

Trembor cursed and ran for him.

"Aiden? Aiden!" The dog headed for them, but the lion intercepted him before he took more than two steps, throwing him to the ground.

Marlot entered a different number. "What the fuck is going on?" He yelled when the officer in charge answered. "Why do I have a civilian in my crime scene? I thought the house had been secured? Don't you people know how to do your job? No, I don't want you to come get him. I want you to make damn sure no one else just walks in here. If I find anyone else here, I'm going to make sure your rating drops so low even a vagrant will be able to afford you. Am I making myself clear?" He terminated the call and glared at Trembor, who was grinning at him, a knee on the doberman's chest. "What?"

The lion couldn't reply immediately because he was now laughing. "You like threatening those poor folks way too much. One of these days one of them is going to realize you can't actually do that. What are you going to do then?"

"I'm going to hunt and claim them no matter their rating." His tone was serious as he joined Trembor.

The lion looked at the dog under him. "Now, I'm going to let go of you and get up. You're going to remain exactly where you are. If you move, even to scratch your balls, I'm going to knock you unconscious and we'll question you in the hospital, understand?"

The canine nodded weakly.

"And you comment on my threats?" Marlot asked with a chuckle.

"At least I can carry through with mine." Trembor stood.

Marlot rolled his eyes and extended a hand to the doberman.

"Come on, let me help you up. Don't worry about the maned pussycat here. He's not going to touch a strand of fur on your body."

The canine looked skeptical, but still slowly reached for the offered hand, watching for the lion's reaction. Marlot pulled him up and sat him on the bench, keeping himself between the young dog and the body.

He smelled young, and looked lost, now that he was no longer terrified. His gaze kept going from the floor to where the body was. Marlot was happy he was blocking his view.

"Call Jaxca," he told Trembor over his shoulder. The lion nodded and took a few steps away. "What's your name?" Marlot asked the doberman.

"Te... Telima, sir." He sounded a lot younger than he smelled.

Marlot showed him his ID. "I'm a registered investigator. MY name is Marlot Blackclaw. I have to ask you some questions. are you okay to answer them?"

Telima nodded.

"What are you doing here, Telima?"

The doberman hesitated for a moment. "I sort of live here."

"Sort of?" Marlot prodded when Telima didn't add more.

Telima plastered his ears against his skull and his tail stuck to his leg, trying to get between them.

The wolf sighed. "Look, I don't think you have anything to do with this, but if you don't answer my questions I'm going to have to get the enforcers to take you in. Things won't be anywhere this comfortable if we have to do this at a station."

"I'm sorry, sir." Telima's voice was barely above a whisper and his eyes didn't leave the floor.

"It's alright. Let's try this again. What were you to Miss. Spottedfur?"

The doberman took a breath and let it out. "I was her lover."

"Contracted?" Marlot asked.

Telima shook his head. "She's contracted with someone else." He lifted his head, surprise in his eyes. "He did it!"

"Who?"

"Her contracted lover. She told me how controlling he was. He must have found out about me and done that to her."

Marlot gave the young dog a moment to calm down. "Do you know who he is?"

"I never asked. I didn't want to pry. I was happy enough she wanted me over him."

Marlot studied the doberman for a moment. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir." Telima puffed up his chest.

Marlot stopped himself from smiling at the youthful display of pride. He looked from the doberman to the body and back. "She was your first, wasn't she?" The age difference, the fact she had a contracted lover, Marlot was familiar with the situation.

Telima tried to keep his gaze on the wolf, but embarrassment made him look at the floor again. That was all the answer Marlot needed. He didn't show his reaction, but he felt sorry for this young dog.

But maybe the situation was for the best, Marlot thought. There was no avoiding that Telima would be traumatized by her death, but it would be tempered by the belief he had been the love of her life. He wouldn't have to deal with being dumped as soon as he wasn't horny enough for her.

"You have a bag." He pointed to it. "Were you planning on staying here?"

Telima nodded. "I'm at the academy for the week and I come here on my rest days."

"Can I see your ID card?"

The doberman took it out of his pocket and handed it to Marlot.

