes to have something to grab when...you know.”

Marlot’s ears folded partially back. “I’m not familiar with the name.”

“He’s from Lower Lake, he came over with his father to discuss buying some of our old equipment, and we went to Alde’Haer a few times after that. We also caught a few movies.”

“Do mother and father know about him?”

“Of course they do, they like him. Father’s hinted to him about the old Banor place, but Hiremoe didn’t get it. I’m going to take him to see it next time he comes to see me. I think it would be a perfect place for us to raise a family.”

“Is he coming soon? I should probably take a look at him, make sure he’s good enough for you. What’s his Family’s name?”

“I’m not telling you.” She pushed him away. “The last time I told you about a boy I was interested in, you went on the net and found all sorts of things I had no business knowing about.”

“He was having sex with half a dozen females while courting you and

bragging about it. You didn't want someone like that for a mate."

"That wasn't for you to decide."

"I didn't—"

"You told father about it."

"He had a right to know, that male would have ended up working for him."

"I would have made him stop. You did it because you didn't like him."

Marlot took a step back and raised his hands. "Alright, I'm sorry. You're right, I shouldn't have. And I won't look into your current interest if you give me his family's name."

Trembor snickered. But from her expression she believed him as much as the lion did.

"Who's that?" Daliha asked, her tone cooler, as if she hadn't noticed until now the lion had been present.

Marlot turned, ears straight in surprise. Had he forgotten about him too?

"Daliha, this is my partner, RI Trembor Goldenmane. Trembor, this is my sister, Daliha Blackclaw."

"It's good to meet you," Trembor said, but he didn't get closer, her gaze wasn't warming.

She only nodded. "Mother said you're coming for dinner. We're going to have your favorite."

"I said I'd try," Marlot corrected. "We have to go through Na'ego's system to see if there are any indications as to who killed him."

She waved the comment aside. "I thought it was one of those in the cage."

"Who told you that?" Marlot asked, head tilted.

She shrugged. "I don't remember who mentioned it. I think I was eating at Jale'i when I heard it. I mean, it's got to be one of them, right? So he's already in a cage, what's left to do?"

"That isn't how it works. We still need to demonstrate he did it, if it's him."

"But he's in a cage. It isn't like he's going anywhere? Come on, you have to come for dinner, we're having your favorite. You've been gone for years without even a word, and you didn't call me to let me know you were coming. It's almost like you don't like us anymore."

"It isn't that," Marlot said defensively, "I've just been busy. Alright, I'll make sure I'm done before dinner time."

She hugged him. "I'm so glad. And mother got your room ready, there's no reason for you to stay at the rooming place."

"I'm not spending the night there," Marlot said forcefully. His ears canted back and were pink. "I mean, me and Trembor have to work, we'll probably continue late in the night."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You can't be working after dinner, you're

supposed to rest after eating.”

“I would, but Arlion wants this case closed, and you know how that lynx is. If he wants something, he wants it done this very minute.”

Daliha said something very unflattering and Marlot stared at her.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. You’ve thought the same about him often enough.”

Marlot sputtered for a moment. “Yes, but you shouldn’t be saying that. What would mother think.”

His sister snorted. “Who do you think I heard it from?”

“Father would spank you if he heard you say it.”

She shrugged. “Father’s claws don’t scare me as much now that I’m a grown female.” She hugged Marlot again. “But he is going to be angry if I don’t get back with the manifest and confirmation the shipment is on its way. It’s going to be so good for all of us to have dinner together.”

“Yeah, I guess it will,” Marlot replied, and a moment later his sister was gone. He looked to Trembor. “Well, there’s no getting out of it now, we’d better go through as much of Na’ego’s system before we need to get ready.”

“Are you sure I should go? From the sound of it, they’re expecting it to be only you.”

“I’m not dealing with this on my own. I’m going to need all the emotional support I can get.”

“That bad?”

“You have no idea.”

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The house hadn’t changed in the years since he’d left. Marlot wasn’t surprised. It had never changed in the time he lived there. His father liked things to be consistent. He did think the walls had been painted, the gray looked fresher than he remembered.

He sat there, parked in the driveway, looking at the house he’d grown up in. All the years he’d spent there, in a cold and controlled environment. He was sure that his parents had been more outgoing with their emotions than he remembered, but compared with the chaos of Trembor’s families, with their raucous get together, his parents were emotionless machines.

He was seriously considering starting the car and leaving when a black wolf exited the house to lean next to the door. He placed a pipe to his mouth and lit it, taking a long drag.

