

“How are you feeling?”

It was the first thing Marlot heard upon waking up. He was still in Trembor’s arms, and he was still wearing pants. He’d fallen asleep half-dressed. The day certainly had taken a lot out of him.

Them, probably.

“I’m okay. Sorry for forcing you to sleep like this.”

Trembor smiled. “I’m not complaining.”

Marlot nuzzled the lion’s chest. “Do you know what time it is?”

Trembor stomach rumbled. “Time to get something to eat.”

The wolf sighed. “That might take some work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jale’i isn’t going to serve us anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s going to know about us.”

“So?”

“Trem, as far as the people here are concerned, we’re sick, deviants. No one is going to want to have anything to do with us. Except maybe the farmers. If no one told them to avoid us, we could probably find something there.”

“It can’t be that bad. He knows we have money. He seemed like a nice enough fellow.”

“We can stop by, but I’m telling you, he’s going to throw us out.” Marlot sat up. “Actually, I’m surprised we haven’t been kicked out of here yet.”

“We’re paid up for the week,” Trembor stated.

Marlot smiled. “We can hope. I’m going to wash up. You should pack our stuff. If we leave anything here, it might not be there when we come back.”

Trembor was silent. “You really think they’d destroy our things?”

“They were ready to kill us yesterday.”

“That was just a small group of them. Not everyone has to think that way.”

“Anyone who doesn’t has left. I told you, this place destroys anyone different.” The wolf got out of his pants and stepped in the shower.

When he stepped out, their bags were packed except for one set of clothing each. While Trembor finished his stretching exercises and then washed up, Marlot went over the room again, then got dressed.

They stepped outside and froze.

Marlot’s car was covered with graffiti; slurs and insults. Only the windows were untouched. In the door jam, The wolf pulled out folded bills. He showed Trembor.

“That was for the rest of the week. I’m surprised they bothered giving the money back.”

“What are we going to do about your car?”

“Nothing for now. We’ll get it cleaned once we’re done here.”

Trembor put their things in the trunk. “Marl, if you want us to head home, I’m okay with it. I get now why you didn’t want to come.”

“We can’t. We still have a case. If we leave without closing it, the council is going to use that to cause us problems. Probably accuse us of not fulfilling our side of the agreement. I can see them unleashing lawyers on us. I’m not giving them that satisfaction.” He got in, and a moment later Trembor sat in too.

“At least you can see where you’re going,” The lion commented. And they headed for the center of town.

“They want us to leave. That’s why they left the windows alone.”

“So you don’t think they’ll attack us?”

“Not while they think We’ll be gone soon. After that, they’ll drink themselves up until they have the courage to try to kill us.”

“How much time do you think we have?”

Marlot shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. If any of them try anything, We’re taking them down hard.”

“What if it’s your family?”

Marlot was silent for a long time. “I’m not looking to kill anyone, but I’m not going to be their prey. Hopefully, a few broken bones will convince them we aren’t worth the effort.” Marlot agreed with the dubious look the lion gave him, but he could hope for them to be reasonable.

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Marlot parked in front of Na’ego’s clinic. The few people about glared hatefully at them. Trembor’s stomach rumbled again.

“I’m going to try Jale’i,” the lion said.

Marlot didn’t argue. He followed Trembor. The people in the restaurant looked at them in open-mouthed amazement as they walked in front of the bay window. The Bonobo was out of his kitchen before they’d opened the door. He stood before them, brandishing a knife.

“Get out.” Jale’i said.

“I want to buy breakfast,” Trembor replied.

“I’m all out.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy, just a few cuts of meat. I’ll pay whatever you want.”

“I don’t take your kind’s money. Get out.”

Trembor didn’t press. He turned and left. “I can’t believe he refused my money.”

“Their narrow mindedness is more important than anything else.”

“So what are we going to do for food?”

Marlot smiled. “I have an idea.” He headed for the council building.

As he entered, an ermine startled, then ran ahead, into the council chamber. Marlot didn't hurry. He was actually looking forward to this confrontation.

He put all his strength into pushing the double doors open, expecting resistance. There wasn't any, and they flew open to slam against the wall. The ermine jumped, and the councilors grew silent. From how they were clustered together, they had been in the middle of a heated discussion.

