

Marlot groaned. He'd rolled on his back and was looking at the sky through the leaves. "I am never doing this again when I'm famished."

The lion chuckled, and Marlot tilted his head back until he could see him, leaning back against a tree. His face and torso were red with blood, but he'd managed to mostly keep his pants clean. Marlot figured he looked much the same, although he knew his pants had more blood on them.

They'd considered feeding naked, but they were outside, and while they were away from anything but trees, there was always a chance someone would walk by. The council hated them enough as it was. They didn't need to add indecent exposure to their troubles.

The wolf debated moving for a moment, then got on all four and made his way away from the body, to his lover. He got between his legs, turned, and leaned back against his mate.

"You know," the lion rested his arms on the wolf's shoulder, "Way back when, this was how our ancestors ate. Kill someone, eat as much of them as they could, and moved on."

Marlot groaned again. "I have no idea how they managed it. I could hardly crawl to you."

"They were built different back then. No refrigeration units, no idea when the next meal was going to be. If the tribe was large, there wouldn't be anything left, but that meant some of them went hungry. That's why most groups were small family units."

"I thought lions didn't do small families."

"We didn't, which is why lions were one of the first people to become sedentary. They'd find a cave at the foot of a mountain, one deep enough to be cool, even cold in places. The patriarch would protect the young as well as the food, while the females went off to find food. But even then, the youngs were expected to leave as soon as they were able to catch their own food."

"How come you know so much about history?"

"Granny Ester taught it at the Academy, and she loved to tell us cubs stories. And I like history, there's a lot of fun stuff, like, did you know it was a rabbit who created the first computer?"

"No."

"How don't you know that? You love computers."

"I love using them. Where they come from isn't of any interest to me."

"So you don't want to know why he invented it?"

"Of course I do, but it's because you're the one telling it."

"Maybe I should become a teacher then."

Marlot swatted his arm. "Don't even think about it."

"Okay, okay. In truth what he invented was nothing like what we call

computers today, it was just an adding machine really, but back then it was revolutionary, and the historians all agree that if not for that one invention, you wouldn't have computers to play with."

"So that's the what, what's the why?"

"Why else, to run a tally of people. He worked for one of the Lords, about three hundred years ago."

"Did that Lord happen to be a lion? And going by the name of Goldenmane?"

Trembor laughed. "No, my family doesn't have any history-shaping creations to its name, as far as I know. The Lord was a wolf, by the name of Ebonymark. History doesn't agree as to his first name. The rabbit was Tobor Fastbeat, he was the Lord's accountant, and it was his duty at the end of every day to count who had survived, so reparation could be demanded. He came up with a level and tumbler system that counted each person who pulled it. He set it up by the field worker's entrance and the accuracy went way up."

"How did he know who to charge?"

Trembor chuckled. "That wasn't his job. He told the Lord how many had been lost, and he sent out his collectors to get the money. I don't expect that part of the system was very accurate since they were mostly thugs with power back then."

"Speaking of thugs with delusion of power," Marlot commented, indicating the cloud of dust coming their way along the road. "I'm willing to bet the rest of the meal that's Banerik."

"I'm not taking that bet because I can't eat anymore. Why do you think that's him?"

"The amount of dust tells me it's a large vehicle and I can hear the engine from here. Much louder than it needs to be."

"Maybe it's some farm equipment."

"Not at the speed it's moving." He sat up and peered in the distance. The car disappeared on the other side of their hill, and his ears pivoted, tracking the engine. "And he just stopped about where I parked."

"You think he's here to kill us?"

Marlot laughed. "If he is, I hope he crammed a lot of people in his car because he's a pushover."

Trembor started standing, but Marlot leaned back against him, pinning him in place.

"You really want him to see us like this?" the lion asked.

Marlot pulled his mate's arms around his shoulder. "I no longer care what anyone here thinks. He already knows we have sex, how is this going to offend him anymore?"

He heard a door slam shut.

