

Marlot pressed his back against the lion, and the arms holding him tightened. “Do we have to get out of bed?”

Trembor chuckled. “Not really. We can spend the rest of our lives here if you want.”

The wolf shuddered. “No, I want us out of this forsaken town as soon as possible.”

Trembor nuzzles his neck. “Then you’ll want to get up.”

Marlot nodded, but it still took him a moment before he sat up with a sigh. He stood, then yelped as Trembor swatted his ass.

“Now that you’re up, get that out of my face and shower before I drag you back in bed and do horrible things to it.”

“You are such a bad lion.”

“The very worst.”

Marlot grinned at him and entered the shower room.

“Hey Marl,” Trembor called when he was under the water. “Do people spar in this town?”

“Well, they call it sparring, but it’s nothing like how we do it.”

“So they have sparring rings then?”

“Not exactly.”

“How can they ‘not exactly’ have sparring rings if they spar?”

“We can go to the gym before breakfast, you’ll see.”

He finished washing and felt better, ready to deal with this town and the people in it. The dryer hardly worked, so it was mostly wet when he left the shower room.

He stopped before the door and watched the lion do stretching exercises. Moving slowly, his muscles rippling under the fur. Marlot licked his lips, and when Trembor bent down he was tempted to return that ass the favor, but he restrained himself. If he did that, he knew they’d end up in bed again.

He looked down at himself. well, his body was certainly in favor of that idea. “You’re a danger to my self-control, Trem, you know that?”

The lion straightened and came to him with a wicked smile. He pressed Marlot against the wall and nipped at his neck while his hands rubbed lower, making the wolf gasp.

“Self-control is overrated,” The Trembor said, leaving the wolf panting as he entered the shower room.

After a moment the shower started and Marlot shook the daze out. “Bad lion, bad, bad lion,” he called. “I’m going to have to think of a proper punishment for you.”

Laughter was the only response he got.

By the time he was dressed, Trembor was out of the shower. Marlot turned

to comment on his wonderful nakedness but stopped halfway. The morning had to have been cloudy because he hadn't noticed the beam of light shining on the bed from the bay window until now.

"Shit," Marlot growled and went to it, moving the slats which had caught on the low table until they fell back in place, cutting off the light. When he turned back Trembor was right there worry on his face.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," and he chuckled. A few months ago, something like this would have sent him panicking. The idea that someone might have seen them causing him to react as if it had actually happened. "No one saw us. Trust me, if they had, they would have kicked in the door and tried to lynch us."

"They're in for a surprise if they ever try something like that."

"Let's just be careful. It's easier not to ask for trouble than deal with the consequences."

Trembor hugged him. "We will, and I'm proud of you."

While Trembor dressed Marlot pulled the beddings off both beds, balled them together, and put that between the beds.

"You really think the person who cleans the room would notice?" Trembor asked.

"Like I said, better not to ask for trouble."

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Marlot parked in front of Jale'i's but they walked two buildings up the road, entering one of dark green brick. Trembor immediately had a sense of a community center, with its many rooms for varying activities. He'd gone to one which his grandmothers every week when he was a cub and sat with them as they gossiped over social games.

Marlot led him to a large room, half-filled with people, all predators, as he was getting used to seeing here. They were paired and moved together at varying speeds. With some, it looked like they were fighting, but the movements were too exact to be what they were doing. With others, they moved so slowly that he didn't understand why they were bothering.

"What are they doing?"

"This is what passes for sparing here."

Trembor gave Marlot a disbelieving look, then studied the couples again. Now that he paid attention, he could see how even those moving slowly were doing attack and defense motions. A cougaress was with a couple, a badger not quite out of cub-hood yet and a tiger, a few years older, who looked at her with a besotted smile. She showed them how to move, then they repeated the movements under her careful gaze.

"Is she teaching them how to fight?"

Marlot shook his head. He was looking at the cougaress, his jaw tight. “At best this is just exercise, none of them would have any idea what to do if you jumped them.”

“And they call it sparing?”

“Yep.”

The cougaress noticed them, and her face lit up. She quickly came to them, arms wide.

“Marlot! It’s so good to see you again.”

The wolf growled. “Don’t touch me.”

She stopped. “Marlot, what’s wrong?” now that she was closer, Trembor noticed the gray in her tawny fur. She had to be in her fifties.

“Trembor, meet Arle’ien Darkpelt, the prowler who made a mess of my first heat.”

Trembor understood Marlot’s reaction now. He kept his face neutral, but he would love to have some words in private with her.

