

The enforcer's bullpen (need another name) was crowded with people other than Marlot, who was pacing back and forth before the bank of monitors, looking at the one of the monitors each time he walked by it; the one with the lion and armadillo on one side of the table, talking. They'd been at it for hours with nothing else happening.

Marlot wanted to barge in there, throw Trembor's lawyer out and demand answers. But leaving aside how it would look to anyone watching the screen, how would take it, Marlot making demands? The two of them had just kisses again for the first time not even—he took his pad to check the time—too long ago. He needed to hold his lion, to make this go away for him.

And how would that leave Trembor feeling like? A possession? With what he now knew of his lion's past experience with Gorrek, Marlot couldn't do that, and he didn't want to. Trembor wasn't his possession, he was his mate. The male he loved, wanted to comfort, ensure he wanted for nothing.

There was someone else in the room, seated opposite Trembor and his lawyer; a hippopotamus in a dark blue suit. The city prosecutor. Marlot cursed. She was going to tear Trembor apart, take whatever this was make is a circus for the newsies to feast on.

This was it. He'd apologize to Trembor, but he was putting an end to this even if it mean eating everyone in the room except the lion. He turned to heads for the interrogation rooms and a massive brown bear headed toward him.

"What are you doing here?" Marlot asked.

"Got a call there was a potential crime about to happen, so I came down here before you did something that would let to you and the lion being in legal trouble."

"I can afford them."

Bahamel canted an ear. "Both?" she looked at the screen. "You were planning in eating Trembor's lawyer too? How indebted are you looking to get?"

"How did anyone here know to call you?" Marlot accused. "Have you told every enforcer in the city you're my friend?"

"They're enforcers, Wolf, when one of their one comes back injured, they sniff far and wide to find out who cause it and how to fix it. Had more than a few of them seek me out to find out how I'd take you ending up on Trembor's prep table."

"You wouldn't let them?"

She snorted. "I told them to clear it with the lion first. I know that no matter how bad it was, he wouldn't want you eaten, by him or anyone else."

Marlot looked at the screen, Trembor sulking while the lawyer seemed engage in a verbal stalking.

"What is going on, Ba? All I heard when they arrested him was something about tampering with evidence, but that makes no sense. Trem wouldn't do something like that. I don't care what trouble he might be in, he does things by the book."

The bear motioned for Marlot to follow him. She knocked on a door opened it and poked her inside. "Grof, you might is I borrow your office?"

"What happened? They shrunk yours and you need more elbow room?" a male answered. Marlot moved to look in. A old silver fox sat behind a desk that looked

substantial, until he realized the office was smaller than Bahamel's. "Ah, I see. Well, better here than where he might eat someone." He stood.

"I wouldn't."

"Not what I hear." The fox said as he stepped out. "People who threaten Trembor have a way of ending up in your stomach."

"It only happened a few times," Marlot said defensively. "And they were going to kill him. Wait, how do you know about that?"

"You hurt one of our own," the fox said, fixing his hard gaze on Marlot. "There is nothing we don't know about you, wolf." He looked at the bear. "Please be careful in my office, it isn't much, but it's the only one I have."

Bahamel entered and Marlot watched her maneuver around a chair, shoulder brushing a bookshelf. She turned, bumped the desk. And gently rested against it.

"You know, there are larger cages downstairs. We could go there."

"Get in and close the door. They listen in on everything going on there."

"I don't think I can fit in here," Marlot said, stepping in and making a show of staying against the wall as he closed the door.

"Funny, Wolf. This isn't any smaller than my office."

"You are clearly spacially challenged. This is half the space of your already tiny office. Is that a thing among enforcers, see in how tiny of a room they can squeeze the people running the departments?"

"Are you done doing everything you can to not hear what I have to say?"

"I have nothing against what you have to say."

"Good, Trembor is being accused of tampering with evidence in the case of Bolifen Goldenmane who was being investigated for the killing of an underage body found in his house."

"Stop it right there, I don't know his brother that well, but under age predation? No, I don't see him doing it, he has to cubs of his own."

"The evidence was compelling, blood on the cub's claws matching Bolifen's, finding the body in his house. There was more."

"You said was compelling."

She nodded. "That hunter you brought in, he confessed to killing the cub, told us where, how and how he made it look like Bolifen did it."

"Why?" Marlot asked, to himself more than her. It made no sense, Bo had nothing to do with him and Trembor.

"That he wouldn't say, but what he told the enforcer panned out. Bolifen's being processed out of the system right now. It's all paperwork at this point. He's going to be back here only long enough to sign the discharge and he will never have to think about this incident again."

"Then why is Trembor in here? If Bo wasn't actually guilty, what Trem did doesn't matter."

Bahamel sighed. "That's not how things work. He committed a crime, one that could cost him his license if he's found guilty."

“It just doesn’t make sense. The investigation he would have tampered with is being wiped away, but his guilt over something that no longer even exist remains?”

“The investigation isn’t being wiped away, Wolf and you know that.”

“So that’s what the city Prosecutor’s here for? Take away his license?”

“Oh, she’s here for a whole lot more. RI uses personal position to protect brother from repercussion of his crimes. I won’t be surprise if she doesn’t come up with a way to make this look like it’s indicative of corruption within all the enforcers. And that it’s Leader Sharphorns’ fault. If she manages that, your lion will be looking at a long time in one of the cage complex.”

“That can’t be legal.”

“What’s legal and what happens don’t always match up.”

“There’s not way Trem’s father will allow it to happen. And if it does? I’m going to start eating each and everyone of them.”

“You’re going to give yourself indigestion before you’ve gone through two of them. Marlot, your wolf has a good lawyer, he isn’t going to let her have things her way. It won’t be quick, but I don’t think he’ll suffer more than the loss of his license.”

“Being an RI is his life, take away his license and you might as well eat him yourself.” He took his buzzing pad out.

“Lion isn’t really my thing.”

Marlot cursed. “I have a body.” He asked close to the scene being fully marked out they were. “Do you think I can get in there before I need to go?” the response came back. “They’re ready for me now.” He cursed again. “You make sure Trem knows I was here and that the only reason I am no longer is because I know he’d be pissed if I let my duty slide on his account, got that?”

She smiled. “I’ll make sure he knows.”

Marlot stormed out of the office then out of the precinct, and as an echo of his mood, frigid wind buffeted him all the way to his car. The sky were gray, and as he looked up, flurries began falling.

He pulled his jacket tighter. The weather was turning cold early this year, his winter coat wasn’t fully gown in. It would make for an interesting few weeks if this was more than a temporary dip.

Trembor respected lawyers. They had an important job to do, protect the innocent. His father told him multiple stories where a man like Barany, sitting next to him, going over papers he took from his briefcase, was all that stood between an innocent man being caged or going free. The judicial system could be brutal at times, caring more about clearing the boards and see full justice done.

“So our strategy will be to lean on the unreliability of their hackers who provided their “evidence”. You and one of them, a miss Jasber Braid, have a history from when you were an enforcer, so it isn’t much of a stretch to establish this was about paying you back for those times. If we can find some connection between her, or her associate, and the criminal group the evidence pointed to, that will reinforce our case, but at this stage,

all we need to establish is that their case against you isn't as solid as they'd like us to believe."

"Only it is," Trembor grumbled. "I already told you, they're right, I did—"

"I'm going to stop you right there." The armadillo glanced at the camera. It was on, to ensure nothing dangerous happened to either one of them, but by law, they couldn't record what was happening while he was with his lawyer. "What I know, what actually happened, isn't what this is about. It's about what they can prove. Right now, they say they can tie you to everything. Fortunately for you, I got here before you were questioned. If you had confessed to everything, then, yes, this would be easy for them; but that is not your job. You aren't an enforcer at the moment, you are a suspect."

Trembor grumbled something intelligible even to himself. That was the aspect of lawyers he hated. They'd defend the guilty with as much vigor as the innocent. How many criminals had gone free because an over-eager lawyer had uncovered a procedural mistake a rookie enforcer had committed?

And now he was the criminal with the over-eager lawyer looking for any mistake, when all Trembor wanted to do was explain why he'd done it. He didn't mind paying for what he did. He'd broken the law, he had good reasons, but he wasn't looking to get out of it.