“No getting out of it anymore,” Marlot grumbled. His father didn’t act like he’d noticed the vehicle in the driveway, and he wouldn’t react if Marlot left now. That male never reacted to anything. But he would find his son later and let him know of his disappointment in a tone so frigid Marlot’s blood would freeze.

“It’s going to be fine,” Trembor said.

Marlot nodded, hoping his lion was right. He got out of the car, locking it out of habit, and it occurred to him it was a habit he’d picked up in the city.

He and Trembor walked to the door under his father’s leveled gaze.

“Marlot,” the older wolf said. “It’s good of you to come visit.” He nodded to the lion, blowing smoke away from them. “Who is this?” As usual, his father wasn’t giving any indication of how he felt, either by his tone, scent, or body language.

“This is RI Trembor Goldenmane. Trembor, this is my father, Keliss Blackclaw.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Trembor said.

Keliss nodded. “They’re inside. Dinner is almost ready. I’ll be in shortly.” He indicated his pipe.

Marlot nodded and entered. The smell of old wood, paper, and spices made him smile. He’d missed this, he realized. Even when living on his own in town, he’d eaten with his family regularly. He hadn’t expected to long for those times again, since he didn’t have many warm memories from them.

He put his and Trembor’s coat in the closet then led him past his father’s office and the family room, facing that, with its large screen on the wall, and old, comfortable seats to the dining room.

Marlot froze when he saw another wolf seated at the table talking with Daliha. She was a head taller than his sister, and more muscular, under her tight shirt and russet fur.

“Finian?” Marlot asked. She smiled and came to him.

“Marlot, it’s so good to see you again.” She hugged him, and it took an effort for Marlot not to stiffen. “I’d heard you were back. You’re investigating Na’ego’s death?”

“Yes, Arlion requested I did. What Are you doing here?”

“I invited her,” his mother said, coming out of the kitchen. “I thought you’d like seeing one of your old fr—how’s this?” she asked on seeing the lion.

“Mother, this is Trembor Goldenmane, he’s an RI like me, and my partner, he’s helping me with Na’ego’s death. Trembor, this is Jogelin, my mother.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the lion said.

Jogelin didn’t seem to know what to say for a moment. “Marlot, can you come to the kitchen and help me?”

“Of course.” Marlot didn’t even consider saying no.

She closed the door behind him. “Why did you bring him?” she asked, her tone just shy of angry.

“What did you expect me to do mother?” Marlot had been prepared for this, although he’d expected his father to object. “I couldn’t just ask him to stay in the

room by himself. I'm the only one he knows here. Would you really want me to be uncharitable and just abandon him? He came here to help me." What he hadn't expected was for his mother to invite his one time interest to eat with them.

"No, of course not." Her beginning anger had turned to indignation. "I raised you better than that. I do wish you had told me. I would have baked an extra pie."

"I'm sorry, I expected you'd heard about him from Daliha."

"I did, it's just that..." She smiled at him. "I'm glad to see the city hasn't turned you into one of those cold people who only thinks about himself."

"I never could, you raised me too well for that." He kissed her forehead. "Can I help with something?"

She had him take out a can of erinberries sauce and heat it.

"The sweetness will go well with the spiciness of the pies," she said as she sliced a cut of meat thinly. She warmed them for a few minutes, then laid them on a plate. She poured the sauce over them. "It'll have to do," she said, not looking entirely satisfied. She handed him mitts and had him carry the plate and one of the pies to the table.

His father was placing an extra chair at the table, he then indicated for Trembor to sit next to Daliha.

Marlot almost protested, but caught himself. What kind of excuses could he give that would make them sit him next to Trembor? The arrangement was clear, his parents were hoping he'd rekindle what he and Finian had had.

"Finian took over her father's garage," Keliss said as he cut the pies.

"I didn't think he'd retire this early," Marlot said.

"He wasn't planning on it, but he wasn't feeling well for the last year, and Na'ego told him he needed to take it easy. My dad's family has a history of heart problems. He still manages the shop, but I do most of the work now." She took the plate Keliss handed her. "Is it common for investigators to work in pairs in the city? You worked alone here, but I guess there's a lot more to do there."

"No, it isn't." Marlot took the plate from his father. "We're the only ones."

"Really?" his mother said. "How did you two meet?"

"Because of Ruxul," Marlot answered.

His mother tilted an ear, but Marlot busied himself eating.

"Thank you," Trembor said, taking the plate. "That was the hunter's name Marlot followed to the city. It wasn't long that he'd left bodies in half a dozen territories, so the city controller called all the Registered Investigators to work together to capture him. It was the first time in over a decade they suspended the territories. We all worked together to catch him. Marlot was already involved, and I was partnered with him for the duration. We worked well together, so we decided to continue when we realized the territory he took over was adjacent to mine."

