

Marlot let Trembor in the clinic, closed the door, locked it, then leaned back against it. Immediately he started shaking.

Trembor took him in his arms. "It's okay," he whispered.

Marlot rested his head against his lover's shoulder. No, his mate. He smiled to himself, and the thought that he was mated settled him. He chuckled.

"I can't believe I did that."

"I can't either. I expected you to take them up on their offer to get out of here."

"We don't abandon cases. Even if I didn't think they'd have tried to screw us over, I'd have stayed."

The lion smiled. "That's a little different from what you were saying a few days ago."

"That was my dark mood talking. As you've noticed, this place brings out the worst in me."

"You think they are going to let us close the case in peace?"

Marlot smirked. "No. They're going to contact the closest RI and hand over the territory, then get us off the case."

"How long do you think we have?"

"A day, at most."

"Then let's get to work."

Half an hour after they sat down, someone pounded on the clinic's door. Trembor checked it out and came back with a few packages.

"They brought food." He opened one and sniffed it. "I don't smell anything bad in it, but it isn't going to be fun to eat."

He showed it to the wolf. Marlot looked up at him. "What do you mean? There's a lot of fat, but we exercise."

Trembor smiled. "You've never prepared your kill, have you?"

"No, I deal with a store."

"Next time I hunt us breakfast, remind me to give you a quick course." He indicated the package. "These are probably the worst part of a kill. Not just because of how much fat there is, but there's ligament in there, and it's tough meat. We're going to chew for hours."

"I guess I should have asked for a specific quality. It's too late now, we're going to have to deal with it."

Trembor was thoughtful. "How hot do you think the heater gets?"

Marlot tried to remember. "It's a standard heater. It'll bring it back to live temperature. Why?"

"The best way to deal with this kind of meat is to bake them for a while. Let me check what I can do with it." The lion left Marlot to continue searching through Na'ego's records.

He came back twenty minutes later and pulled out his pad. Marlot sent him a patch of files for him to look through. Over the next hours, the scent of meat filled the clinic.

Near midday, Trembor bought Marlot a plate with glistening meat on it. “It hasn’t baked as long as it needs, but it shouldn’t be too tough.”

The wolf carefully picked up a piece, surprised when he didn’t burn himself, and at how much fat still dripped off. “Where did you learn to bake?”

“At home. My dad did most of it, and he made sure to show us the basics before we left. Didn’t your parents teach you?”

Marlot shook his head and chewed for a while. “They both work with the commune,” he answered, once he’d finally swallowed, “so they never had the time to do much more than heat the meat. If they wanted something fancy, they went to Jale’i.”

“My dad always made sure he had time to bake, even when he worked.”

Marlot ate a few more pieces in silence, then spoke. “Your father is a better parent than mine.”

“Until yesterday, I would have argued. But he attacked you. I can’t accept that from any parents.”

Marlot looked at the meat and had to force himself to finish it. Thinking of his father’s behavior killed his appetite. After washing the plate and his hands, he got back to checking the files.

“Marl?”

The wolf looked up from the screen and for a moment his vision was blurry. He rubbed his eyes and checked the time. It had been three hours since he ate.

“Did Na’ego usually treat sheep?”

“No, the farmers have their own medics.”

Trembor nodded, “This file is for a sheep.” He paused. “He did some pregnancy tests.”

“Who is she?”

“Lamia of Softpaw.”

Marlot brought up the file. “It doesn’t say why he saw her.” He took out his pad. “Urion brought her, so I’ll check with him.” He entered the number.

“I’m busy,” the ram answered.

“This is just going to take a moment.”

The ram sighed. “What is it?”

“You brought a Lamia of Softpaw to see Na’ego a week ago.”

“Yes, her pregnancy has been giving her problems, and I can’t find the problem. I asked Medic Na’ego for his assistance.”

“Did he find out what was wrong?”

“He drew blood, took an in utero sample. If he suspected something, he

didn't say it while we were there. I didn't hear from him before he died."

Marlot thanks him and disconnected. "Did you see anything about samples sent to a lab?" he asked Trembor.

"I don't—yes, there it is. Na'ego sent blood and fetus samples to Arsego Labs. That's the same lab the Protectors deal with. Couldn't he do that here? Jaxca does his own analysis."

"Look around. Towns like these don't call for that sort of analysis all that often." Marlot found their numbers and placed the call.

"Arsego, how may I direct your call?" a bored sounded male answered

"I'm trying to find the result for tests that were sent to you—" he looked at the lion, who gave him the date. Marlot repeated it.

"If the tests have been completed, they've been couriered to you."

"It's been more than a week, I'm trying to find out if they're completed."

The male sighed. "What are the sample numbers?"

"I don't have that."

"How can you not have them? Aren't you the one who sent them to us?"

"No. I'm Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw. I'm looking into the death of Medic Na'ego, from the town of Great Prairies."

"I see. Does the test play a part in his death?"

"I don't know."

"In that case, I can't give you the information. Tests results are privileged."

"Alright, but can you at least confirmed the tests were done? And sent to Na'ego?"

"Just give me a moment, without the sample numbers I have to look it up by the date of arrival. There it is, Medic Na'ego Silverfur. Yes, everything was processed and sent to him 4 days ago."