"How did you get here so fast, anyway?"

"Your father called me. he mentored me when I was making my way through the pit that's evidence processing, so he knows I'm good at taking apart when they plan on using."

And how had Torim known? Marlot was the only possibility, and it would make sense he would call for help. Trembor was mildly surprised his wolf hadn't stormed the precinct demanding he be freed.

Another thing that surprised him was how quickly the enforcers had found Jasber. She was good, had been good when he'd been an enforcer, and had only improved over the years. It was why he'd gone to her when he couldn't see any other way to free Bo.

"I don't need you doing all this," Trembor said, and was glared at.

"Mister Goldenmane—"

"Trembor, I'm younger than you."

The armadillo sighed. "Mister Goldenmane, the simple fact you want to admit culpability demonstrate you need me."

"But—"

"There is no but, Mister Goldenmane."

"You sound like my dad," Trembor grumbled, "When he keeps using my name, he's not happy."

"Good, then maybe you'll listen to me as if I was him. I know that if he was still practicing, he would be sitting in this chair instead of me."

Trembor groaned at that image. Torim Goldenmane, verbally tearing apart whoever would sit opposite them, refusing to listen to reason because Trembor would never, under any circumstances, break the law.

His father was going to be so disappointed with him when Trembor told him he had done it.

“Look Trembor. Just let me do the talking.” The armadillo’s soothing tone made Trembor suspicious, but before he could voice it, the door opened and a hippopotamus in a very expensive suit stepped in.

Barany was on his feet so fast Trembor was surprised, and the look on his lawyer’s face, as Trembor followed suit, told him he wasn’t happy about the reflex, which told Trembor this female was important.

“Sit down,” She said, in an annoyed tone.

“Ma’am,” Barany said, seating himself. “Why are you here?”

Now that he wasn’t catching up to the situation, Trembor recognized her. He didn’t know her name, but anytime the city prosecuted someone important, she was the one doing it. There was no way Trembor warranted that level of involvement.

She smiled. “A well respected RI uses his connections to shield his family from the repercussion of their crimes.”

“I—” Trembor began, for a raised hand from his lawyer silenced him. He hadn’t protected anyone from repercussions, his brother had been framed.

She smiled at his near outburst. “Did you think we’d send some subordinate to handle this? No, I’ve been telling that old Dullhorns for years we needed to clean up the enforcers, and I finally have the case I need to show our too old in the tooth city leader that this city needs a firmer hand at the control.”

Barany settled his papers. “Very well, although I’m not sure what has you so confident.”

She looked at the papers in disdain as she pulled her pad for her jacket and read from it. “Evidence tampering, hiring hackers to plant evidence, paying said hackers—”

“I’ll stop you right there, Ma’am, there is no evidence such transactions took place.”

“I have the transcript of the interrogation of the criminal in question.”

“As do I,” Barany move a few pages to the top, “and all I read here are claimed unsubstantiated by any evidence.”

“It’s only been a few days, but you know as well as I do, that we will find the money trail, we always do. It doesn’t matter if they rely on old hard currency, the trail is there. We’re going to link your client to the withdrawals he did at the few remaining places dealing in hard currencies, and they’ll total the amounts that he paid the criminals.”

“I know no such thing,” the armadillo said, “because my client didn’t do the think the criminal in question claims. If you read the file in its entirety, you know Miss Jasber Braid was arrested multiple times by my client while he was an enforcer. His interference in her criminal enterprises impacted her productivity rating, put her life at risk. It’s entirely reasonable to suspect she would hold a grudge.”

“So what? You expect to convince a judge she acted to protect Bolifen Goldenmane, your client’s brother, just so she could frame your client? I thought you

were a lawyer, not some fiction writer.”

“I don’t have to speak to Miss Braid’s motivation,” Barany answered calmly. “All I have to do is show that the evidence against my client isn’t as damning as you want him to think. And that, Prosecutor Flattooth, I can do rather easily.”

“So that is how you want to handle this? I came here to help your client resolve this quickly without the publicity a trial will bring. To give him a chance to shield his family from the blood that’s splash over the good Goldenmane name.”

“Don’t you—” Trembor was on his feet, ready to lay into the female, but Barany pulled him back down in his chair. The lawyer was stronger than he looked. Trembor noticed the disappointment on the hippopotamus face and realized she’d almost goaded him into doing something that would see him caged regardless of the lawsuit.

“That was uncalled for, Prosecutor,” Barany said sharply.

“All I did was point out the reality of a trial. I advise you to reconsider, Mister Goldenmane.”

Barany glared at Trembor as he opened his mouth, and he closed it like a chided cub. He just wanted to get this over with. Settle his affairs and move on.

He was guilty.

The silence stretched until she sighed. “Very well, have it your way. Your client’s bail has been set; he’ll remain caged until the trial. As I expect the precinct will have better use of theirs than holding him, I’ve started the arrangements to have him transferred to the DownStream complex.”

“That’s unreasonable!”

Trembor stared. DownStream was for criminals deemed too dangerous. Hunters who were caught instead of killed during the chase ended up there.

“It’s the only complex able to take your client on short noticed,” She answered smugly. “I’m sure it will only be for a few days, until one more suited to him can make arrangements.” She fixed her gaze on Trembor. “There is still time to resolve this quickly, Mister Goldenmane.”

“No deal,” Trembor said before Barany stopped him. He wasn’t going to be bullied by her, not by someone willing to be as dirty as the criminals she was supposed to be putting in cages.

Barany’s surprised morphed into satisfaction, then concern.

“Very well,” she said, standing. “Enjoy your stay at DownStream. I’m told it’s very exciting there for anyone with connections to the enforcers.” She left the room.

Instead of talking to him, Barany hurried out of the room too, taking his pad out and leaving the papers on the table. A cheetah in enforcer uniform looked in.

“I take it the interviews over?”

Trembor shrugged.

“Come on, Trem, you don’t need to stay in here if they’re going to leave you unsupervised.”

“Isn’t that your job, Spotter?”

The cheetah smiled. “Yeah, but it doesn’t mean I have to do it here, right? And the

more of us watch over you, the less chances you'll run, right?"

More preferential treatment. That one he could only blame on himself. He'd gotten to know just about everyone in his time at the academy, and he kept in touch, stayed friends, and made more friends through them. He wondered he there was even one enforcer in the precinct who didn't know him at least indirectly.

He looked at the papers his lawyer left, the transcript of Jasber's interrogation. He probably shouldn't have access to it. He shouldn't have any of the niceties offered to him. He was a criminal.

"Just take me to the cage."

"Trem."

"I don't feel like being among people right now, Spotter. I just want to be alone."

The cheetah nodded. "Alright, come on then." Trembor offered his hand to be cuffed, and the cheetah rolled his eyes. "Don't be an idiot."

And Trembor crossed the precinct more like one of them than the criminal he was, and felt dirtier for it.

Marlot showed his ID to the enforcer, and then reluctantly left the crowd of warm bodies to walk onto the construction zone.

"RI Blackclaw," he told the zebra standing a few feet away from the body, which was on its stomach, with snow starting to obscure it, "what can you tell me?"

"It's too fucking cold."

Marlot chuckled. The temperature had continued dropping, and flurries had turned into light snow. Even he'd have to dig out a heavier jacket if this kept out.

"How about this body?"

"Wolf, it's been there at least eight hours, that's when security did a round of the site."

Marlot looked around. No fencing to keep anyone out. The building looked to be retail, halfway constructed. In this weather it was perfect for vagrants to take shelter in.

"It was found by that guy, and called in." The zebra pointed to an emaciated mink dressed in rags and little else. If the zebra was cold, that guy had to be frozen from ear to tail.

"Is anyone getting him something warm?"

"No one has anything warm," the zebra complained. "It wasn't supposed to get this cold today."

"He's a witness, I don't want him to die of exposure, go get him a few blankets from your car." Marlot smiled. "Maybe keep one for yourself." He headed for the mink. "RI Blackclaw." He showed his ID again. "You are?"

"Galden," the mink stammered.

"What can you tell me about the body?"

"I called it in." His teeth chattered hard enough to make the words hard to understand. "I could have kept it, but I called it in. So it's mine, right?"