“Marlot, what are you talking about? I did no such thing, I just—”

“Don’t bother. I’m not that cub anymore. If I thought it’d do any good I’d tell the council about you, but your mother’s still on it.”

“Marlot, you’re making a big deal out of nothing. All I did was help you along, give you the benefit of my experience.”

Trembor couldn’t stop the growl. “Where I’m from, we have a word for people who take advantage of others when they aren’t in any state to understand what’s happening. Abusers.”

She gasped. “I never. Marlot, tell that... lion that I never took advantage of you.”

Marlot laughed, and this time it was loud enough that the people in the room stopped what they were doing to look at them. “You know that’s not true. I was overwhelmed by my first heat. I didn’t know how it was supposed to go, just like that tiger over there. My instincts were in control, and I would have fucked anything that offered itself to me. You used that to make me think it was how it was always supposed to be. When the heat faded, I kept going because I didn’t know anything else, and when I finally no longer could keep up with you, you threw me to the side. ‘Good for nothing’ I think is what you called me when I finally told you no.”

Marlot noticed the people looking at them, but instead of blushing or panicking, like Trembor thought would happen, The wolf straightened, smoothed his jacket, and looked at him.

“So, this is what passed for sparing,” he said as if the cougaress wasn’t there. “If you want, we can probably use a corner and not get in anyone’s way.”

Trembor looked the crowd over, noting the confused expression on the

young tiger. “No, it’s okay, we can probably manage with sparing until we get back home.”

Marlot nodded and turned. Trembor glared at the cougaress a last time and followed his wolf out.

“Did you know she’d be there?” he asked once they were outside.

Marlot nodded. “That’s where she hunts. We all go there for exercise, and she teaches the cubs, so she’d right there to smell it when our first heat gets close.”

“How does she manage to stay satisfied? There can’t be enough young males here that she always has one.”

“No. She isn’t like Aiden was. She doesn’t need to have one all the time, but when she does...she doesn’t let go of him until he can’t keep up anymore. I lasted three months after my first heat faded. Some lasted longer.”

“You know them?”

Marlot chuckled as he opened the door to Jale’i’s. “As you said, this is a small town, everyone knows everyone. Yeah, I know who they are. They’re most of the males. My age and up, and possibly a decade younger. Sometimes I’m amazed at how normal everyone here is, considering she’s our first sexual experience.” He took a booth and when Trembor went to ask his next question, his wolf shook his head. They weren’t discussing this here.

“Morning,” Tarin said as she got to their table.

Marlot nodded his greeting to the bonobo. “We’ll have whatever your father made for breakfast. And can you ask him to prepare something for each of us we can take with us for lunch? We’re going to be busy today.”

She eyed him. “You want what dad made? Again? Are you okay? That’s the fourth meal where you haven’t argued about what you’ve eaten in a row.”

Marlot smiled. “What can I say, the city mellowed me.” He raised his voice. “And I know a lost cause when I see one.”

“Lost?” came from the kitchen. “You’re the one who’s never had any sense.”

“I can survive his cooking, so what’s the point in arguing.”

She gave him a suspicious look, but left and came back a moment later with two plates of sweetened meats, glasses of blood and fruit juices.

By the time they were done eating, she brought two boxes. “You’ll be happy, he hasn’t started on lunch yet so it’s just simple meats with two containers of sauce.”

Marlot opened one and looked surprised when it turned out to be just that.

“I saw you do that,” came from the kitchen. “If you don’t trust my baking, go eat elsewhere.”

“I trust your baking,” Marlot replied. “It’s your sense of humor I don’t.”

“Ah! Like I’d ever do anything that would cause food to go to waste.”

Marlot shrugged. "I guess he has a point." He paid for the food, and they headed to Na'ego's clinic.

The bear's office had a small cooler, filled with water bottles, and a warmer. "Na'ego ate most of his lunches here," Marlot said.

"Bought from Jale'i?"

"No, he's always baked his own food. He and his family ate there on his rest day. They made it special and ordered the most elaborate meal Jale'i knew."

"Does he have any children?"

"His daughter joined the Protectors the year before I left, his son was studying in the city to become a medic. I didn't know either very well, but if he was in town, he would have helped. He must have found a position in another town."

"Alright. How are we going to do this?"

"We have full access to the files now, I'll send half of them to your pad. I'll handle the rest." He started the process. "Or maybe not half of them. Na'ego's files are larger than expected."

"Just send me those from around the time of his death. If the reason for it is in there, that's where it'll be."

"I can't. Na'ego didn't put the date in the file name, and there must have been a program running in the background because all the files show they were accessed when I started the system."

"Didn't you check for that yesterday?"

