

Trembor woke up to the section's door slamming shut. A glance at the clock on the wall outside his cage showed it was almost nine in the morning. It had been a long time since he'd slept in, not that he felt like it. The cot in the cage wasn't anywhere to comfortable. He didn't bother sitting. They could put whoever had been caught in their cage without the need for an audience.

"Morning Trembor," a female said. He hurried to sit.

"Captain Morninglight," he greeted the precinct captain. The golden horse was radiant, as always in her uniform. He was surprised to see her. They hadn't interacted when he'd been brought in or during any of his questionings. He was even more surprised when she opened his door. He tried to think of who could be here to question him where she'd feel the need to escort him. The city leader?

He followed her out, but instead of leading him to an interrogation room, she led him to the release counter, where the officer on the other side placed the items Trembor had on him when he arrived.

"What's going on?" he asked her. This couldn't be his family having posted bail, he hadn't even had a hearing to determine that. One of the things Flattooth had made sure of, to show her distaste for him.

"You're being released."

"Why?" he thought about Marlot's plan. It couldn't have taken effect yet. Even if Flattooth went after him, she'd keep Trembor here as an accomplice. She wasn't letting him off her claws short of—

"Lack of evidence."

Trembor stared at her.

"Your lawyer had his investigators look into the evidence the prosecution had. Whatever he found was enough to get them to drop all charges, so you are free to go. I understand someone is waiting outside to drive you home."

Trembor took his things, trying to understand. Marlot's plan had been to shift the blame to him. Did he also find a flaw in the made-up evidence the prosecution had? "Wait, what about my brother's tax, even a lack of evidence doesn't change the fact it needs to be paid, I—"

"It's been paid."

"By who?" Trembor asked in surprise. It couldn't be Marlot, not unless he'd borrowed too much money. If he had, Trembor was going to strangle his lover. He couldn't see his parents doing it. As much as they'd want to help him out, paying the tax on their son wouldn't be comfortable.

She chuckled. "That falls more within your territory than mine."

Did he want to know? If it was Marlot, he would find out once he saw his wolf, if it was someone else? Maybe Marlot had found the killer and gotten them to pay. Again, he'd find out once he met up with his wolf.

His walk through the precinct was quiet, everyone there stood as he stepped in and watched him. A few had to be pulled up by other officers and the jackal glared at him, but most only had respect in their eyes.

He was still shaken once outside; and seeing Marlot by his car in the light snow didn't help. As happy as he was to see his wolf, it added to the surreality of the moment.

Marlot hugged him as Trembor reached him, but it was stiff.

"Marl?"

"Not out here," His wolf answered, then opened the passenger door for him to get in.

Trembor waited until the car was in motion before speaking. "Marl, what is going on? Is this part of your plan? Where are we going?"

Marlot glanced at him, his expression guarded. "We're going to pick up Herelex and Isenson."

"They're okay?" Trembor couldn't hide his worry.

"So I'm told." Marlot started and stopped speaking a few times. Trembor could see the fight in his expression. His wolf, trying to figure out how to say what he needed to.

"If you need to order me, to say it, go ahead," Trembor said, placing his hand on his wolf's leg.

Marlot shook his head. "Not a habit I want to foster, even in a situation like this. And I don't have the time to explain everything." He glanced at the pad resting against the dash. Not Marlot's pad, and showing a route. From what Trembor saw, they didn't have far to go. "The most important thing, right now, is that my plan, as you call it, isn't over yet." He looked at Trembor. "You're not going to like what's going to be said, but you have to go along, no matter what. Your nephews' lives could depend on it."

"You're not saying ours might."

Marlot chuckled. "Would you care?"

"About yours."

Marlot placed a hand on top of Trembor. "We aren't doing that anymore. No more sacrificing ourselves for the other. We live, or we don't, together from now on. We're mated."

"Then I hope your plan has us living."

The hand tightened on his. "Only if you can play along, Trem. Like I said, you're not going to like it, but it's the only way through this."

He nodded. He couldn't imagine what was coming that Marlot wouldn't be confident in Trembor's ability to go along with his plan. "For the cubs." Marlot smiled and nodded.

Their destination was a warehouse. One of those sprawling things every TV show and movie used as the lair for villains because they were cheap to rent and unused ones were abundant.

Trembor started commenting on it, but the seriousness of his wolf's expression stopped him. Marlot was acting like they were on the prowl, no, like they were the prey. Looking around for every spot a predator might pounce out of. He was reminded of the story Marlot had told him; how as a cub his hand his friend played at being prey, being hunted through the commune town.

Only this time it wasn't a game.

Trembor exited the car with Marlot and they headed for the warehouse's door. He didn't go any faster than his wolf, but he couldn't wait to be inside. It had been warmer when he'd been arrested, and his jacket wasn't doing much against the cold.

Inside was warmer and well lit. The door opened onto a large empty room with at least twenty people there, including the mole and his nephews, who were kept in place by bulky manes with a hand on each of the boy's shoulders. Herelex looked like he wanted to gnaw on the hand on his, but Isenson's expression was that of someone who'd given up.