“It is. As soon as I close the case, you’ll be able to eat it.”

“How long’s that going to take?” Galden hugged himself tighter, not that it did anything to stop his shivering. “Haven’t eaten anything in days.”

Marlot didn’t want to consider what the mink had eaten last. “I don’t know. Depends on what you can tell me, how hard the killer is hiding. It’ll be a few days at least. Could be a week.” He motioned to the returning zebra.

“Can I take a bite out of it now?” The mink pleaded. “Nowhere that you need, I just need to eat something, anything. I’ll take a foot.” The mink stiffened at the approaching enforcer.

“I can’t let you do that. The body has to remain in its current condition until my examiner has determined the cause of death, and after that, it’s staying frozen until the investigation is over.”

“I’m not going to last that long,” he whined, moving away as the zebra handed him the stack of blankets.

“First thing you need to do is not freeze to death. You won’t be able to enjoy the meat if you’re dead too.” Marlot took a blanket and draped it over the mink’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, you can keep them.” The mink seemed to shiver even harder under the three blankets. “Why aren’t you at a shelter?”

“All full. I was going to stay here, out of the wind and snow.” He indicated the half-finished building. “I saw the wolf lying on the ground and thought I’d finally have a real meal. But I thought about his family. So I called you. Now I’m not going to get to eat at all.”

Marlot looked in the body’s direction, taking out the old paper pad and pen from a pocket. “Do you know the Spottedspine processing store?” It looked to be healthy, too healthy for a vagrant. He wrote a note for Ezk’Eriel. The mink shrugged noncommittally.

Marlot handed him the note. “Go there and hand this to Ezk’Eriel. He knows me and he’ll give you a week’s worth of meat. If you don’t have a place to store it, I’m sure he’ll be fine with you coming every day for part of it. I’ll bring the body over once I’m done with it, I’ll take the body there and you can arrange the rest of it.”

After a hesitation, the mink snatched the paper from Marlot’s hand. “What if it takes more than that?”

He looked the body over again. It wasn’t big, but there should be two week’s worth of meat on it. “Have Ezk’Eriel call me if that happens and I’ll see what I can arrange with him. How can I contact you if I have more questions?”

The mink shrugged. Right, vagrants and pads weren’t a thing.

“I’ll leave a message with Ezk’Eriel then. You can pad me back.”

The mink nodded and Marlot went to the body. He took his pad out and brushed the snow off the head. “The body is a wolf, brindled fur, preliminary cause of death is a broken neck. The head is twisted at something close to a hundred-twenty degree. The examiner will need to confirm. Didn’t do a smell test. The temperature dropped below freezing and makes that useless, but the body is less than eight hours old as of this recording based on witness testimony taken by the enforcers. Testimony to be appended.

Beginning pat-down for ID.”

He paused the recording and searched the body, brushing the snow off as he went. “No wallet, so ID found, so it’s possible the killer’s just slow in paying the tax.” Although with leaving the body in the open, it was doubtful. “No possession on him at all. Could be a robbery that escalated. Clothing is worn but in good condition.” He couldn’t pry the muzzle open but felt the teeth. “Dentition feels intact, so an ID should be possible that way if he isn’t in the DNA registry.”

The clacking of metal made him look up. A bundle of black with only spots of red poking through the clothing approached, pulling a gurney.

“Did you somehow know the weather was going to turn?” Marlot called to the frog.

“Does of us cold-blooded people never take for granted the weather will be warm. My heated outdoor suit is always maintained and on hand. You have no idea how easy you furred people have it.”

The zebra snorted. “Not all of us with fur have enough of it matter. If my grandpa was still alive I’d kill him for moving the family this far north.”

Jaxca eyes the enforcer. “Get back to me after you missed two day’s work because you set out to do work in the garden and the temperature dropped.”

“Your wife left you outside?” Marlot asked, taking the gurney from the frog.

“She was away at a conference. Found me on coming back.” He crouched next to the body. “How old?” He pressed the sides.

“No more than eight hours.”

“The temperature dropped before freezing four hours ago and he feels about four hours hard. He was here before that. That looks like a broken neck.”

“No possessions, so this might be a robbery.”

“You’re looking at someone strong to do that. Especially if I don’t find defensive marks. Predators don’t usually go down without inflicting damage.” Jaxca looked at the hands. “No visible blood. Help me on the gurney, he’s not going to get easier to move if we wait any longer.”

Once Jaxca let with the body, Marlot looked the area over. He checked the ground. The sand offered resistance to his fingers but broke under his feet. “Does anyone have an air blower?” he asked the zebra.

“That isn’t standard equipment.”

“Get me one, there’s a chance the cold preserved the footprints.”

The zebra grumbled something about it not being an enforcer’s job, which made Marlot smile. An enforcer’s job was whatever the Registered Investigator said it was when a body was involved.

“Think about it this way. It’s going to be warm inside a store.”

The mouse escorted Trembor through the precinct, where the officers they passed offer him their support and well wishes. He took them in the spirit they were meant. To

them, he was a friend in a bit of trouble. As those who'd visited him during his few hours in the cage expressed, they knew he hadn't done what he was accused of. It was all some frame job, or a mistake and they'd have it cleared up in no time.

The doors to the lobby opened, and almost before Trembor stepped through, the lioness had her arms around him. "Trem, I am so happy you're out of there."

"I'm fine mom." He hugged her back. "It's just a cage, nothing dangerous. The only others in it were drunks, and they were sleeping it off."

His father waited for his turn. Then it was Cerek, Baytil, and Vexori. Once his siblings had their turns, Dayra extended her arms to be picked up.

"Was it bad?" she asked, looking at his face, pulling his lips up to study his teeth.

"No, it wasn't," He answered. "You guys didn't have to come."

"Did you think we'd leave you alone?" Torim asked. "How was Barany?"

"He was fine." More hoped. Now they'd get their hopes up.

"Did you brush?" Dayra asked, either not noticing, or not caring about the tension.

"I did." He handed her back to her mother. He didn't want to risk bring brusque with her, and his patience was thin right now. "I hope you don't mind, but I just want to go home, eat and—"

"Nonsense," Torim said. "You're coming with us. We'll make sure you can rest after this."

"No, dad. I'm going to my home."

"Trem." His mother took his hand. "You shouldn't be alone. This is something you get through with your family."

There was nothing to get through. He wanted to tell them, to yell, but Dayra was here so he kept his thought to himself. "Mom, I just want to be alone." And get ready for Marlot's visit. The message that had been waiting on his pad when it was returned to him warmed his heart. Not that he was telling his parents that. After the ranting he'd done, Serene would show up to protect him from Marlot. Of his parents, she'd taken their breakup the worse.

"Trem, you—"

"I'll drive him," Cerek said, cutting her protest. "I know you mean well, but he probably just needs to process what happened."

She studied Trembor. "Alright, but you pad us with anything you need. We'll help you beat this."

"Sure mom."

Torim stayed silent. But he knew his father well enough. In a few hours, or tomorrow, he'd get a visit or a call, and Trembor would have to either tell his father the truth or lay down careful scents to appease him.

They stepped outside, and the cold seeped through Trembor's light jacket. Fortunately, Cerek had left his car running, so it was warm when he sat in it.

"You okay?" Cerek asked once they were moving.

Trembor glared at his brother, who ignored it. "I'm fine. At least they didn't bring

the whole family.”

Cerek chuckled. “Not a lot of us have jobs that let us take a few hours off.”

“How are Herelex and Isenson?” since he’d have no choice but talk, Trembor wasn’t to control the conversation.

“They’re fine. Bo’s home. He won’t talk, but Vex dropped of meat this morning and said other than being lackluster, he looked okay. What happened? Don’t give me that look. I’m not Dad. I’m not cross-examining you. I just want to know how Bo gets kidnapped, not to mention accused of underage predation.”

Trembor sighed. “How much did you hear about the hunter Marl caught?”

Cerek smiled. “Back to Marl, are we? And I heard what the newsies have been saying for the last few days. Lots of death, Marl’s a hero, you know how they are.”

“What they don’t know is that it was more personal. The hunter targeted Marl. Forced him to hunt him. Wanted Marl to kill him. For some reason, he decided that one way to make that happen was to frame Bo for the killing of a cub. That’s been cleared up.”

