

Marlot was looking at the food on his plate. Jale'i called it a meat cake.

"What?" the mongoose said. "Too fancy for you?"

Marlot bit off the reply he wanted to make. "I'm just worried about the number of greens in it." Vegetables were sandwiched between thinly cut slices of meat. Six layers in total.

"There's good for you."

"Sure," the wolf replied. "In small quantities." He pulled the top meat layer off and the leafy greens under it were almost as thick. "Don't you think I might get green-sick from all that?" He looked at the lion who was busy cutting in his portion.

Trembor looked back as he brought a fork full to his mouth. "Don't look at me like that. Jale'i baked this, it's bound to be good."

The mongoose puffed out his chest.

"You've only had two meals here, how can you be sure?"

"That's it," Jale'i said. He grabbed Marlot's plate off the table. "You can go hungry."

"Wait!" The wolf caught his arm, and then the plate as it almost tipped over. "I was joke kidding. I'm going to eat it."

The mongoose eyed him for a moment, then put the plate back down. "I hear one complaint from you, and I'm never feeding you again."

"I promise, I'll only give you praises." He started eating and made exaggerated sounds of pleasure.

Jale'i snorted and left them to eat.

Trembor shook his head, grinning. "Does exasperating him give you a thrill you don't get anywhere else?"

Marlot shrugged. Before he said anything his pad beeped.

"RI Blackclaw," he answered.

"This is Carniel, from Low Valley, we talked yesterday."

"I remember, any luck finding traces of the coyote through your territory?"

"No. I spoke with every patroller who've been out over the last two weeks. Not one of them saw a vagrant coyote or any indications of any vagrants."

"So no report of missing food? No poaching?"

"I don't know that missing food would get reported, but our cook will give away food to passing vagrants. He spent some time as one, so he helps them. No one has come by his restaurant in over a month."

"Alright, thank you." He put his pad away and tapped his fingers on the table.

"You better start eating again," Jale'i called from the kitchen.

Marlot waved his words away.

"What's wrong?" Trembor asked.

“I’m not sure.” The wolf forced himself to eat, to keep Jale’i from bothering him. “The coyote claimed he came from Low Valley’s direction, but there are no signs of him there.”

“And that’s unusual?”

Marlot nodded. “How did he feed himself? He isn’t part of the town, so he can’t go to the store, and unless he has money, he can’t stop by the restaurant. So vagrants have to resort to stealing food, either something prepared, or kill.”

“Maybe he had food from where he was before crossing that town.”

Marlot frowned. “He didn’t have any meat paper.”

“What’s that?”

“Sorry, it’s what vagrants call the paper meat is wrapped in after being processed. It’s got a waxy coating that keeps the blood from dripping out if it’s properly wrapped. Every vagrant I’ve ever dealt with has always had some.”

“I don’t remember the komodo dragon having any either.”

“But she was found sick behind the restaurant. Some of her things might have been on the ground, no one would have noticed them.”

Trembor nodded. “And when I looked, if I saw that, I thought it had fallen out of the garbage.”

“Once we’re done eating, I want to go talk to him again. See if he can explain it.”

Marlot finished his plate and nodded his appreciation to Jale’i.

* * * * *

The wolf entered the enforcer’s office and walked past the lynx, seated at his desk. He also ignored Banerik’s calling after him, telling him to stop. Marlot didn’t. He made it to the cage and had stopped on his own when the lynx grabbed his arm.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Take your hand off me, Banerik. Unless you want to lose it.”

The enforcer snarled and Marlot bared his teeth with a growl.

“Really?” Trembor said. “You two are going to behave like cubs? I expected something more professional from an enforcer, and I know you’re capable of better, Marlot.”

Marlot wrenched his arm out of the lynx’s grip. “Don’t expect me to apologize.”

“I wouldn’t want it from a runaway like you.”

Marlot indicated the empty cage. “Where’s the coyote? I need to ask him a few questions.”

“I let him go last night.”

It took Marlot a moment to respond. “You what?”

“He’s just a vagrant, he didn’t commit any actual crime.”

Marlot glared at him. "And you know that how?" he growled.

"Come on, a skinny male like that? There's no way he could have taken on Na'ego. That bear would have crushed him."

"That isn't relevant—" Trembor started saying

"Shut up lion," the lynx cut him off. "This doesn't involve you."

Trembor's ears half folded back.

