

Banerik followed them the whole way back to town, even parking next to them when Marlot stopped in front of the clinic. The wolf unlocked the trunk and Trembor grabbed the rest of their meal out of it.

“What do you think you’re doing with that?”

“I’m going to put it in one of the freezers,” the lion replied, closing the trunk.

“I don’t see why you need to do that, you’re going to be gone soon.”

“Since you’re so sure of that,” Marlot said, “why don’t you go find that RI and tell her to meet us here.”

The lynx glared at him. “I’m not here to run your errands.”

Marlot shrugged. “Then go tell your grandfather we’ll be staying until the RI informs us she’s taking over the case.”

Banerik glared harder, then got in his car.

Trembor watched the car speed away. “How long do you think it’ll take him to realize this is the best place to find Arana?”

Marlot opened the door. “Until someone smarter than him points him in the right direction.”

The buffalo stepped out of Na’ego’s office as the door closed. “What—” she began but stopped talking and moving as she looked them over. “Ancestors, what have you two been doing?”

“We ate an early dinner.”

“Did you roll in your food afterward? You two look disgusting.”

The lion smiled, and Arana took a step back. “We like eating wild once in a while. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to freeze what’s left so it won’t go to waste.”

She stepped out of his way. “There’s a shower in the surgical suite, use it.”

“What are you doing back here? I asked you to give me the day.”

“Banerik interrupted our meal to kick us out of town. I figured it meant all the council had signed everything. His grandfather wouldn’t have sent him otherwise.”

“What species is that Banerik?”

“Lynx. Arlion is his grandfather.”

“He was the one hurrying everyone else along. I would have been there all night if not for him.”

“I’m not surprised, Arlion is the one who coerced me into coming here. Now that I am someone who loves another male, I’m a blemish on his decision making and he wants me out of here as fast as possible.”

“And that Banerik is his errand male?”

“He’s what passes for an enforcer here. You’re going to have fun dealing with him.” He looked at himself. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go shower too.”

“Yeah, you go do that. We can talk afterward.”

Marlot heard the shower start as he headed to the back and let that guide him. He undressed and joined his lion under the water. They made sure to rub the blood completely out of their fur, but even if that rekindled their desire for each other, they didn't play. They needed to find out the status of the case.

Still damp, but no longer reeking of blood, they joined Arana in the office. She sat behind Na'ego's desk. She had a pad with notes next to the computer.

"Are you taking over the case?" Marlot asked.

"Before I decide I want to know where it stands."

"We don't have the killer," Trembor said, "but we have an idea who it is."

Her ears canted inquisitively.

Marlot shook his head. "We only have a general idea. Based on what we think the motive is, and the sequence of events."

"Okay, lay it out for me."

Marlot took a moment to make sure he had the events in the right order. "About eight days ago, one of the communes' medic, Urion Roundpoint, brought a sheep to Na'ego because her pregnancy was causing her problems. Na'ego didn't make any specific notes on her file, but he took blood and a sample of the fetus. He sent both to the labs. The blood result came back a few days later and didn't show anything he flagged as unusual. There were no notes on if the results from the fetus had come back, so I called the lab and they confirmed they sent it four days ago. I tracked the delivery, and it arrived here just before dinner time that day. Five hours later Na'ego dies in the Council chamber, to be discovered the next morning."

"When did you get here?" she asked.

"At the end of that day. Arlion contacted me in the morning and tried to talk me into coming to do the investigation, but I turned him down. He resorted to using the town's significant political weight to get a city official to force me to come."

She nodded. "And from what you've told me, you know why he was killed?"

"I suspected the reason the moment I found out he'd sent the sample to a lab. He'd only do that if he thought the baby was mixed breed. The fact he received the result but didn't enter the information in the sheep's file confirms it. He went to confront the father in the council chamber."

"And the father killed him? Why? Did the medic try to blackmail him?"

"No, Na'ego wouldn't do something like that. He would have been angry, but he wouldn't have wanted to ruin someone's life over this. As best as we can figure, the fight was because the father wanted Na'ego to abort the pregnancy."