“And frame you too?”

“When that wasn’t enough,” he continued, ignoring the uncomfortable question, “he kidnapped Bo, I went after him so did Marl. We caught him, and Marl made sure to leave us out of it.”

“And you two patched things up over capturing a hunter.” His brother grinned. “Pretty romantic.”

“I guess so.” Trembor smile died as he thought about the crimes he’d committed. He’d barely hesitated. Even now he didn’t care that he’d broken the law. It was everyone coming to his defense that was getting on his nerve.

Cerek stopped the car by the curb in front of Trembor’s house. The yard was covered in at least an inch of snow. If it kept going, he’d have to take out the shovel.

“Are you sure you want to be alone? I get not wanted to be at Dad’s, but Palinox would love to have his favorite uncle staying with us for a few days.”

Trembor looked at his pad. At Marlot’s message. The thought of declining popped up. Maybe this wasn’t the right time for them to be together. Maybe the best thing was to wait until he paid for his crimes. Only he’d been away from his wolf too long, he wanted to bury his muzzle into the fur. Breath in his scent. “I’m not going to be alone.”

Cerek peeked at the pad. “So it’s not just being back to calling him Marl, you two are spending the night together?”

“I don’t know about the night.” Did he want a night with him? Without hesitation, but was that what they needed? “Things happened. I understand some of why he acted the way he did. He knows about Gorrek.”

Cerek cursed. “How?”

Trembor shook his head. He wasn’t ready to address that yet. “So we need to talk.” And touch. He needed to run his fingers through his wolf’s fur.

Cerek sniffed the air.

“I better go.”

His brother chuckled.

Trembor hurried inside, to get out of the frigid weather, away from his brother and the knowing look he gave him. Sex was not on the table. Not tonight. The door closed, he leaned against it and let the silence soak in. His first moments of it in almost a full day. The precinct was not a quiet place.

His breath continuing to fog reminded him the house wouldn't warm until he switched the heat on, and since he wanted it to be comfortable for Marlot's arrival, he did that, then took a long shower.

Going to be late, Marlot sent, *the traffic is horrible*. He put the pad back on the dash and looked at the stopped car ahead of him. The snow had stopped, but it hadn't helped the traffic. The accidents had already happened. The roads were already jammed. He took the pad and looked for an alternate route. The entire city was gridlocked.

He looked at the pedestrians. They'd probably get where they were going before he did.

Twenty minutes later, he finally drove by the accident. Fender bender, no serious injuries, just blocking the only lane so they had to drive into oncoming traffic when there was space. Half an hour later, he parked in front of Trembor's house. The path to the porch was cleared. Across the road cubs were throwing snowballs at each other. Parents were clearing their driveway.

Trembor hadn't done that yet. He hadn't had to. His car was still in the garage, the enforcers had taken him away. Them, or more probably, Trembor's family had driven him back. Marlot shuddered at the memory of calling Ufen to have them send someone to look after Bo's cubs so Marlot could follow the enforcers. He and the lion had gotten along as they were both outsiders to the family. He was mated to one of Trembor's sister, but he'd still been curt to the point of almost hanging up when Marlot identified himself. No one in Trembor's family liked him right now for what he'd put him through.

He stepped up to the door and knocked, tightening his jacket. The end of the snow hadn't brought warming temperatures. The door opened and heat blew around him, carrying the scent of his lion.

"Hi," Trembor said.

Marlot smiled. How long had it been since he'd seen his lion? "Hi." Far too long. "How have you been?" Trembor tilted an ear and Marlot's own burned. "Stupid question. Sorry. I missed you so much. I wanted to be here sooner, but there's a bunch of accidents due to the snow."

"I might have noticed the snow," Trembor said, chuckling.

"I'm being an idiot, aren't I?"

"It's endearing." The lion pulled Marlot in his arms and inside the house. "I missed you too."

Marlot buried his muzzle in the lion's mane and breathed in. The fur soap had washed away most of Trembor's scent, but he was still there, under the chemical ones. His lion. His mate. He tightened his hold on him. He'd chased him away, almost lost him

completely. He wasn't going to do anything like that again. Whatever it took, he was going to keep his lion, make him happy. Never lose him again.

"Are you hungry?" Trembor whispered, mouth to his ear.

"Are you on the menu?" Marlot whispered back.

Trembor chuckled. "How about we see how the evening goes first?" He looked him in the eyes and smiled. Before Marlot could react, the lion had his mouth on his.

Marlot melted into him. Parting his muzzle at the first pressure of the tongue, letting the lion in, tightening his grip on him. Too quickly it was gone, and Marlot was panting, opening his eyes to look at his lion's smile.

"I'll warm us some meat," Trembor said, stepping deeper into the house without letting go of Marlot. "I can even manage not to add anything to it, if you prefer."

Marlot chuckled. "I'll eat anything you prepare, even if it's just a body you drop on a tarp on the floor."

"It's definitely too early for that one. Or rather, what tends to happen afterward."

Marlot's ears warmed at the memories of their showers, where they did much more than clean the blood off each other. Trembor sat Marlot at the table and (need to check if Trembor has a prep table) took meat from the cooler.

"How did the interview go?" Marlot asked. "I saw the city prosecutor was there."

Trembor shook his head as he placed the meat in the warmer. "Let's not talk about that. I just want this evening to be about us, not my legal problems."

"It is about—" Marlot closed his muzzle and took a breath. Even with having gone to his counselor yet, he knew he had to stop wanting to know everything about what Trembor was up to. They'd get back to that point in their relationship, but it had to happen organically. "How's Herelex?"

"Glad to have his father back home. You mentioned something about seeing a counselor, yesterday, before..." Trembor trailed off.

Before the enforcers dragged you away from me, Marlot thought. How are we supposed to talk about us and not address what's going on right now?

"I haven't seen her yet. My first appointment is in a few days. Should be fun." He didn't look forward to it, but anything to keep his lion. "Who drove you home? The enforcers?"

"Cerek. Mom and dad were there, as was Bay and Dayra, and well as Vex."

"Which one is Vex?"

Trembor chuckled. "Vexori, one of my brothers by Lyria."

"Right." He had no idea which of the brothers that one was, although he remembered Lyria. Nice female, quiet strength. Marlot had felt she was the more understanding of Trembor's mothers, but then, Arima was protective as he was her biological son, and Serene was just plain scary.

"Don't worry, I reintroduce you to him at the next dinner."

"If I'm not the one cut up in pieces on the table."

"They won't do that." Trembor took the meat from the warmer and placed them on the table. He took a bottle of blood from the fridge. "You want yours cut?"

“No, thanks.”

The lion filled one, then added alcohol to the other.

“When did you start cutting yours?”

Trembor shrugged, placing the glasses on the table. “It’s been a stressful few months.”

Marlot bit his lips to keep from replying. He’d been the trigger for most of it, after all. He’d keep an eye on it, make sure his lion didn’t overdo it. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to drive you. Had a body.”

“How did that go?”

“Looks like a robbery gone wrong. A vagrant found it, reported it instead of making off with it. Jaxca has it. He should have the preliminary tomorrow. The cold did help. The top ground layer hardened enough I was able to get the snow blown off, so I have some tracks, it’s a construction zone, so how useful they are, is questionable. We can go question the site workers tomorrow.”

“I can’t,” Trembor replied. “My license is suspended.”

“That’s bullshit,” Marlot grumbled. “Your brother didn’t do anything, so what you did doesn’t matter.”

“I broke the—” Trembor closed his mouth, forced a smile. “How’s Hela’han? Is the ‘friend’ still coming over, or do you scare him too much?”

“He comes when I’m not there, but I smell him.” Marlot let Trembor change the subject. “His intentions toward her haven’t changed, but she smells like she wants the same thing, so I’m not going to get in the way.” He realized he’d eaten half his plate. “This is good. What is it, elk?”

“Warthog.”

Marlot tilted an ear. “That’s not what you usually hunt.”

“Kill of opportunity. He got in the way of my planned kill.”

Marlot was surprised. Prey tended to protect who they knew— were close to— and Trembor didn’t normally hunt prey as aggressive as warthogs. He wondered who he’d planned on killing that had a warthog as a friend willing to risk their lives to save them.