Marlot stepped to the center of the large room. He looked them over, and when his gaze fell on the ermine, she cringed, then ran out a side door. He settled his gaze on Arlion since he was the cause of this.

"I'm guessing you've heard."

They gasped in surprise.

"Heard?" the lynx said. "Everyone knows you're an abomination. You think you can get away with forcing one of our clerks into mating you to—" he motioned toward Trembor. "—that? I'll make sure he sues you."

Marlot shrugged. "I can't say I care all that much what you do. Now, considering what you know, I expect you want me to drop the case and leave town, right?"

"You'd better be sure that's what we want," someone said. Marlot didn't look in whoever's direction that was. He kept his gaze on Arlion.

"Yes," the lynx said, "we want you to leave. Your services aren't required anymore."

Marlot nodded, then smiled. "Too bad. I'm not leaving."

The lynx stared at him. The others whispered among themselves.

"You'd better leave, wolf," a badger said. Fulrin, Marlot thought his name was.

"I can't. I'm in the middle of a case."

"I'm taking you off the case," Arlion growled.

Marlot chuckled. "You can't." He enjoyed watching their stunned expression. "There's only two ways I can be taken off a case. First way is for the group supervising me to remove me from it."

"That's us," Arlion stated.

Marlot shook his head. "No, it isn't. I gave up my territory here when I moved to the city. It's someone within the Revenue Department who looks after the city's RI. And they don't just pull off cases on a whim. They need to see that I'm not doing my job to the best of my abilities. You can always contact the city controller, again. And get him to threaten someone into calling me back, but I'd like to see how you'll convince him, considering you threatened a vegetable shortage if he didn't convince me to come here. Are you going to tell him you don't want me here because I'm a tailraiser? You really think he's going to care who I'm mated to? In case you weren't aware, no one cares who I have sex with in

the city.”

Marlot let them grumble together. Many of the councilors gave Arlion accusatory looks. The lynx waved them aside. “You all agreed to it, don’t put the claws in me. What’s the other way I can get rid of you?”

“Well, the only other way is if my case happened to take me on another investigator’s territory. If that happens, the investigator can require that I hand it over.” He smiled. “According to Banerik, you never gave this territory to another investigator. You consider him good enough to deal with it. Before you ask, you can’t get him to take over. He isn’t a registered investigator, he’s barely a Protector. So you’re stuck with me until we close the case.”

More grumbling.

“Now that’s settled, there are a few things we need to talk about. Since you want me out of here as fast as possible, you better tell people to cooperate with our investigation. The most difficult they are, the longer we’ll have to remain. And no, I don’t mind sticking around. Not anymore, not now that you no longer have any control over me. So think it over carefully before telling everyone to make our lives difficult.”

Marlot crossed his arms over his chest. “And you’re going to have to do something about feeding us.”

“You can’t be serious,” a female wolf said. “You’re forcing your stay against our wishes, and you expect us to feed you?”

“Hey, you don’t want to take care of the food for us. We’ll deal with it ourselves, after all, unlike the lot of you, the two of us are decent hunters.”

“You think we’re going to let you poach our farmers?” a tigress exclaimed.

“The farmers? I’d never hunt them. Not when there’s plenty of prey available for Trembor and me to hunt right here in this town.”

The statement confused them, and Marlot’s smile widened. This had to be the first time any of them had been compared to prey. When it sank in they exploded, they screamed over one another, making what they said unintelligible.

Arlion was the one to finally quiet them. He glared at Marlot. “You probably expect us to convince Jale’i to bake your meals?”

Marlot shrugged. “If you want to piss him off, sure. If you want to stay on his good side, just have three meals worth of meat brought the Na’ego’s clinic every morning, starting now.”

The wolf turned, took a step, then turned back. “Just in case your thinking of poisoning us. We can smell poison. So we won’t touch it, and we’ll go hunting. Considering the way this place is run, I don’t expect anyone to be all that expensive, other than the council.”

Marlot didn’t give them time to comment. He walked out and didn’t stop until he was in Na’ego’s clinic.