He looked at it. Unlike his own card, which was muted gray, Telima's was bright red, identifying him as a student, and therefore off-limits to predation. At least he didn't have to worry about him disappearing during the investigation. He handed it back.

"I want you to go back to your dorm. You can't stay here, it's

going to be awhile until her possessions are processed." Telima nodded and stood, looking a little dazed. Marlot placed a few bills in his hand. "I want you to buy a wallet for your card. The type you can wear around your neck. Once you do, don't take it off, even while sleeping."

Telima looked at him, eyes wide. "Am I in danger?"

Marlot couldn't stop a small chuckle. Ah, the ignorance of youth. "You're eighteen, Telima. You're of predation age. You look like an adult, and you smell like one. The only thing keeping you safe off the academy's ground is your student status. You need to take care of your card. It isn't because you're a predator that you're safe. Until you've learned how to defend yourself, you can end up as someone else's meal. Yes, they're going to be in trouble when they find out you're a student, but you're still going to be dead."

Telima nodded and quickly backed away.

Marlot didn't care if he'd scared him, he'd be better off for it, so long as he took care of his ID card. They were already losing too many young adults to carelessness as it was.

The doberman looked at the money in his hand, a questioning look on his face for a moment. He probably hadn't handled physical money before. The government had started pushing for electronic currency a decade ago, and nowadays it was the most common method. Only the older folks, or those like Marlot who dealt with people in the gray areas of society, kept physical money going.

The government kept pushing to eliminate physical money, claiming only criminals used it these days, but it never amounted to anything. Everyone knew a lot of people within the government were involved in criminal doings.

Marlot didn't expect it to happen anytime soon. The worse Telima would have to deal with were odd looks when he paid for his wallet with them.

A few moments after Telima left, a bright red frog came up the stairs carrying a portable gurney. "Hey Jaxca," Marlot greeted him. "How's life?" He joined the frog next to the body but kept his distance.

"You know me. I live the blessed life."

"Don't get cocky." Trembor's tone was sharp. "One of these days you're going to come across someone with a taste for the exotic."

Jaxca set the gurney down next to the body. "My rating keeps anyone but the rich from affording me." He took a plastic bag out of his jacket, unfolded it over the gurney, and unzipped it.

"And who do you think have the weird tastes?" Marlot asked. "Those who can afford them," He answered himself.

They meant the warning. Even Marlot could make quick work of the frog if he wanted to. Only the poison Jaxca's skin secreted had kept him from considering the frog as his next meal the first time they met.

"Just be careful, okay?" Trembor helped Jqaxca place the body on the gurney. "I don't want to have to start looking for another examiner. No one's going to measure up to you."

The frog stood and looked up at the lion, the top of his red head barely reaching the middle of Trembor's chest. "Everyone measures up to me, and more." Jaxca then bent back down to zip the bag close.

Marlot gave him a wide berth. He didn't want to risk even a mild case of accidental poisoning. It wouldn't kill him, but it would lay him out for a few days.

Jaxca stood. "You two grab the gurney and bring her to my car. I'll have a prelim for you by morning."

The lion and wolf carried the body out of the house, and newsies started snapping pictures and yelling questions. The enforcers kept them for coming close.

Once the gurney was in Jaxca's car Marlot went to the officer in charge, a female hyena. "We're done here. Have all the lock codes been changed? Are the unused doors sealed?" The officer gulped and nodded. "Good. You're clear to catalog the contents. When you're done seal the house and pad me the codes."

He joined Trembor and led him to where he was parked. "Do you think her contracted lover could have killed her out of jealousy?"

Trembor looked at the house before answering. "She was a VP. Do you really think she would contract someone who couldn't afford to pay her rating? I don't care why he'd kill her, he wouldn't have left her there to rot."

Marlot nodded. He unlocked the car and sat behind the wheel. Trembor sat on the passenger side and placed a hand on the wolf's thigh as soon as he closed his door.

Marlot placed his hand over the lion's and squeezed it once, before moving it back to Trembor's lap. "Someone might so," he said, looking ahead.

Trembor shook his head in amusement. "No one cares, Marl. And we're RIs, even if they did, you really think anyone would want to mess with us?"

Marlot shrugged and started the car. "Let's just go, okay?"