“How’s the office? Did you downsize?”

“No, things were getting tight, but with capturing Nikal, the city gave me a bonus. It’s going to tide me over until you come back.”

The lion didn’t say anything.

Marlot wanted to demand why Trembor took this lawsuit so seriously. In a few days it would blow over, they’d slap a fine on him and that’d be it. He didn’t care what Bahamel said, Trembor hadn’t done anything bad. It wasn’t like he’d let a hunter run around the city free to kill for weeks after realizing he was there. Between the two of them, Marlot was the one who deserved to have his license taken away.

He almost told the lion he’d take the blame. With his computer skills, he could transition to another field. Go into security like Afirna, although he probably wouldn’t deal with her restriction since he’d never been caught hacking government databases. He

could continue working on his tracking program.

He could smell the worry wafting off Trembor.

He could make all his problems go away, but that would be him dictating what happened. He'd be doing what Gorrek had done.

"Is Gorrek too sensitive of a subject?"

Trembor chuckled. "It's not like he can show up out of nowhere anymore. That was always my biggest fear."

"I didn't think you went for the aggressive type."

"I was young, at that age it's flattering to have someone come after you that hard. By the time he had me, that I realized what I'd gotten myself into, I didn't know how to get out. Half the time I didn't think I wanted to get out. I'd agreed to be his. So obviously I had to want to be treated that way. He was always very good at making me think the whole situation was my idea."

"And I blamed you for making me hack your pad."

"It's okay, Marl, I understand where you were. Why you lost it."

"It doesn't make it right."

"Are you going to do it again?"

"Absolutely not."

Trembor smiled. "Then we're good."

Only Marlot didn't think they were. Where had Trembor been mentally that he'd been willing to break the law? Had Nikal engineered the situation to force Trembor there? He suspected the hare would tell him, if he could only ask him.

"Trem, this lawsuit, why is it worrying you?"

"Because I broke the law."

"But it was nothing, they're going to see it and toss it out."

"That isn't the point Marl, you know it. It always starts that way, one little thing, you excuse it and then another opportunity occurs and why not? You got away with it last time. Only this time it's a little bigger. Then there's a third and before you know you're just like—" Trembor snapped his mouth close as he looked at Marlot, his ears turning red before folding back.

"Me," Marlot said coolly. He shouldn't hurt. Trembor had discussed Marlot's flexible morals often enough when they worked. How easily he could work with criminals, pay them, to get information. A lot of enforcers did the same, but not Trembor. He'd considered that a line a law-abiding citizen shouldn't cross. He'd never said he saw Marlot as a criminal himself, until now.

"I didn't mean it that way," The lion whispered.

"Then tell me how else you meant it."

Trembor attempted, but failed, to say anything, and it was answer enough for Marlot.

He stood. "I need to go."

"Marl, don't—"

"You just—" He closed his muzzle on the shout, tried to get his emotions under

control. Telling himself his lion hadn't meant it didn't help. He was afraid he'd something Gorrek would if he stayed, and that was one person he didn't want to be compared to anymore. "I have to go." He stated as calmly as he could and left before Trembor could voice another protest.

He shouldn't have said that, Trembor thought as the echo of the slamming door died, Marlot had just tried to understand. Trembor couldn't be the only person who thought crimes should be punished, regardless of the reason they were committed, Having good intentions did not protect someone, him, from the repercussions of his acts. He let out a sigh.

All he'd wanted was a quiet evening with his wolf. Forget the last months. Forget about everything but Marlot.

He took the plates and considered throwing the rest of the meat away; his appetite was gone. But it was meat. He put them in the cooler. He'd have them for breakfast.

He leaned against the counter and considered what to do next. With the evening not happening as planned, he was left with a void that he should fill with...something.

His scratching post was visible; with all the wear. Not yet at the point Trembor needed to replace it, but it was a reminder the house could use some seeing to.

He remained there.

He should vacuum, his office needed general tidying. He had laundry to do. If he began with that, he could see to the rest while it happened. He needed to pull his winter clothing out of storage. Unlike Marlot, he wouldn't get much of a winter coat naturally. He should start with that since he'd have to put it through the laundry too.

He noticed the glasses and washed those.

He wiped the table, the counter. Forced himself out of the kitchen and stood in the living room, looking it over. If he cleaned his winter set right now, he could go get meat. Use the first snow as it distracted people. It would get him outside. Somehow it felt like he'd been stuck inside for days now.

He headed for his office, and somehow ended in the bedroom, sitting on the bed. Maybe the best thing was for him to turn in early, he'd have all day tomorrow to deal with chores. Without his license, he had no reason to leave the house.

That was the best course. Sleep off the mood he was in. But first, he needed to apologize to Marlot for what he'd said.

I'm sorry, he typed. *I didn't mean to include you*. He looked at the words. Erased them.

I love you. He sent.

The charge was getting low. He needed to have a charging pad in the bedroom. That would solve the problem. He should move the one from the office. He also had a backlog of messages. Everyone in his family checking in on him. Why hadn't he been notified?

Right. He'd had the family lock on yesterday since it was still work hours when the enforcers showed up. He hadn't thought about that when he was handed back his

things.

He turned it off. He probably wouldn't have to turn it on for a long time. And read through the messages. His siblings were the standard 'how are you doing?' checks. He smiled at his nieces and nephews' messages. Those asking how comfortable the cage was; if he could take pictures of it so they could see. Questions about who else was in a cage.

He'd answer them tomorrow.

His pad buzzed as he set it down. Bo was calling him.

He sighed. Did he want to talk to his brother?

"Hi, Bo."

"Hi, Trembor." Silence stretched.

"Bo, you're the one who called me."

"Sorry. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"No. I'm just..." he looked around the bedroom. "Just resting."

"Okay." Another silence. "I was wondering if we can meet tomorrow, for lunch or something. To talk."

"Let me check something." He'd seen a message from Barany and he'd said something about tomorrow. Also, why did Bo want to talk? Trembor supposed he might finally be ready to come clean and ask for help. The meeting was for the afternoon, going over their position, how they were going to establish doubt against the prosecution's evidence. "Lunch is good."

He so didn't want to be part of this lawsuit.

"Okay, good. I'll message you the address. Don't worry, I'll pay for the meal."

"I'm not destitute yet, Bo." Trembor did his best to lower his hackles. "I can pay for my own meal."

"Right, of course. I'm sorry. I'm just.... I'll see you tomorrow."

Trembor looked at the pad once the call disconnected. Seemed a lot of people were in odd places today.

"I can confirm the body died of a broken neck," Jaxca said, "the twist sheered the vertebrae apart and severed the spinal cord. He was as good as dead before the killer let go of him."

Marlot looked at the pictures on his screen. "So I'm looking at someone strong. Was there any blood under the claws? Fur, or skin to help narrow down who killed him?"

"No, as far as I can tell he didn't have the time to put up any resistance."

Marlot frowned. "That's unusual. Even prey defend themselves once you corner them. Anything in the blood to explain why he let it happen?"

"No, came back normal, he was fighting a cold, but it's that time of the year. He ate a few hours before dying, but the contents were what I'd expect with a predator, meat, some greens, nothing fancy."

"Any other injuries that would justify not putting up more of a fight?"

“Nothing that happened close to when he died. He got roughed up a week ago, give or take. Healing bruises, cuts, but it’s all superficial. It might have impeded running away from his killer was in better health, younger. But it wouldn’t have kept him from defending himself. Maybe he wanted to die?”

“And leave someone hanging for his tax? Why not pick someone who’d take his body and eat him?”

“I can’t help you there. I did run his DNA, which came back negative. So I made a cast of his dentition. Negative on that too.”

“Both?” That was unusual. Not every predator was in the DNA database, since the government hadn’t made it mandatory yet. They’d used the “don’t you want to be sure your family will know you have passed?” slogan, and last he’d heard, ninety-five percent of prey had registered. But Predators didn’t often think about their death, so it was only close to forty percent who had.

“That just means he didn’t have any dental work done in the last three years.”

“And has he?”

The frog chuckled. “I can tell you he had work done at some point. Repairs, fillings. Again, normal things I’d expect on a predator who hunts. Prey will get in a lucky shot.” He looked at something off-screen. “Or a dozen.”

