

“You’re lucky,” the medic said as she shaved the fur around the gash in Marlot’s side. He hadn’t realized he was bleeding until after he’d called Bahamel, the pain distracting him from smelling it. Trembor had bandaged it as best as he could, using his ruined shirt. Watching his mate shirtless had given something better for Marlot to think about.

“I don’t feel it,” he grumbled as she wiped loose fur off the wound with a disinfectant wipe. “I feel like I got what I deserved for being careless.”

The medic smiled at him. “You’re still alive, so you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

Marlot studied her as she applied a numbing gel around the wound. Almost immediately the pain diminished. She was a sheep with dark brown wool, turning gray in place. Her work as a medic was one of the reasons she’d managed to live this long, medic couldn’t be hunted when they were on duty, but the scars on her arms indicated that she’d been in her share of fights, and lived.

It felt strange watching someone whose life was at risk every day be this alive, while the farmers back at the town, who never had to worry about being hunted, looked to be a shadow of her.

Did prey need to be in danger to feel alive? He almost asked her, but stopped himself. He would be callous of him at the very least. So he watched her sew the wound shut in silence.

“There, you might have a small scar, but the fur is going to cover it.” She put the needle in a box for contaminated instruments.

He looked at her arms again, with the scars showing through the wool. What had the predator who’d done that to her been like?

“I don’t mean to be insensitive, but how many predators have you survived?”

She looked up at him and then her arms. “Oh, I got those in the war. I was in the Protectors before becoming a medic.” She smiled. “The predators in my neighborhood know better than to think I’m their next meal.”

Marlot nodded.

“Well,” said a large bear as she stepped next to him. “Didn’t I tell you not to wait for another disaster before arranging to see me again?”

Marlot chuckled, then winced as both of his sides hurt.

“You’re going to want to be careful,” the medic said. “Even laughing too hard could tear the stitches.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think my cracked ribs will let me.” Marlot forced his breathing to slow. “And I didn’t arrange this, although I have an idea who did.”

“What to share?” Bahamel asked.

“I don’t know the name, but I expect it’s the killer I’m looking for.”

“I can have Belric question them if you want.”

Marlot shook his head. “Unless he needs it as a distraction, I wouldn’t bother. The killer’s too smart to have let them know who he is. He needs to protect his position.”

“So he’s got money? Power?”

Marlot nodded.

“Then what’s he doing not paying for his kill?”

“He’s afraid of the social stigma, terrified of it I’m guessing.”

The bear looked at him in disbelief.

“It isn’t here. It’s back in my home town, the council blacked mailed me in going back to handle this. Their mentality is different from here.”

“What, they don’t approve of hunting?”

“It’s a farming town. They don’t participate in hunting, but that isn’t what he’s afraid of. It’s what the town is going to do to him when they find out he’s had sex with a sheep that’s got him doing all this.”

“They don’t approve of that? And they don’t approve of your interest in Trembor. Is there anything they approve of?”

For a moment Marlot wondered how she’s figured out he’d gotten mated to him, but this wasn’t about that. She’d realized he liked males more than females, and it hadn’t been hard for her to work out that’s why he’d left.

“Not being different.”

“If this is related to your home town, I’m guessing you’re going back there?”

“Not by choice.”

“Should we reschedule next week’s dinner?”

“No. I’m going to be done with this in a few days at the most. Me and Trembor are going to be there.”

The lion limped to them and sat next to Marlot. “How are you feeling?” his right arm was bandaged.

“Okay, all things considered. Right now I kind of wish they’d done more damage, so you’d have a reason to arrest them. As it is, this isn’t really going to interfere with our work.”

“Not my beat, you know that. I’m vice, not productivity crimes. But you’ll be happy to know the alligator is part of the Longtooth gang, and they’re known to deal in drugs. His three friends are probably part of it too, although they’re new faces to me. So I still get to arrest them.”

“Good.”

Marlot pad buzzed. “RI Blackclaw,” he answered, not bothering to check who it was.

“Marlot, it’s Jaxca. I’ll have the sample ready in about an hour.”

“That’s good, we’ll be there to pick it up about that—”

Trembor took the pad out of his hand. “Jaxca?” He nodded. “We’re going to

get it in the morning. We had an altercation, and I'm taking Marl back home for some rest. We'll be there first thing in the morning."

He handed the pad back. Jaxca had already disconnected.

"We should get it tonight."

"Why? The lab's going to be closed."

"We might be putting him in danger."

Trembor scoffed. "His clinic has a guard, and he's poisonous. No one's going to bother him. It isn't like the killer has any way of knowing we dropped it off there."

"He knew enough to use our house hunting to lure us out here."

"With all the searches you've been doing over the network, anyone could find out about that. Jaxca might be our official examiner, but unless he has access to restricted information, he can't have found that out in the short time it took for us to drive back." He looked to Bahamel. "Unless you need us, officer, we'll head home."

"I have your statements, so you're good to go. I'll see you both next week."

"I wouldn't miss it," the lion replied. "Marlot told me great things about your baking."

She glared at the wolf. "You've been spreading lies again?"

"I wouldn't dare. You bake, that makes anything you make great compared to my food."

"I tried to teach you."

Marlot shrugged. "I have better things to do than spend time on making meat look pretty."

"Food's made to be enjoyed, wolf."

"Don't worry," Trembor interrupted. "He's going to eat it, and he's going to love it. Isn't that right, Marl?"

"With you taking her side in this, what choice do I have?" Marlot mock glowered. "Quite the mate you are."

He stood to go, but Bahamel's large hand landed on his shoulder. "Did you say mate?"

Trembor nodded. "We signed the contract a couple of days ago."

"And I'm just hearing about this now? How come I wasn't invited?"

"It was a spur of the moment thing," Marlot said, not looking at her.

"Actually it was as a way to get back at my father and the whole narrow-minded town. Not the best reason to get mated."

"But I'm not letting him out of the contract."

"I still expect the council to annul it."

"Then we'll get mated again here and have a proper ceremony." The lion smiled at Bahamel. "We're going to have a ceremony, anyway. My parents are

going to make sure of it, and I'll see to it you're invited since you're Marl's oldest friend in the city."

The bear smiled. "Good. And don't let those grass-eaters push you around, Marlot, you're better than that."

Marlot nodded and forced a smile. "I won't. And with any luck, this is the last time they're going to want to have anything to do with me." He helped Trembor stand, and he helped him walk back to the car.

"It's a good thing this was a setup," Marlot said after a few minutes of walking. "You'd have fallen in love with the house and we'd have been forced to walk this path every day to go to work. Can you imagine doing that?"

"You know we could have asked her for a ride."

"Sure, but then you wouldn't be appreciating how bad of an idea living here would be."

"Quite the mate you are," Trembor grumbled.