

Lamia's screams came through the door, and Trembor plastered his ears against his skull. He glared at the young wolf seated on the other side of the waiting area. He'd tried to run the moment Marlot had opened the car door, and that had earned him a cut on the side of the head when his wolf tripped him. He'd tried again in the confusion that bringing the sheep in on a makeshift stretcher had caused, and that time Marlot had knocked him soundly against the wall. Even now he was eyeing the door.

So he wouldn't have to focus on the sheep's pain, he went and stood before the young adult. "Care to tell me what you thought you were doing?"

"I don't have to tell you anything."

Marlot snorted, but he didn't add anything.

"Did you know she was pregnant?" Trembor asked.

"What do I care? She's just a sheep."

"You cared enough about them to have sex with one," Marlot said.

The young wolf glared at him. "Why d'you think I went and did this? Borok said it was the only way to prove I wasn't one of them."

The lion looked at his wolf, who shrugged. "The name's familiar, but I don't know who he is. That's his family name?"

The youth shook his head.

"Give the name," Trembor said, "and you might be able to avoid the punishment that's coming."

"She's just a sheep. Nobody's going to care."

"We care," Marlot said.

"And she isn't just a sheep, she's a pregnant sheep. More than three months pregnant."

"So?"

"So, your attack on her was an act of predation on her baby, who is underage. Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you if it dies as a result of it?"

"It's a sheep too, nobody cares."

"I care," Trembor growled. "I don't care that this town might want to cover the scent. I'm not going to let that happen. If her baby dies, I'm going to make sure she presses for the full penalty, and I'm going to be the first in line to offer to devour you."

"You—you can't do that." He looked to Marlot. "He can't do that! She's just a sheep!"

It was Arana who answered, turning her back to the door leading to the operating room. "The law says he can. If Miss Softpaw demands reparation, you get eaten."

"But I just did it to prove I'm not one of them!"

“That’s quite clear,” Trembor said. “You such a predator, attacking a pregnant female.”

“I didn’t know!”

Arana harrumphed. “That’s why you’re supposed to stalk your prey.”

“Borok picked her, not me. I just went along to they’d stop calling me a sheep.” He pulled his legs to himself and hugged them.

“He picked her specifically?” the lion asked. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He and the others had been drinking. They hunted me down and said I could prove myself to the town. I didn’t know what they meant until we got here. He said that if I killed a sheep, he’d know I wasn’t one because sheep can’t kill. I thought he’d point to one at random, but he took us in the field and around the houses until we got to that one, then he had us wait until you left.”

“He was close enough to watch us?”

The young wolf shrugged. “He kept us back. I could hear voices, but I couldn’t make out what they said. I guess he was close enough.”

Marlot frowned. “Was he the cougar, the jackal, or the mongoose?”

The youth shook his head.

“There were only four of you,” Marlot said.

The wolf started shaking his head, then stopped himself.

“So this Borok sent you to kill this sheep, but he didn’t take part himself?” Trembor asked. He exchanged a look with Marlot, and a moment after that the screams died down.

The wolf and lion joined Arana at the door as it opened.

“How is she?” the buffalo asked the horse

“She as well as can be expected,” she replied. “Physically, she has a few superficial claw cuts, and she’s lost a good amount of blood do to losing the baby. It wasn’t developed enough to survive.”

Trembor growled, causing the horse to take a step back, but she kept her calm. “Emotionally, there’s no telling how long it will be until she is over this. You have to understand that in her current emotional state, even once she’s healed, I don’t believe it will be wise to have her work.”

“That isn’t our concern,” Marlot answered. “We don’t represent the town. I need you to put the fetus in a freezer box. We need to take it with us.”

Trembor turned away from them and took a step toward the youth, only to find Marlot was holding his arm.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. The parents have to decide what they will do about it.”

“They’re going to prosecute the killer,” Trembor growled. He pulled on Marlot’s arm, but his wolf wouldn’t let go.

Marlot looked at him and shook his head. “You can check with Miss

Softpaw,” he told the medic. “She indicated to us before this happened she didn’t want to have anything to do with it.”

The horse didn’t seem to believe him, but she went back inside.

“Arana, we’ll be outside, can you bring us the box?”

She nodded. “I’ll handle the enforcer and processing the crime.”

Marlot nodded and pulled Trembor along.

