

Marlot was running before the scream finished echoing. He rounded the corner. A poorly dressed form bent over the sheep, arm raised, the ram was huddled against the house, cowering.

Without thinking, he tackled the form, and they both rolled away. He got to his feet instantly, while the other moved slower, stumbling a little, cradling his arm.

Marlot growled. It was the coyote Banerik had released against his instructions. And now he was attacking the sheep? There was no way this was a coincidence.

There was motion in his peripheral vision, and he glanced there. Trembor was pulling the sheep up and herding her inside.

“Why d'you attack her?” Marlot asked, crouching, ready to defend himself. He tried to remember the yote’s name. Arches, that was his name.

“I’m hungry.” The coyote was in a fighting position, and Marlot noticed his claws were sharp.

“I thought you didn’t poach, Arches.”

“The enforcer wouldn’t give me any food before sending me away. A male’s got to eat, right?”

“Sure, but why bother crossing the fields to reach this yard? There’s plenty of farmers out there. The wheat’s tall, it’d be easy to isolate one of them without being noticed. Instead, you come here and go after a pregnant sheep? You do know the punishment for killing an underage cub, right?”

Arches shrugged and edged toward the house. Marlot interposed himself.

“You’re not getting her. You might as well stand down.”

“You know, he said this was going to be easy, but you had to show up and make me work for it.” He rushed Marlot and slashed.

The wolf blocked it but barely saw the yote’s ‘injured’ arm move in time to get out of the way. His jacket had three parallel gashes in it. The coyote pressed his advantage, slashing at the wolf, up then down and sideways.

Marlot dodged and blocked, taking steps after steps back. Arches, if that was even his real him, was far too good to be a vagrant. Marlot crouched and threw himself at the coyote’s midsection. They went down again, but this time the coyote threw him off and was back to his feet before the wolf.

Marlot scrambled out of the way, then kicked out, forcing the coyote back. He used the time to stand. Far too good. Reflexes like that came from regular training.

Marlot ran at the coyote who stepped to the right, easily getting out of his way.

“I expected a little better for a city male,” the coyote sniped.

Marlot didn’t answer, he ran at him again. And again the yote stepped out of

his way, to the right.

“Don’t you think you’re tiring yourself out for nothing here?”

Marlot went at him again, but this time, as the yote began to move out of the way, the wolf jumped high and to the right, coming down with an elbow into the coyote’s shoulder.

Marlot didn’t hear the bone snap he’d been hoping for, but the coyote went down with a cry of pain. The wolf kicked and connected. His second kick was caught, and the coyote pulled him off his feet.

“Tricky wolf,” the yote panted, as Marlot jumped to his feet.

Marlot gave the coyote time to get up, and was pleased to see his right arm limp at his side. Then he berated himself for not pressing his advantage. This wasn’t some prey he could wear down. This opponent would kill him if he had a chance.

The coyote came at him with quick slashes, so fast Marlot didn’t get out of the way in time and felt claws rake his chest. He hissed and punched, but missed, still forcing the coyote out of reach.

“You know,” Arches smiled, “It’s been a while since I’ve had a good fight. I’ll be happy to stop it if you’ll let me do my job.”

“I’m not letting you kill a cub.”

“Suit yourself. It’s going to be a shame killing you. I hate wasting meat.”

The coyote calmly walked toward the wolf, flexing his working hand.

Marlot hated seeing such confidence in an opponent and he took the offensive. He swung and kicked, but the coyote dodged. Then Marlot felt pain in his left shoulder. Claws digging in.

The yote moved closer, turning his hand. The pain was so strong Marlot’s legs almost gave out. “You know, I heard something about you and the lion being together. I wonder how he’s going to feel when he’ll see your dead body. You think that when I kill him I’ll be doing him a mercy?”

Marlot’s head snapped up, and he glared at the coyote. “No one hurts my mate,” he growled. He ignored the pain and moved his arm up and around the coyote’s shoulders and with his other hand he punched his stomach over and over.

Arches tried to pull away, grunting with each blow, but Marlot tightened his arm and moved in step with him, the entire time hitting the stomach. After a time the coyote’s voice lost strength, and his steps faltered. Marlot tried to hold him up but had to let go before being pulled down.

The coyote’s stomach was open and his guts pouring out. Marlot hadn’t realized he’d opened his hand and was striking with his claws. His arm was covered in blood all the way to his elbow. The coyote was looking up at him, fear in his eyes where confidence had been.

Before he could stop himself Marlot brought a foot down on the coyote’s

neck. He didn't hear bones snap, so he did it again, and on the third time he heard the sound and the coyote became still. Marlot smiled in satisfaction.

Then he cursed loudly.

"What's wrong?" Trembor came running out of the house.

"I just killed the one person who could have given us the father's name."

"You got carried away?"

"He threatened you, and I got angry."

The lion smiled. "I kind of like how you're overprotective of me."

Marlot sighed, then smiled. "We just got mated. What kind of mate would I be if I let you get hurt the day after we signed the contract?"

Before Trembor could reply, Someone threw up.

Marlot turned to watch Urion, on all four, vomit still dripping from his mouth. He'd forgotten about him. He stepped toward him. "Are you okay?"

The ram looked up, eyes wide. He sniffed the air, whined, and then took off. For a moment, Marlot felt like giving chase. He wanted to bite down on his flesh, tear it from the bones. He shook himself. He already had a kill.

"I guess he never saw a kill up close," Trembor commented.

"No one in the communes has. Hardly anyone in town has too." Marlot turned back to his body.

"What makes you think he knew how the father is?" The lion asked, going through the coyote's pockets.

"He wasn't a vagrant, he was too good a fighter for that. And he came here, of all places, for a kill. Only one person has a reason to want her dead. My guess is he hired the coyote to kill her."

Trembor pulled a wallet out of the yote's pants and handed it to Marlot. The wolf took the ID out. The name on it was Arches Longlegs. "You know, with all the years I've been doing this job, I've never had to deal with a fraudulent ID."

"You think it's fake?"

"It's got to be. If he's a hunter, I can't see him wanting to advertise his real name."

"Well, unless the kiosk refuses it, it isn't your problem."

"Great, and I won't get to a kiosk until we get back to the city." His stomach growled.

Trembor stood. "I'll get the tarp out of your—Your car's parked at the clinic."

Marlot nodded. "Check the back of Urion's vehicle, he probably has something we can use." The wolf pulled out his pad.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to check his ID's valid."

"He isn't the case, you can't pull up that information."

Marlot smiled. "I'm not supposed to be able to."

"You can lose your RI license for something like that."

"They won't know, and I'm not going to check his rating, I just want to make sure the ID won't be refused. I'm hungry, and I don't want him to go to waste."

"Then do it the proper way. Call the tax department, explain the situation and they'll check it for you."

"That isn't anywhere near as fun."

"Now that we are mated, I expect you to think about the consequences of your playing your techy games with the system. I have no intention of being in a relationship with a felon."

"Fine, you go find us a tarp, I'll call the tax department."

Trembor looked at him, arms crossed over his chest, for a long moment, before turning and walking around the house. By the time he came back, Marlot had confirmed the ID was valid, and the representative gave him Arches value, which was lower than he'd expected. The representative noted the kill in the system and informed Marlot he had seven days to pay it. Marlot didn't expect that to be a problem.

When he had the time he was going to pull all the information on Arches Longlegs, he could find.

"What now?" Trembor asked.

"We Find Urion so he drives us back to my car, then we find an out of the way spot where we can eat in peace."