"I looked for corrosive programs, and there weren't any. This must be some maintenance program Na'ego set to run when he accessed the files."

"So we have to go through everything?"

Marlot sighed. "Looks like it."

"Good thing you got us lunch."

Trembor started going through the files Marlot sent him. Fortunately for them, the individual notes were dated, so he could discard those that were too old. He set two months ago as too old. He couldn't see how it would take that long since the last medical interaction for someone to react to what she or he had learned. Even with doing that, they only worked through half the files by the time they decided to stop.

Trembor stretched, making his joined pop. "Just how many people are there in this town?" He looked at the dredges of a meal on the plate on the desk. When had he eaten that?

"About five hundred."

"That can't be right. I went through at least four hundred files. You have to have gone through a similar number. We should be done."

Marlot collected their plates. "By some of the dates in the files I'm guessing

he never cleared up the files of people who died, He's been the town medic for over forty years. That's at least two generations, so we might be looking at over a thousand files. Not to say that I saw files on sheep, which means he either shared files with Urion or made them files when he saw them."

"Why would he see sheep if they have their own medics?"

"Maybe none of them knew how to deal with the problem. I don't know what kind of training they get, but considering how Urion wasn't comfortable at the city's Academy, I have trouble believing he managed to stay for the extended courses. And, if I remember my father's records, farmers tend not to have many of the complicated illnesses."

"Why not?"

"If the illness is too grave, it ends their work life."

Trembor shook his head. "That still seems screwed up to me. It's one thing to fall to predation because of age or illness, it's another to just be told to give up and end your life."

"I know." Marlot put the clean plates in the cupboard. "Let's go have dinner. We can come back after that, put in a couple more hours, and call it a day."

Trembor smiled. "I could go for more of Jale'i's baking."

Marlot chuckled. "He's going to ruin your tastes. Next thing you know you won't be willing to gorge on prey on the office floor anymore, you're going to require all those special sauces and spices."

The lion laced an arm around Marlot and squeezed. "You know that isn't true, those times are special in their own right, especially now that you don't mind letting me lick you clean." Trembor licked his lips at those memories. "And you know the rest of the time I enjoy more flavor with my meat than you do."

"That's why I'm worried, you're not going to be happy with the normal ones anymore, you're going to blow our food budget on specialty sauces. I'm going to have to go lean because of how Jale'i's feeding you."

Trembor stopped and placed a hand over his heart. "I solemnly swear that if I start buying overpriced sauces, I will be the only one suffering for it."

Marlot rolled his eyes. "Like I'd be able to watch you suffer and not share my food."

"Well, that's your problem, you can always swear to let me suffer no matter what."

Marlot pushed the lion against a wall. "Don't even joke about that. I don't want to ever be the reason you suffer. I made your life miserable enough already."

Trembor place both arms over the wolf's shoulder and look in his eyes tenderly. "You ever made me—"

"I did, you don't have to lie. I was an insufferable idiot for being afraid to let you demonstrate how you felt about me in public for all those years. And I'm sorry

I have to ask you to refrain again after you've just gotten used to making me blush when others are around, but I swear, once we're gone from here, you'll never have to hold yourself back." He kissed the lion.

The ardor with which the wolf kissed him took Trembor by surprise for a moment, but he got over it and responded with as much desire. When they broke apart, the wolf was smiling, his eyes slightly wet.

"I love you so much, Trem. I want to run out there and smash in all their heads until they accept it. I hate that they remind me of how I was with you."

Trembor kept him from saying more by hugging him tightly. "It's okay, Marl. We'll close this case, leave, and you'll never have to come back." After a moment he let him go.

Marlot dried his eyes and straightened his jacket. "Anyway, I couldn't let you go hungry. You wouldn't look this good all skinny."

The lion smiled. "I know, I really am good looking, aren't I?"

"You are such a bad lion."

Trembor returned the smile. "I'm waiting for my punishment."

"You just want until we're back home." Marlot looked himself over in a mirror, ran his finger through his head fur, and headed for the door, Trembor in tow.

As soon as they stepped outside, Trembor went on his guard. Something wasn't right. He looked around the deserted street, trying to figure out what it was. It felt like when he'd chased a prey right into its territory and it had friends waiting for him.

"Where's everyone?" Marlot asked, also on his guard.

That was it. There was no one around.

He hadn't been here for long, but there had always been people moving about, now there was no one.

The lion felt his hackles go up. "There's a town meeting?"

"I doubt it, they're always after dinner."

They headed for Jale's, two blocks over, paying attention to their surroundings. It wasn't often that Trembor felt like he was the one being hunted.