“Just one door,” Trembor commented.

“Maybe the entire town got out the driver’s side.”

“If he has them all in his car, he’s going to have to revoke his own driving license. There are passenger limits for them.”

“Nobody here cares about that stuff.”

“Do they care about anything?”

“Only when it affects what they want.”

They became silent when they heard someone cursing. A moment later tufted ears appeared, then the rest of the lynx. He glared at them.

“Banerik,” Marlot greeted him jovially. “What brings you to these parts of the woods?”

“I got a report of an eyesore parked on the side of the road. I figured it’d be you two. What are you still doing here?”

“Having an early dinner.” Trembor indicated the partially devoured body. “If you want some, go ahead. We’re not going to be able to finish him.”

The lynx looked at the bloody body on the ground and made a disgusted face. “I’m putting you under arrest for poaching.”

“We didn’t poach.” Marlot pulled the ID card from his pocket. “He was the poacher, or more probably a hunter. We caught him trying to kill one of the farmers.”

By Banerik’s expression, Marlot could tell he didn’t believe him, so he offered him the card. “Take and scan it. You’ll see I’m telling the truth.”

The lynx shook his head. “You two are savages, eating on the ground. Is that how it’s done in the city?”

“Of course,” Trembor replied. “All the best places are set up so you can bring in your kill and bury your muzzle in it, of course, there we do it naked. Blood is tough to get out of fabric. We kept our pants on out of respect for your town’s delicate sensibility.”

“I knew you were a deviant, even when we were kids.”

Marlot shrugged. “So, do you want to know who he was?” he waved the card.

“Who was he?”

“The coyote I told you to keep in his cage.”

“You blaming me for this?”

“Maybe, unless someone overrode my instructions and told you to release him?”

“No one tells me how to do my job,” the lynx growled. “Not you, not anyone.”

“Then yes, this is your fault. Fortunately, the sheep’s fine. Or is that unfortunately? I guess it depends on what you were hoping would happen. I mean,

if you're the one who actually released him."

Banerik's eyes narrowed, and Marlot smiled innocently.

"I got no idea what you're implying," the lynx said. "But I want you out of town."

"Can't, we still have a case to close."

"Maybe you haven't heard, but the RI who covers this territory is in town. You two aren't needed anymore."

"So the council finally got off their tails and contracted with the local RI. Good for them. How much groveling did your grandfather have to do?"

Banerik growled.

Trembor leaned in and whispered. "I think you just insulted his family."

"Oh no, they do that on their own just fine," Marlot replied. He grinned as the lynx began shaking.

"I want you out of here," he hissed, "or I'm going to arrest you."

"For what?"

"You're trespassing."

"No, we're not. The town owes this land."

"Then I'm going to arrest you for vagrancy."

Trembor laughed. "How are you going to explain that report? Two RIs who own a car, vagrant? Next, you're going to tell me there's a law against eating unprepared meat?"

"Maybe there is," Banerik growled.

Marlot stood. "Don't get that thing you call a tail bent out of shape." He pulled the lion up. "Let's pack up and go check in with that new RI, see what she wants us to do."

"I told you, she wants you out of town."

Marlot smiled. "I hope you don't mind, but I want to hear it from her mouth."

Banerik began fuming as Marlot and his lion rolled the tarp over the body and carried it down to the car.

"Who do you think told him we were here?" Trembor asked.

"My guess is that Urion padded him, and then he drove around until he saw my car." They threw the body in the trunk, and Marlot took out two seat covers, handing one to Trembor.

"Were you serious about fighting Arana if she wants us off the case?" the lion installed the cover and sat down.

Marlot did the same. "I was. Now that I'm fed, and ate what was the best lead we might have had, I don't know."

"Maybe she can get Lamia to talk, prey to prey."

"If she's willing, she can try, but I doubt it. That sheep is too afraid of

whichever councilor is the father.” He sighed. “Let’s go find out what Arana wants to do and go from there.”