

The attacker came from the alley. He jumped out, claws out and Marlot barely managed to get out of the way. Others came out, growling.

“Tail raiser!” a leopardess snarled, swiping at him.

Marlot dodged it easily but he went cold inside. How? How could they know? He’d been careful, Trembor hadn’t done anything to give him away. Was it because they’d shared one room? Had balling the sheets not been enough? Then he remembered the beam of light.

He backed up against someone and almost turned to slash them, but the scent was that of his lion. Trembor was with him—Trembor was being threatened also.

That realization pushed the panic away enough for him to notice they were in the middle of the street, surrounded by a large number of people, all snarling and growling, calling them ‘tail raisers,’ ‘male lovers,’ ‘abominations.’ Each word was like a claw cutting him, but he wouldn’t let them take him down, not this time. He wouldn’t let his fear put Trembor in danger.

“Back Off!” He yelled, swiping at Banerik, who’d gotten close. The lynx quickly stepped back.

“I knew it,” Banerik snarled. “I knew there was something off with you ever seen we were cubs. I guess that’s why you hung out with that wolf.”

“You don’t know a damn thing. And unlike Magerlo, I’m not a defenseless cub.” He raised his voice. “I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish here, but we’re both hunters. We know how to kill.”

“I saw you!” A young female said, out of Marlot’s view. “I saw it all!”

He turned, and Trembor moved to stay at his back. A brown-furred female wolf was standing at the front of the circle, lips pulled back.

“Daliha?” What was his sister doing here?

“I saw you,” she spat. “I saw the disgusting things you let that lion do to you.”

“What? How?”

“How? I wanted to make it up to you for how Mom and dad tried to corner you with Finian. I could tell how uncomfortable that made you, and I wanted to invite you to a quiet dinner, just the two of us. But I heard noises when I reached your door and I peeked inside. I saw him do—”

The sound. He had never thought about how loud they’d been. This was his fault. He’d known something like this would happen. He should have gotten them separate rooms.

“You two are degenerates,” Daliha growled.

Marlot growled back in indignation. “Don’t you dare say that about Trem.”

“Why not? He’s as much a monster as you are for shoving his—”

“What is the meaning of this?” a male yelled, loud enough to carry over the growls and snarls. The crowd parted and Marlot’s father stood there, glaring at

everyone. “Well? What are you all doing here? Threatening my son!”

“Dad, he’s—”

“Be quiet Daliha.”

“But—” She wilted under his glare.

Marlot was stunned. He’d never expected his father to come to his rescue, not with this.

“I have no idea what you’ve heard, or think you’ve heard,” Keliss said, “But this isn’t some vagrant committing atrocities behind one of the buildings. He’s my son! I will not have people spread falsehood about him, is that understood!”

Marlot’s hopes died. Of course, his father wouldn’t stop them if he thought they were right.

Keliss looked the crowd over. “Go home! All of you. Think about what you almost did here.” No one moved. “I said, GO HOME!”

Slowly, the crowd dispersed.

“Daliha, get your car and go home.”

“But dad.”

“Do not argue with me,” her father growled. “Go home.”

She threw a hateful glare at Marlot and stormed off.

“As for you, young male, get in my car. Your mother and I are going to talk with you.”

“I’ll follow you,” Trembor said.

“This doesn’t involve you,” Keliss replied. “Go back to the city, where you belong.”

“He’s staying,” Marlot stated.

His father sighed in exasperation and pressed his thumb between his eyes. “What is it with kids these days always arguing with their elders.”

“I’m thirty-two. I’m not a kid.”

“Then stop acting like one. Don’t you see that spending all your time with him is why people are thinking what they did?”

“He’s my partner, what do you expect me to do?” he’d meant to say lover. He had wanted to say it, to lay it out for his father to confront. Hadn’t he told his lion he’d do just that moments ago? He’d let him down again. How could he constantly do that to him? He deserved so much better.

“I expect you to act like an adult, him too. This is our family’s business. He doesn’t need to be involved.”

“So you want me to leave him to the mercy of the town? After what just happened? You think they’re going to stay away for long? The moment we’re gone, they are going to fall on him like scavengers.”

“Fine,” his father sighed, “he can follow us.”

“We’ll follow you,” Marlot said.

His father narrowed his eyes. "You are riding with me."

"No. It's my car, I'm driving it."

"Then I'll follow you home. I don't like what the city turned you into. I don't trust you not to drive off instead of going home as I told you to."

"Right, because I'm the untrustworthy one in this town."

Marlot headed for his car before his father could say anything else. As soon as they were seated he started driving.

"Don't." He said before Trembor could say anything. "Just don't." He didn't want to have to deal with his lion's reproach now, not when he was going to have to endure his father's lecture about how appearance was everything, how what people thought of you mattered more than who you really were. He'd heard them hundreds of times as a cub and young adult, and hated it each one of them. The idea he was going to have to listen to it yet again, now that he was his own male galled him.

Daliha's car was parked partly on the driveway and partly on the grass. Typical, she was throwing a tantrum because their father wasn't letting her have her way. He'd expected her to mature out of them while he'd been gone.