Marlot got in Banerik's face. "Don't take that tone with him. I said not to release him until I gave the okay. Are you going to tell me Naria didn't tell you that?"

"I told him." The civet blurted out.

Marlot looked in her direction. He hadn't noticed her. Banerik glared at her and she looked away. The wolf poked the lynx's chest with a claw, barely stopping himself from drawing blood.

"So you know I wasn't done with him, and you still let him go."

Banerik patted the hand away from him. "I don't take orders from you. I'm in charge here. If I say someone's time in the cage is done, then it's done. If you aren't happy about it go back to the city where you fit in so well."

Marlot made fists. "You think I want to be here? I hate you and this place." Banerik took a step back, and Marlot followed him. "You think I have any good memories here? This place took away everything I had. You better get it through that thick skull of yours. This is my case. Your grandfather forced me to take it. You're going to do what I tell you, if that pisses you off, go complaint to Arlion."

The lynx pushed Marlot away. He was stronger than the wolf expected, so he stumbled back. Marlot raised a hand to strike him, finger's uncurled, but Trembor caught it.

"Don't Marlot." The lion said. "I don't care how low a tax is. He isn't worth the expenditure."

"I don't care. He deserves it."

"Maybe, but eating him isn't going to let us get out of here any faster. From what you told me, I don't think his family's going to care that you've paid his tax. They're going to come after you."

"Yeah," the lynx said. "I'm not just some farmer you can slash. I'm important."

Marlot growled.

"If you don't shut up," Trembor told the lynx. "I'm going to be the one eating you." He pulled Marlot away. After a few steps, the wolf pulled his arms away and stormed outside.

"You better keep him under control," Banerik yelled. "Or maybe I'll be the one eating him."

Trembor ran past him and got behind the wheel. Marlot glared but sat in the

passenger side. He was still growling as the car started moving. He could imagine himself ripping the lynx limb from limbs, how satisfying that would feel. Cutting out his heart and eating it right there, feeling the blood run down his chin. One of these days, he was going to do it, the cost of it be damn.

The door closing forced him out of his reverie. Trembor had gotten out of the car and was heading for their room. Marlot had been so focused on what he was going to do to Banerik he hadn't noticed they'd arrived. He got out of the car and stormed in the room, slamming the door behind him, making the blinds fly up and fall back in place.

"I'm going to kill him."

Trembor moved behind him and wrapped his arm. "We're going to be done with this in a few days. We're going to leave this place and never come back. You have my word on it." He buried his muzzle in the long black fur at the back of his neck.

"Trem, not now," Marlot said harshly. "We need to work."

The lion nuzzled his neck and then move up to whisper at the wolf's ear. "You won't be able to focus in your current state." He licked the ear's rim and Marlot shivered. "You need to relax. We can get back to work in the morning. The rest of the day is going to be just for us."

Trembor removed Marlot's jacket and dropped it to the floor while he continued to lick his ear. Then he unbuttoned the shirt and pulled it off. He nibbled the side of Marlot's neck, drawing a sigh out of him.

He turned the wolf and pushed him on the bed. Marlot backed up until his feet were off the floor and Trembor straddled him, running his hand through his chest fur.

"I love you, Marl. Remember that when this place drives you crazy. We'll go back home, and soon we'll share a home. You aren't alone anymore."

Marlot reached up and unbuttoned the lion's shirt. "I know." His voice caught for a moment. "I love you too."

Trembor smiled with pride.

Marlot wanted to be able to say it with ease, and he was getting there. Looking into his lion's golden eyes helped him feel confident. He pulled the lion's head closes and licked his muzzle before kissing him. Trembor moaned and started moving on top of him. Marlot could feel their hardness rubbing together through the pants.

Suddenly he didn't want anything between them. He reached down and undid the lion's pants. Trembor got the message and moved off so they could undress.

A moment later they were back on the bed, limbs intertwined, nuzzling and nibbling each other. In no time, Marlot reached down between them and squeezed,

making Trembor grunt.

“I need you,” The wolf whispered, before kissing him.

Trembor got off him only long enough to get the lubricant, then he was back between his legs. He prepared his wolf, and then they both moaned as he entered him.

They made love slowly, then fast. They rested and Marlot made love to his lion. By the time they finally slept, the sun had set. The lion held his wolf, and for a while longer, Marlot didn't worry about anything.