It was all he could do not to run to them, not to tear those two males apart and take his nephews in his arms, comfort them, do his best to convince them it would be okay. The fact they looked in good health otherwise helped calm him. Marlot had been right, they'd been well treated.

They stopped a dozen feet from the mole and his nephews.

"Miss Burrows," Marlot greeted her, more polite than she deserved as far as Trembor was concerned.

"Registered Investigator Blackclaw," he replied. "Mister Goldenmane," she said with a smirk when she addressed Trembor.

"Hand—" he began, but Marlot stopped him by grabbing his arm tight enough he felt the claws through the fabric.

"Forgive my mate," Marlot said, "he's a family male, and you are holding his nephews."

She smiled, a sickly sweet thing. "Yes, I am. Tell me, how did you convince him to agree to this? Every meeting I had with him seemed to lead to him more determined to destroy me and what's mine."

"He's my mate," Marlot answered in a flat tone. "He knows where he stands in this relationship."

Trembor bristled. Was Marlot saying what it sounded like he was? The hand on his arm squeezed once and relaxed, but didn't let go. Trembor tried to calm himself and was happy for the jacket that hid his hackles.

"I'm glad to hear this because the work I have planned for him to do will push his loyalties." She smiled again as he looked at Marlot. "I'm afraid that you might have relationship issues because of me."

"You let me deal with that," Marlot replied coldly. "Trem isn't going to give you any trouble, but you aren't going to give either of us any orders for a while. The agreement is that I get enough time to ensure all your claws are out of his family members. And being thorough takes time. You try anything until then, and I will talk with your boss."

"Do not threaten me," she snapped.

Marlot smiled. "I'm not. I'm telling you how things are before you get too full of yourself and think this agreement is between you and me. You're just the intermediary, you'd do well to remember that. The three of us work for the same person. We're equals,

keep that in mind and everything will be fine.”

Trembor’s teeth were hurting from how hard he was grinding them. Marlot had sold them to those criminals? He wanted to yell. He wasn’t to wrench his arm out of the grip his wolf had on him, but the claws reminded him Marlot had said his nephews’ lives depending on playing along. And if it meant his family was safe, really safe, then he’d do whatever was needed, even if it meant working for them. At least until he could come up with a way for him and Marlot to destroy them.

“We are not equals,” the mole growled. “You will never be my equal.”

“That’s fine, treat us however you think you can get away with. I’m here, as agreed. I’ve told you we will work for you once I’m sure Trem’s family is safe. Now hand over the cubs.”

“I didn’t hear Mister Goldenmane say he’d take my orders,” she replied. “He’s the one I’m interested in hearing.” She grinned at him. “Well? Will you do what I tell you?”

Never. He barely swallowed the growl. “I will,” he said through clenched teeth.

“You don’t sound very convincing,” she replied.

“If you think I’m going to bother trying to make you think I like this,” Trembor snarled, “you can go fuck yourself. The only reason I’m here and not tearing you apart is standing next to me. Now hand over my nephews.”

“I thought you could control him,” she told Marlot.

“As he said. He’s standing next to me and not tearing you apart. If that’s not a demonstration of the control I have over him, I’m not sure what is. He stated he agreed to work for you. If you’re waiting for him to be pleasant about it, we don’t have the time. The cubs, now, or I call Mister White.”

The hate he saw in the mole’s eyes pleased Trembor, and he let the smile show. With a motion from her, the thugs released his nephews. Herelex was the first to move, first stepping toward them, then going to his brother who hadn’t moved, and escorting him to Trembor.

Marlot let go of his arm and he hugged his nephews, joy and worry fighting for dominance. Was Isenson’s condition a result of something they’d done to him, or because of Bo’s death? The trouble his father had been in before that?

“We need to go,” Marlot ordered, and when Trembor glared at him, the softness in the eyes contrasted with the sternness of the order.

Right, they were still among criminals. He held his nephews as they returned to Marlot’s car. The cubs sat in the back, Herelex holding his brother. The car pulled away from the warehouse and Trembor wanted to scream at his wolf for daring to drag him into what he’d fought to stay out of. He’d been willing to die to avoid working with criminals.

But he couldn’t yell, not with the cubs in the back seat. He couldn’t even tell his wolf how angry he was. Right now Isenson needed to see unity, not more fighting, not more dissension within a family.

“You should call your parents,” Marlot said as he stopped the car in a mall’s parking lot. “Let them know Herelex and Isenson are okay.”

Trembor looked around, hardly hearing Marlot's comments. "What are we doing here?"

Instead of answering, Marlot grabbed him and kissed him hard, desperately hard. Before Trembor could get over the surprise, Marlot let go of him and got out of the car. Trembor was out of it a second later, in time to see the bear approaching. What was Bahamel doing here? Why were there enforcer cars at the periphery of the parking lot? Trembor wondered, noticing the cars there.

"You know what to do?" Marlot asked the bear when she was before him.

"Do I look like an idiot to you, wolf?"

"Not at all."

"Then don't tell me my job."

"Marl, what's going on?" Trembor asked as Bahamel turned the wolf so he faced Trembor.

"Marlot Blackclaw," she said, "you are under arrest for tampering with an investigation."

"Trust me," Marlot said before Trembor could protest.