He parked behind her, making sure to stay on the driveway. His father drove by and parked in the garage. Marlot sighed in resignation.

"I can stay in the car if you want," Trembor said.

"No, you're coming in. I don't want to deal with this alone."

"Won't my presence make things worse?"

Marlot snorted. "My sister saw us having sex. It can't get any worse than that."

"Your father doesn't seem to believe her, maybe you can—"

"Call her a liar? What's the point? She already hates me. I say that and she'll probably try to kill me right there. Maybe I can get my parents to understand. My father is a reasonable male, he'll see that we're no different than when we had dinner."

The lion nodded and squeezed Marlot's arm.

They got out of the car, and even before Marlot opened the house's door, he could hear the screaming. His mother and father. Marlot paused. He couldn't recall ever hearing them fight before. He opened the door and the voices died off. He entered the dining room to find his mother standing next to Daliha, her lips tight.

She glared at Marlot. "Is it true?"

"Of course it isn't!" his father yelled before Marlot could reply.

Marlot winced at the volume.

She turned her glare on him. "Really? You're saying my daughter lied?"

"Of course not! I'm saying she jumped to conclusion, like she has a bad habit of doing! They work together, nothing more!"

Marlot hunched in on himself.

Daliha snorted.

Her mother turned on her. “Daliha, that is not proper behavior.” She turned back to her mate and poked him in the chest. “As for you. You haven’t even let her tell you what she saw.”

“I don’t care!”

Marlot watched his parents, horrified at the anger they directed at each other.

“My son isn’t like them!”

He wanted to say something, anything, to get them to stop.

“I won’t have anyone spread such lies about him! Not even Daliha!”

He wanted to run out of the house. He grabbed Trembor’s hand and held it tight, gaining some comfort from it.”

“You’ve always been blind to your son’s weaknesses.” His mother said.

“You still think he’s going to come right back and take over running the commune for you, well, it’s time you realize those tracks are gone. He abandoned you!”

“No! Marlot has not abandoned us, he’s out finding his way and he’ll come back to us.” He turned to Marlot. “Tell you moth—”

She turned at the same time and gasped.

Daliha stood and pointed at the hand he was holding. “See, I told you!”

Keliss seemed confused by what he saw. His mouth opened a closed as he tried to say something. “How could you,” he eventually managed, pain in his voice.

“Father,” Marlot began, it isn’t—”

“How could you!”

“Father.” Marlot made his tone firm, even if all he wanted to do was cower under the older wolf’s anger.

“I raised you,” the male growled, “I fed you, I clothed you. I gave you everything and how do you repay me? You runoff. You—” words failed him as he indicated their hands. “How could you betray your family like that!”

Marlot looked away by reflex, then he forced himself to look at him.

“Father, that isn’t—”

“You,” Keliss growled at Trembor. “This is your fault. You’re the one who did this to my son.” The older wolf stepped around the table,

Marlot didn’t think. He pulled the lion behind him.

“Get out of my way Marlot.”

“No.”

The protest stopped Keliss. Again, he looked confused. “You’d protect— that? After what he did to you?”

“Father, you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting?” The older wolf was stunned. “I can see him holding your

hand like you belong to him.”

Marlot was extremely conscious of the lion’s hand in his, and a part of him told him to let go. But he wouldn’t listen to that part of him ever again. It was the old him, the one who was afraid of being who he was because of what had happened to Margelo. Margelo would never have wanted that for him. He’d wanted him to be free, to grow up without fear.

“I’m holding on to him, Father. I love him.”

“You what?” Keliss yelled.

“I love him.” He’d expected to be afraid to say those words before his father. Afraid of the disappointment he’d see in the eyes of the male he’d admired when he was young and, even as he decided he’d never return here, still respected him. But that wasn’t what he saw in those eyes. He saw the anger turn into hate, then rage.

The older wolf lunged at him, claws out.

Marlot grabbed his arm and pulled him along, adding his strength to the motion and slamming him into the wall. His father fell to the ground and didn’t move.

Marlot couldn’t believe it. His father had attacked him. Had tried to kill him. His own father. He almost wondered who he could have done that, but he remembered Margelo’s parents among those who kicked him to death.

“I’m sorry,” he told his mother, “I just react—” the words died in his mouth. She was looking at him with hate. Daliha had her lips pulled back, growling.

Trembor pulled on his arm. “I think it’s time we left.”

Marlot resisted for a moment, then followed the lion out. He sat behind the wheel and drove away, his mind having trouble processing that his father had wanted him dead. He’d always thought his father different from the others, smarter, more reasonable, able to accept facts put before him, not give into hysteria.

His father had tried to kill him.

He stopped at the intersection. He had trouble breathing. How could his father betray him like that? He’d expected him to be unhappy, but hate? To come at him with claws?

Marlot started growling. How could that do that to him? Marlot wasn’t a cub, hadn’t been one for years. He was his own male, able to make his own decision.

He looked at the road before him, going left to right. He looked left, toward the city. Toward freedom. Toward happiness.

“Fuck this.” He put the turn signal on.