"She's close to four months pregnant," Trembor continued. "Killing the baby would constitute predation of an underage cub."

"Why would they fight over that?" Arana asked. "I'm no medic, but even I

know crossbreed cubs almost never survive.”

Marlot nodded. “But if the cub kept going even for a little more, when she miscarried, it would have been clear he was mixed breed. And I’m guessing the father’s species is somewhat distinctive. It might already be noticeable on the fetus, but if he’d been able to convince Na’ego to end the pregnancy, no one would have seen it.”

“Is that all you have?”

“No, the sheep indirectly confirmed he’s on the council, although she wouldn’t give us the name. And he sent someone to kill her. We prevented that from succeeding.”

“Then you can get the name from him.”

Marlot shook his head.

Trembor indicated the hall. “He’s in the freezer.”

It took her a moment to understand what he meant, then she looked at them, stunned. “How did that happen?”

Marlot sighed. “I was hungry, and he threatened Trembor. I lost control and killed him.”

She rubbed the base of her horns. “Predators, you, and your stomach.” She pursed her mouth. “Okay, but the sheep is still alive, right?”

Marlot and Trembor nodded.

“Then you can get her to tell you.”

“We already tried.” Trembor started, but Marlot stopped him with a raised hand.

“You said we can get her to talk. Does that mean we’re keeping the case?”

“Of course you are. I am not setting foot in the middle of an ongoing case that involves the council, especially not after you ate one of the few leads there were.”

Marlot nodded. “Are you willing to assist us? The sheep won’t tell us who the father is. She’s terrified of what he can do, and as predators, we aren’t putting her in a calm state where she can think about it clearly.”

“Yeah, I’ll assist.”

“Good. Then let’s meet back here tomorrow morning to go see her.”

“Why not go now?”

“We were there earlier,” Trembor said. “And she was attacked. It’s best if we give her time to rest.”

“Aren’t you worried the father is going to send someone else?”

Marlot shook his head. “Not this quickly. The Coyote was a professional. I don’t know how he got him this quickly since he was in town by the time we were here, but even if he finds out his hunter’s dead, I can’t see how he’ll get another one by morning.”

She looked thoughtful. "I'm going to make a few calls, find out if anyone I know is aware of hunters being on the move."

Trembor's ears went up. "You have contacts among hunters?"

She shrugged. "A couple."

The wolf and lion exchanged a look.

"Don't go thinking anything. I'm not one, and I wasn't one. I just hung out with people who might have been. I'm not going to confirm that either way, so don't bother asking."

Trembor raised his hands. "I wasn't going to. I'm just surprised, that's all. I was in the enforcers before becoming an RI, and I remember how impossible it was to get information from that community."

"That isn't going to change." She got up. "If I need to get you in a hurry where are you staying?"

"Here," Marlot said. He shrugged at her surprised expression. "No one here will let us stay at their place, not my parents, or even the rooming house. We're undesirables. I'm pretty sure Banerik is going to try to kick us out the next time comes by."

"No he won't," she said. "I can't do anything about how the town treats you, but I'm going to have some words with him. Him I can do something about. I'll let him know how things stand, and what is going to happen to him if he bothers the two of you."

Marlot grinned. "Any chance you can record the exchange? I would love to see his expression when you put him in his place."

She leveled her angry gaze on him, and Marlot swallowed. "I'm not some show person. I don't record what I do unless it's needed for official business, and then only the people who have a right to see that do. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

With a snort, she left.

When he heard the outside door close, the wolf looked at Trembor. "I didn't know it was possible for a prey species to be this fierce."

Trembor nodded. "She reminds me a little of Sarene."

Marlot had to agree. He shuddered as at the memory of his first encounter with her.

"Is there anything case related we can do tonight?" the lion asked.

"I could find us something to do, why?"

Trembor pulled his wolf close to him. "Because I want to figure out where we're going to sleep and make sure we're exhausted."

Marlot smiled. "Let's go lock the door first."