The lion growled at the youth as they headed for the door. He thought about pulling away and ripping the young wolf apart, but Marlot must have sensed it. He tightened his grip, and a moment later they were outside.

“Trem, calm down.”

“How do you expect me to do that? He killed a cub.”

“And he isn’t much more of one himself.”

“Is that an excuse?”

“Of course not, but Arana will deal with that, Our job is to get Na’ego’s killer.”

“Are they even going to prosecute him? From what you told me about this place, it doesn’t seem the cub will get justice.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think Arana’s going to let them wash this away, but the council is going to do its best.” He hesitated. “Look, I agree that what he did is inexcusable, but you have to realize, he was used. That Barok set him up to do it. If someone should be paying, it’s him.”

“Why do you believe him? He could be making it up.”

“You remember the wolf that was being harassed, the one wearing the sheep’s skin?”

Trembor nodded.

“That’s him. Barok told him he’d regained his dignity by doing this. I know it doesn’t work that way, but I also know how desperate someone can get to fit in this place. I watched my first love be killed, remember? I obeyed the council without questions while I lived here. I made myself a mere shadow of who I am because I didn’t want anyone noticing I was different. Trem, even if he isn’t prosecuted, that wolf is going to be traumatized for a long time. I think that’s punishment enough.”

Trembor closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. “It wasn’t going to survive,” he said, more to himself than his wolf. When he looked up, Marlot was watching him. “I’m fine, I just don’t like it.”

“I know how you feel about cubs, Trem, but like you just said, this one wasn’t going to survive. If you can look at this objectively, it’s for the best.”

“How can you say that?”

“The medic will report the miscarriage. That should ensure the sheep’s safety. If we make sure she also reports we took the fetus, that should redirect the

attacks our way. We're better equipped to handle them than anyone here who'd try to protect Miss Softpaw." He paused. "Except maybe Arana."

"You really think she's going to be safe?"

"I have to hope so. The father knows she never gave up his name, he has no reason to think she will after this. The fetus is the only threat."

"And it's going to be out of here with us."

Marlot nodded.

"You think we'll have to come back here?"

"I don't know. When we have the result, we can send them to Arana, and let her deal with the rest."

Trembor watched as his wolf bit his lower lip. He scented the air, but before he could comment, the door opened and Arana came out, holding a white box with the medical symbol on it, a claw cutting flesh with one drop of blood.

"Did the medic give any trouble?" Marlot asked.

"No. Lamia couldn't insist hard enough for you to have this. As far as she's concerned, this was the worse thing to happen to her. When the medic told her the damage caused by the miscarriage meant she might not be able to have any other children, Lamia beamed. I'm worried she's going to go back to him, maybe even warn him that you have this." She handed the box to Marlot.

"That's fine. We want him to know. To keep other attacks on her from happening. Make sure the medic reports it too. He might not believe Miss Softpaw when she tells him."

"You think he's reading them? They're supposed to be confidential."

Marlot shrugged. "The medic works for the commune, very little is confidential here."

"Do you think the father is part of the family who runs this commune?"

"It's possible, but that'd be stupid on his part. He'd have to interact with her, or at least be around her a few times a year, and seeing how devoted to him she is, someone would notice the level of attention she gave him and start asking questions."

"Going to another commune gives him anonymity."

Marlot nodded. "You're going to have to protect her for a while longer. Until the father learns we have this, he might send someone else to kill her."

"Don't worry, nothing will happen to her." She went back inside.

Marlot headed to his car. Once seated, he handed the box to Trembor.

"You didn't smell confident about staying away," the lion said as the car started moving.

"The only thing the tests are going to give us is the species of the father, not the individual. We know he's on the council because the sheep slipped up, but she won't corroborate it. Unless we can get some of his DNA and get a comparison

done, it won't be proof."

"Then we get his DNA, it shouldn't be too difficult."

"To be certain he can't contest it, we'll have to get it directly off him. Anything we collect at his home, or the council chamber, he'll be able to argue we got the wrong one."

"You think he'd be willing to sacrifice a family member?"

"I don't know. He was willing to kill Na'ego, who he had known for years, to protect his secret. There's no telling how far he's willing to go."

Trembor looked outside for a moment, watching the golden field pass by. "And everything I've seen on TV about towns like this made them seem like such ideal places."

Marlot snorted.