Marlot found the description Jaxca had written up next to the pictures he’d taken. Head, each extremity, and full body. Wolf. Brindled coloring, height, and weight. Mid to late thirties. The bruises were indicated, as were the cuts, only two sets were visible on the pictures. Larger claws, so more likely a fight with another predator than a prey defending themselves.

“Anything else I need to know?”

“No. On the medical side, everything is as it looks. Someone strong took him by surprise, broke his neck and took his possession.”

“Thanks, Jaxca.”

He disconnected and looked at the message. *I love you*. He’d left it visible because after the way their evening ended, he needed the reminder it hadn’t ruined all their chances.

After a hesitation, he called.

“Hey,” Trembor answered.

“Hi.” Marlot smiled. “How are you?”

“I’m bored. The cubs did their morning questioning, although this time it was all about my few hours in a cage. From their question, they think I had this big adventure while there.”

“Everything was an adventure when we were cubs.” Marlot smile faltered. He didn’t like to think of his lion in a cage.

“How are things with you?”

“My body looks to have let himself be killed. And he’s not in the DNA or the dental database. Since the killer took his ID, I’m going to have to walk around and show his picture.”

“Not going to check the cameras?”

“I will, but the construction site didn’t have any and the whole area has this low tax feel to it so I don’t expect the city cameras will be maintained. I could use the company while I’m walking and talking to people.”

“Marl, I don’t have my license.”

“I’m not asking for you to work. Just be with me. Just us, being together. We don’t even have to talk. We can silently bask in each other’s love.”

Trembor chuckled. “Okay. I’ll message you after lunch. Bo wants to talk.”

“You think it’s about Nikal framing and kidnapping him?”

“That, or his gambling problem. I’m hoping he’s going to finally ask for help dealing with the problem instead of dodging it.”

“Whatever it is, you’re going to help him. I know you.”

Trembor was quiet. “I’ll do my best,” he finally said.

“I’ll let you know where I’m at when you message me.”

“Alright. Good luck in tracking the killer down.”

“Thanks. Good luck with your brother.”

Neither of them disconnected. Marlot listened to his lion breathe. Imagined himself resting against him.

Trembor chuckled. “You do have work to do.”

“I know. He’d be easier to do it with you here.”

“After we’re done asking around. I can come back to the office with you. I should say hi to Hela’han, if nothing else.”

“Okay, see you soon, then.” Marlot ended the call and set to work. If Trembor was going to come back here, he wanted to have as much ready as he could. Trembor might say he wouldn’t work, but they could still bounce ideas.

He started his tracking program and inputted what he had on the body; it was so little Marlot worried it might just die on initiation, but it began working. Marlot was curious what, if anything, it would find, but while it worked, he needed to do his part. He printed the pictures and headed to the neighborhood where it was found.

Hopefully, someone had seen him before he died and Marlot would be able to track his movements back to his home.

The restaurant was nice enough, Trembor thought as he parked in the half-full lot. He tightened the jacket against himself as he hurried to the door, then inside. The tigress behind the podium smiled at him as he relaxed. He couldn’t wait for warm weather to return.

The scents of cooking meat, fragrant sauces and spices wafted over him, and he salivated. “I’m meeting my brother, Bolifen Goldenmane.”

“If you’ll follow me.” She led him to a table near the back, where Bo sat next to a mole. The hostess placed a menu on the table and left. Trembor looked at the other tables, trying to identify the mole’s thugs, but people he saw all seemed to be respectable

middle-upper tax bracket people.

“It’s only the three of us, Mister Goldenmane,” the mole said, “Please take a seat.” Bo looked uncomfortable when Trembor fixed his gaze on him. “It’s customary to sit at an eating establishment.”

Trembor sat and pushed the menu aside. If he ate anything while here, it wouldn’t be on the menu. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am him.”

“No, I know who you represent. I want to know your name.”

She smiled. “Ahhh.” She considered, her minuscule eyes looking ahead without moving. He’d done some research, and moles weren’t blind, but without glasses, she probably couldn’t see him clearly. “Maoma Burrows will do, I think.”

“And if I ask to see your ID, what will that say?”

“Nothing of relevance, as you will not see it. Before you get yourself and the people you care about into trouble, know that while my people are not in the restaurant, they are monitoring the situation. If something happens to me, something will happen to someone in your family. Have I made the situation clear enough?”

“You have,” he growled.

“Good.” She smiled. “Now, after our last discussion, you went and did something rather idiotic. You had a hacker plant information that led enforcers to arrest some of my people. Two of which they ate.”

Trembor watched her. *Her* he didn’t feel the need to admit anything to.

She placed a pad on the table. “Before you begin protesting your innocence, you should listen to this.”

“He paid us to do it!” Jasber Braid’s voice came from the pad, the volume low enough her yelling wouldn’t disturb the others in the restaurant. Behind her, someone was screaming.

“Who?” a man demanded.

She didn’t say anything. The screaming intensified.

“Trembor! His name is Trembor Goldenmane! Please stop it. I made the deal with him. It was me. Stop torturing him!”

Maoma tapped the pad, and it fell silent.

“What happened to them?” Trembor felt sick. He thought Jasber and her friend were in enforcer custody.

“What do you think?” the mole answered. “She confirmed that you had her employee plant information within our communication network for the purpose of shifting the blame for the cub’s death from your brother to us. Despite my assurances we had nothing to do with that.”

“You’re crooks,” Trembor snarled. “I wasn’t going to believe—”

“And yet,” she cut him off, “you now know, we had nothing to do with it, don’t you? A Nikal Swiftfall confessed to doing it, I believe.”

Trembor gritted his teeth.

“Now, you owe me two employees, as well as the time I had to invest in clearing

this little mess you made for me. How do you plan on replaying me?”

Trembor stared. “You can’t be serious. You lose people all the time.”

“And anytime it requires it, those who cause the loss are made to pay, just as in this case. The business I run doesn’t have the luxury of looking to the government for productivity compensation, so I must ensure I receive said compensation directly from the people who created the loss.”

“I am not paying you anything,” Trembor growled. “You brought this on yourself when you ensnared Bo.”

“Your brother brought his situation in on himself. He is repaying a debt he acquired.”

“You expect me to believe you didn’t manipulate him into it?”

“What you believe is irrelevant. And you should focus on your situation instead of your brother’s. Now, I will not have you kill. You are more valuable alive. I will have anyone you know killed for this, as I don’t believe that would lead to a satisfying conclusion for either of us, but be careful of how far you push me, Mister Goldenmane, I may change my mind on this one. You have stated you will not be reimbursing the value of my employees your actions caused to be eaten. This leaves only one course of action.”

Trembor waited for her to continue. When she didn’t he sighed. “Which is?”

She smiled. “For you to work for us until you’ve paid off your debt, of course.”

Trembor snorted. “Good luck with that one. I’m heading for a cage complex.”

“That is easily resolved. Although even if it wasn’t, a male like you would be useful to us even inside such a complex; but no need to worry. You are much more valuable to me as a Registered Investigator.”

“My license has been suspended.”

“Only until the case against you is resolved,” She replied casually.

“You aren’t going to be able to make the evidence the enforcers have against me.”

She shrugged. “You would be surprised what I can do. But no, vanishing evidence would only speak to someone helping you. I don’t need you freed with suspicion over your head. I need you cleared so you can return to work without anyone looking over your actions.”

“You can’t make that happen.” Trembor wished he felt as confident as he sounded. They’d gotten into where ever Jasber had been held. Either gotten her out along with her friend or, and that was more worrisome, had tortured them right there.

She smiled. “If you’re referring to Prosecutor Flattooth, I wouldn’t worry about her.”

“There’s no way she works for you,” Trembor said before he could stop himself. If these criminals had someone like her under their control and she managed to replace City leader Sharporns...

“Wouldn’t that be nice for us,” she said. “But we don’t have to control her, to make sure this case moves in our favor. You agree to replay me this way, and you will go free. Once your debt is paid off, you will be entirely free, this lapse in judgment on your part will never return to bother you again.”

“No,” Trembor snarled. Even if he believed her that eventually they’d let him go, he wasn’t working for criminals.