"Can you tell me what kind of tests Na'ego asked for?"

"I'm sorry, but no."

"Thanks."

"Anything useful?" Trembor asked.

"I don't know. The test results got here on the day Na'ego died, but he didn't enter them in his computer."

"If it had arrived after his death, we would have found them."

"He died during the night, and deliveries happen in the day. He received them."

"So why didn't he enter them? At least log that he received them? I checked with other patients, anytime he sent out for lab work, he logged it when he received the results."

"He didn't want there to be records."

"Why not?"

“I can only think of one reason.” He called Urion again.

“Yes?”

“I need to talk with the sheep who needed the tests done, Lamia.”

“Why?”

“Because I think she can clarify something.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. Her pregnancy is difficult enough as it is without any added stress.”

“Medic Roundpoint, I’m not asking for your permission. I’m doing you the courtesy of telling you so you can be there. I will be talking to her, regardless.”

The ram sighed. “Alright, I’ll meet you at the clinic, and take you to her house.”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Marlot shut down the computer and headed for the door, Trembor in tow. He opened it and stepped back at the sight of a female bison about to knock.

“The clinic isn’t open,” The wolf said, getting over his surprise. “Na’ego died.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’m not here to see him. I’m Registered Investigator Arana Stomp. I want to know what the problem is that got the geezers here in such a state that they rushed transferring this territory to me when they’ve refused to let me have it for the last three years.”

“You’re the local RI?” Marlot asked, amazed. Then he chuckled. “Oh, they must have been overjoyed to have to give a position of authority to a prey.”

The bison got in his face. “I’m no one’s prey,” she growled.

Marlot took a step back, forcing Trembor to move out of the way. “I didn’t mean any disrespect. It’s just that you must have noticed that this town has a clear division between predator and prey.”

She snorted. “This one and all the other towns around here, but this place is the only one who gave me a hard time about taking the territory. So, if it wasn’t yours, what are you doing here?”

“The territory used to be mine, I gave it up when I moved to the city. I expected Fodel to take it over since she was about to graduate when I left.”

Arana shrugged. “No idea who that is. I heard there were territories available, so I came for them.”

“Where did you travel from, Investigator Stomp?” Trembor asked.

“Hadel City.”

The lion’s ears straightened. “That’s quite a ways. Did you fly?”

“I drove. Three days straight.”

“Why did you travel all that way?”

The bison leveled her gaze on Trembor. “Let’s just say I needed to leave the city and leave it at that.” She focused on Marlot. “Now, you still haven’t told me

why you're here and why they're in a hurry to get rid of you."

"You might as well come in," Marlot offered. He pulled a chair in the waiting room and sat down. Trembor sat next to him, and she before them. "They called me in because they thought they could control me. Get me to close this case quickly without bothering to find the killer."

"You that sloppy of an RI?"

"I used to be. I don't know how the other town councils have treated you since you didn't grow up here, but they tend to be set in their ways. Councils have a lot of power and until I moved to the city, I wasn't aware of the kind of power I was supposed to have. They expected me to be the easily cowed wolf I was back then."

"Yeah, I've butted heads with a few of them in the other towns, but they respect me now. If this bunch thinks they're replacing you with someone they can push around, they're in for a surprise."

Marlot shook his head. "That isn't the reason. Me and Trembor are mated."

"So the car's yours then."

"Yes."

She sighed. "I had no idea how narrow-minded the people in this part of the country were when I moved here. Feels like I'm back in the ancient times with the predator/prey segregation and this stupid idea males have to mate females."

"That's why I left. I didn't intend on coming back, but the council forced me to. Yesterday it came out Trembor and I were lovers. They tried to get me to leave this morning, but I pointed out they lacked the authority."

"Which is why they told me to get rid of you when they gave me the territory."

Marlot nodded. "I'm going to fight you for this case."

She narrowed her eyes. "Why? Considering what they did to your car, I'd think you'd jump at the chance to leave."

"A few days ago I would have, but I'd have regretted it. I don't abandon cases. But that's not the main reason I want to finish this. I want to stick it to those bastards. I want to close this case and shove it so deep down their throats they're going to shit data for a week."

She laughed. "Vindictive male, aren't you?"

Marlot shrugged.

She sobered. "If I tell you I'll give serious consideration to letting you work it, can you two make yourselves scarce for the rest of the day? I want to be able to tell the council you've left so they'll finalize the transfer."

"They're going to claim you broke the agreement if you let me continue after that."

"Let them. Once this territory's officially mine, they're going to have to

prove it, and I know their types. Me getting rid of you is a handshake deal.”

“We need to go see that sheep,” Trembor said.

“After we see her, we can drive to one of the neighboring towns for the night.”

“And get a decent meal.”

The bison sniffed. “Then you’re going to want to take what’s in the heater out.”

Trembor stood. “It’ll be ready for tomorrow.” Then left.

She studied Marlot. “This sheep, what’s she have to do with the case? She your killer?”

“I doubt that, and I’m not certain. That’s why I want to talk to her, clarify things.”

“Okay, then tomorrow morning we’ll meet up here and we can discuss the case.”

Trembor returned, licking his fingers. And they left for the commune.