"Doesn't sharing the profit means you get less?" Keliss asked.

“No, because we accomplish more together than if we worked separately. Your son is adept with computers and he handles that side of the searches. I’m old school. Claws on the ground, following scents. Once he began helping me, we cleared most of the bodies in my freezer.”

The older wolf nodded. “My son always had a good head for business. That’s why I thought he’d take over running the combine when I was done.”

“You know I never had any interest in doing that.” Marlot kept his tone even, even if he was tired of hearing about this.

“Finian, have you any news on the new tractors?” His mother asked, giving his father a severe look.

“Yes, they’re going to be in next month, I’ll have them tuned up in time for the planting.”

His mother smiled at Marlot and placed a hand on his arm. “Finian was able to talk the manufacturer to sell them through her instead of the representative that used to come around. What was the name of that squirrel?”

“Porgibom,” his father answered.

She nodded. “Can you imagine a squirrel trying to convince us to buy from him?”

Finian nodded. “When I told them I could double the number of tractors that sold they didn’t believe me, but I pointed out that since I do the repairs, I know who needs them and who doesn’t.”

“It helps that you speak the same language as us,” Keliss said.

“Well,” his mother said, “you can’t expect a squirrel to know about running a commune.”

Marlot glanced at his lion, who was keeping his face neutral

She squeezed Marlot’s arm, and he brought his attention back to his mother. “Finian has made her father a lot of money, and I’m sure everyone’s going to buy through her from now on.”

Marlot translated. Finian was now wealthy enough to be worth approaching. Having the two families attached through a mating would benefit them by having a direct line to the reseller. His father might be the one running the commune, making sure all the numbers added up, but his mother wasn’t any less cunning.

He smiled at Finian. “Your father must be very proud.”

She nodded and smiled back.

After that, the conversation moved to Daliha and her beau. Marlot finally found out his family’s name; Sleekpelt and his sister glared a warning to him. Marlot decided that unless he found something truly horrible, he wouldn’t bring any of it up. He didn’t want to give his parents any reason to think he was interested in being part of this community anymore.

Keliss talked about how well the commune was doing, his mother spoke to

the fact they were looking at enough of population growth among their farmers they'd be able to expand their commune's territory.

Reluctantly, Marlot talked about his and Trembor's work. About how they constantly closed a higher percentage of cases than the others. He didn't like talking numbers, it made him feel like he was bragging.

When the meal was over, his mother tried to convince him to stay, saying Trembor could come pick him up in the morning, but Marlot said they still had work to do, and they both said their goodbyes.

The car was just started moving that Trembor looked at him. "Did I imagine things, or was Finian making moves on you?"

Marlot sighed. "She was. Finian is the only female I've ever shown an interest in, and now that his family is in a good position in the community, mother is hoping I'll get interested in her again. Finian is clearly still interested in me, although she might just be hoping for a way into my family."

"Would you do it?"

"What? Of course not. I'm with you."

"What if I wasn't here?"

Marlot didn't answer immediately, focusing on his driving. "I don't know," he finally said. "I told you about my encounter with the prowler, right?"

"You told me it happened. You never gave me details."

"As you'd expect, I was coming into my heat. Because of that, I'd started noticing others, males and females. I stayed away from males because of Margelo, and Finian caught my interest. I started spending time with her, and I'm sure she's the one I would have been with when my heat hit, but..."

He was silent for a long time, before sighing. "Her name was Brocerlim Longreach. She was a wolf, and she approached me on my way back from the academy. I usually ran home, and I'd seen her in town, she runs the clothing store. She gave me a ride and her scent was intoxicating." She chuckles. "She had me out of my clothes under five minutes. I had no idea what was going on, but I wanted more. She was more than happy to give me as much as I could take."

He stopped the car in front of their room. "For the next three months, if I wasn't at the academy, I was with her, in her bed most of the time. She treated me like I was a king, or at least that what it felt like. I get now that she was stroking my ego, so I'd perform for her. And did I ever, until my initial heat passed and my desire calmed. Of course, I didn't know that's what had kept her interested. I was ready to sign a lifetime mating contract with her. But the first time I didn't feel like performing for her, she kicked me out. I didn't understand. It took me a long time to figure things out, but after her, females didn't interest me anymore. I didn't give Finian a second look in all the years I lived here."

He shut down the engine. "Even when I met you in the city, I hadn't thought

sexually about females. So no, I don't think I'd consider mating her, even if you weren't in my life."

He got out of the car, locked it, and entered the room. He made sure the blinds completely blocked the view, then he took his lion to bed, and had a night of passion with him that burned the memories away.