“Mister—”

He was on his feet, hand on the table, leaning toward her. “I fucking said no. I’d rather die than be pulled into what you do. I am going to be caged for my crimes. I’m going to pay for what I did. I don’t get other people to pull my tail out of my trouble.”

“An admirable sentiment,” she replied, unmoved by his growling. “Utterly misplaced, but admirable. I am a business female. You may disapprove of the services we provide, but they are needed, otherwise, we wouldn’t still be in business. As such, I will do what any good business person does, and give you the time to consider my offer. If you become overly difficult, I can always decide to have you feed my people. I’d endure a loss, which I would have to explain to my superiors, but if it comes to that, I can accept that.” She stood. “But I’d like to think you’d rather continue to live.” She stepped around the table and left.

“Trem,” Bo began.

“Don’t, Bo. Just don’t.” Internally Trembor screamed. He thought getting himself caged was going to be tough when his lawyer was working against him. If criminals now wanted him to be proven innocent, how was he going to make it happen?

Marlot looked at the stores facing the construction site; electronics, clothing, protective clothing, vegetables, books, everyday items. They were small and matched the lower rating of the area. Bars over the window and the door, brickwork in need of repair. People in the alleys huddled in small groups, unmoving. In this weather they might be frozen to death, the enforcer patrols would dispose of the bodies, if the other vagrant didn’t do it first.

For his body to have been found here, he needed a reason to come. He hadn’t worked at the construction site; the company managing it had confirmed that. His clothing fit the area, so shopping was the more likely thing he’d done. The construction site was surrounded by stores, and without a fence, the victim could have been crossing it to go from one to another on the opposite side.

The tracks in the frozen sand hadn’t yielded anything yet. The lab was backlogged, so he needed to do this the old fashion way. He crossed the street when the traffic slowed and entered the electronics store. Everything was a few years out of date and rebuilt.

He showed the picture to the clerk who shook his head. Asked about any security cameras inside the store that looked out and another shake of the head. The clothing and vegetable store had the same result. The clerk at the protective clothing though she remembered him stopping by, but wasn’t certain.

The clerks at the bakeshop across the corner didn’t even look at the picture, too busy serving everyone coming in to get out of the cold. Marlot had a pastry to justify staying a few minutes.

His pad buzzed.

“Trem.” He smiled as he greeted him.

“Marl, I hope you won’t be too disappointed,” the lion said, “but I’m not going to be joining you for the search.”

“That’s fine,” Marlot replied, hiding his disappointment. “Is everything okay?”

There was hesitation in Trembor’s voice. “Yeah, yeah, it’s...” he sighed. “Lunch didn’t go as I’d hoped.”

“Bo’s okay?”

Trembor chuckled dryly. “He’s not the problem. I just need to be alone for a while. I have to see my lawyer in a few hours.”

“Are you sure? I can keep you company. This is just trying to catch a scent in the wind, it can wait.”

“I—Thank you. I just want to rest. You keep looking for the body’s killer.”

“If you’re sure.” Marlot didn’t like the tone in the lion’s voice. He sounded more than tired. “You know you don’t need to do this alone. I am here for you, no matter what.”

“I know.”

“Do you want me to come over tonight?” Marlot asked after too long of a silence.

The answer took just as long. “Can I get back to you on that after I’ve seen my lawyer? I want to Marl, but if that meeting leaves in anything resembling the state I’m in, I’m not going to be good company.”

What did it matter if he was good company or not? Marlot wanted to demand. He needed someone there. Marlot would take Trembor’s company in whatever state he was. He just wanted to be with him.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll wait for your call then.”

“I’m sorry, Marl. I know this comes at the worse possible time for us. I’ll make it up to you.”

“It’s okay, Trem. Life happens. We’ll get through this together.”

“Yeah. You will.” Trembor didn’t sound convinced of it to Marlot’s ears. Or maybe he was just that tired.

“You go rest. I have a bunch of store clerks and owners to question.”

“I love you, Marl.”

“I love you too, Trem.”

The lion ended the call.

Marlot considered ignoring what Trembor had said and driving to see him. His lion needed him. Marlot needed to be there for him, to comfort him, to make up for how he’d treated him. But that would just be him forcing himself on Trembor. Forcing the lion to do what Marlot wanted.

Marlot hated Gorrek. Hated finding out about him. Hated that some of how he interacted with Trembor even resembled how Gorrek had treated him. Hated doubting each and every action he wanted to take to make sure Trembor was fine.

Trembor wanted him to keep working, so that was what he was going to do.

Hopefully, the meeting with the lawyer would put his lion in a better mood and tonight they could give spending time together another try.

He braved the cold. The forecast called for a few days of it before it warmed again. And hurried to the next store, and the one after that, and the one after. Each telling him the same thing. They had no idea who the body was, and that they had no cameras that looked outside. They didn't care about outside, just protecting themselves and their inventory.

He had a different answer at another bakeshop. This one didn't offer the patrons space to eat, they just sold pre-made meals to be taken home. The owner and primary baker knew him as a regular. Hardir Mixcoat. He knew little about him, other than he seemed to have constant bad luck in his hunting, but made enough to be able to supplement what he couldn't hunt with the meals this shop sold.

Marlot hurried to call into the computer at the office and add the name to the tracking program. That would make all the difference. With a name, he could pull the social circle, and from there confirm the body's movements. He continued around the block, but even with providing the name, no one knew anything else. Hardir didn't socialize when he was shopping, he went in, got what he wanted, and left. A clerk at the used clothing store gave Marlot the area where the thought Hardir lived, and he noted it, but didn't head there. His tracking program would give him the exact address.

With the entire block questioned. Marlot checked his pad for any messages. Nothing from Trembor. Ezk'Eriel had messaged him to let him know the mink had come for another meal. Marlot had asked to be kept informed. Galden was in a precarious situation, and while Marlot couldn't pull him out of it, he figured he could check in on him if he didn't come for a meal at any point.

He checked on what work he needed to do on the bodies in his freezer as he headed to his car. He didn't want to sit around waiting for Trembor to call, driving to the closest precinct for an update, even if he already knew the answer, would keep him from rushing to the lion's home.

Trembor looked up from the pad to the garage door. He hadn't wanted to cancel on Marlot, but his wolf would be able to tell something had happened, and he'd want to act. To protect him. He couldn't let Marlot endanger himself that way.

He checked the time. A few hours still until his meeting. He could go track down someone, prepare them, then bring what he wouldn't eat to his buyer once his lawyer left. He chuckled. Or he could make it easy on himself and just prepare his lawyer. That would solve the issue of arguing with him over how his defense should go. But even if he could afford the male, his father would demand an explanation, and Trembor didn't think 'I deserve to be caged' would be acceptable.

He stepped out of the car. He needed to change if he was going to refill his cooler. He'd dressed for lunch with his brother, not to fight.

"Trem, wait up!" Bo called, getting out of his own car.

Trembor's hands clenched. "Go home, Bo. I'm not in the mood."

"Will you calm down?" His brother hurried to join him, and Trembor considered decking him. He hadn't hit one of his brothers since they were cubs and play fighting, but Bo was pushing his luck.

"Calm down, after what you fucking pulled? You said you wanted to talk. I thought you'd finally come to your senses and were going to ask for my help extricating their claws out of you. Instead, you go and pull me in?"

Bo raised his hands placatingly. "It's not like that. You're the one who needs help, so I reached out to people who can do that."

Trembor starred. "I don't need criminals' help. I went to criminals to help you, and not only did that end up with them being tortured, but now I have more of them wanting to buy my freedom."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Do you really want to be caged?"

Trembor gritted his teeth and settled for glaring. Telling Bo yes wouldn't help. Everyone had it in their head he shouldn't have to pay for his crime. His family was a stubborn bunch, they'd just fight harder to make him see 'reason'.

"Look, working for them isn't that bad. It's not like they've asked me to break any laws or anything."

"No, they just got you to arrange a meeting between them and me."

"I asked them, Trem."

Trembor snorted. "Don't kid yourself. What are you going to do when they 'ask' you to introduce them to Harezik?"

"They won't do that."

Trembor shook his head. "I can't believe you're that naïve. Harezik works for the revenue department. Do you have any idea how valuable that would be for your 'friends'? I'm just and RI and they want me."

Bo sighed. "You're being paranoid. When can they have you do?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Bo shook his head.

"If they kill city leader Sharphorns in my territory, he goes in my freezer and he stays there until I find the killer. Doesn't matter how long it takes. Now. Imagine what they could do if they had someone inside the revenue department who could delete an ID, or switch it with someone else's. It's no longer city leader Sharphorns in my freezer. As far as people and the government know, he just vanished. And why only have to pay a fraction of what he's worth."

"They won't do that. Trem, they aren't like that. They're business people."

"They're criminals. And the only thing anyone gets from working with criminals is a lowered rating."

"Oh get off your hill, will you? I'm trying to help you. Maybe if you weren't so fucking stiff you'd see this is a good thing. You're not the only one able to help his family."

"Stiff? You're seriously going to tell me that because I don't want to work with

criminals—”

“You already did, you hypocrite.”

“I did that for you!”

“And I’m doing this for you!”

“No, you idiot,. You’re doing it for them!”

“Of course. Trembor’s the only one who sees things clearly. Age and all that. And he never needs help, that’s why Dad and our Moms had to step in between you and your boyfriend before he killed you.”

Trembor stiffened. “I have never claimed not to need help,” he growled. “When I want help, I ask for it.”

“Sure like you—”

“You don’t fucking know what you’re talking about! I told them I need to get away from Gorrek. I told them I didn’t know how. I broke down like a cub in my Mom’s arms. I had to look Dad in the eyes and admit I’d been wrong! When are you going to do that?”

“Dad’s got nothing to do with this!”

“Oh, get off your fucking hill. He’s got everything to do with this. If you’d swallowed your fucking pride and listened when he told you you were digging yourself in too deep with your gambling—”

“He yelled at me!”

“Because you never fucking listen when we talk!”

“Maybe I would if one of you finally talked reason, instead of always trying to shove your view down my throat! I’m only a year younger than you, how about you all start treating me like an adult?”

“How about you start acting like one?”

“I fucking am! I’m dealing with my situation without any of your help.”

“And you’re fucking dragging me down with you!”

“Fuck you!” Bo turned and headed away. “You want to be caged on that hill of moral fortitude, you fucking go ahead. I’m done trying to help you.”

“I didn’t ask for your help!”

Bo laughed. “Yeah, that’s fucking hypocrisy on your part.” He got in and slam the car door shut.

“You were going to be killed for predation in a cub, you idiot,” Trembor grumbled. “I’m just going to be caged.”

Bo drove away.

Once his brother calmed down Trembor would call him, do his best to get him to see reason. Their situations were nothing alike. At worse, Trembor was looking at a few years in a complex, maybe a work detail, that wasn’t worth getting cozy with criminals. And Bo seemed too eager, too comfortable with the idea of working for criminals. Maybe it was just because the finance world wasn’t as prone to crimes, but Trembor suspected it was more because Bo’s friends hadn’t worked out an angle that satisfied them yet.

He sighed and got into his house. He needed to relax before the lawyer arrived. He'd go hunting after.

The tracking program's response made no sense.

Marlot stared at the 'no result' message. How could providing the body's name return a 'no result'? How could there be no one named Hardir Mixcoat in the revenue database? He considered this had been a visitor — there were far away places who didn't use productivity rating, even now — but someone one had stated he lived nearby. It was possible to visit, and even stay for a few days with an ID card, but to have an apartment required being in the system.

There were plenty of male brindled colored wolves of the height and mass of the body, but the system considered them alive; their ID had been used to pay for something in the last twenty-four hours.

Marlot wondered if this was a case of identity theft. There hadn't been a recorded case in over a decade, since the last database upgrade, but someone could have gotten through the encryptions and security processes. Nothing remained secure. Only, for identity theft to be effective, the body needed to be eaten, or at least hidden; constant investigations made using the ID difficult.

"And his name would be in the system." That more than anything made him think Hardir hadn't used his real name. It wasn't unheard of. Even people who obeyed the law somethings wanted to disappear for a few hours. The shop where Hardir had been seen wasn't one that required ID. None of those in that neighborhood were. At the rating of an area dropped. The business people had to become less selective about who they served. Accepting physical currency was the simplest way to do that. Without the ID, Marlot couldn't find out what kiosk had been used to withdraw the money.

Could there have been an error on the ID? He'd never heard of an error sticking, too many processes were in place to catch them, the simplest one was kiosk asking for the user to confirm their information each time they used a kiosk. Annoying, but effective. He programmed a letter flipping process in the tracker and set it running.

It didn't like it and crashed. He cleaned the process, and it gave him hundreds of meaningless results. He'd set the priority so it would ignore species. He corrected that, and he received three results. A Hadrir, and Ahrdid and a Hardri, all males brindled wolves, none of them in the city.

He considered adding the last name to the letter flipping process, but how many foreign last names were only flipped letters away from a local one? More than what he'd gotten at this point, he expected. It was five minutes to add that code to the program, and he set it running. That would take a while.

While it did that, he entered the revenue database. What could he do that his program didn't? He filtered it to only the resident of the city. Close to ten million people. When he asked for the wolf population, the database asked for more criteria, like a time frame, status, employment. He quickly filled those. Nearly a million wolves in the city. That seemed high, but it wasn't like Marlot had paid attention to any of the census

results. His job had never required that he do this kind of search.

Brindled, brought the result down to just over two hundred thousand. Male, just under a hundred thousand. Starting with H, two thousand six hundred and eight. HA.

Hardir Mixcoat came up, eighth in a list the database told him was seventy-eight names long. Marlot straightened. How had he gotten the name when his program hadn't? He looked through the criteria, the city, brindled wolf, male, status, time frame..... He'd entered fifty-five years, instead of five.

Sighing, he checked the rest of this Hardir Mixcoat's details and found what he expected. His tax was paid six years ago. He snorted. Dead Male Walking. It'd be funny, if not for the fact it meant it was of no help to him at all.

He messaged Trembor and received a generic 'I'm busy,' message. He was still in that meeting with his lawyer then.

He let his head fall back and looked at the ceiling. Noting the imperfection in the paint job. He had nothing. No dental records, no DNA; not even a match within the database. The closest was a male dead for six years.

Marlot straightened.

Was he dead? How would the system react if somehow the ID wasn't deactivated with the record of the death? He looked through the information he could access, but nothing there about the status of an ID card.

He'd gotten halfway through the mainframe's firewall when he stopped; Trembor's words coming back. How it started with easy crimes, simple ones. He backed out and brought up the revenue department's IT. After searching, and not finding any names he knew, he called one at random.

"Larmor, IT," a female answered.

"RI Marlot Blackclaw, I have a question about the database."

"ID number, please." Marlot gave it. "What's your questions, RI Blackclaw?"

"Where can I find the status of an ID card on someone who's been declared dead?"

"There isn't a status on deactivated cards."

"That's my question, how do I confirm the card's been deactivated?"

"The ID comes back as dead," she answered. "It's an automated system. When the tax is paid the ID is suspended. Once the ID Arrived at the processing center, it's scanned and moved to the dead files."

"Can I access that?"

"Why would you want to?"

Marlot stifled a sigh. "So I can confirm it's there."

"Of course it's there."

"So there's a way I can access the dead card database?"

She typed. "No, sorry, that's not accessible to the outside."

"Alright, then you can access it, I can give you the ID so you can check it."

More typing. "How old is the ID?"

"Six years."

The typing stopped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I need to—”

“Look, do you have any idea how many dead ID are processed each year?”

Marlot shrugged. “In a population of ten million? I figure the rate of death is under ten percent, so a million.”

“How do you get a population of ten million?” he asked in disbelief

“It’s the city’s population as of the last census, give or take.”

“You do realize we process every city, right? On the entire continent. Take that ten million and add a few zeroes to it. Do the same to how many deaths we process every year. There’s no way to maintain a database that large.”

Marlot almost told her she was wrong. It was all data, not physical cards. It was just a question of information compression, but she was only IT, and this was the government, so there was no telling what the reasoning was.

“How long at they kept?” he asked, not holding out hope.

“Two years for any cards that come through the kiosks. Five for card numbers that don’t get confirmation of receipt, and indefinitely for any cards on bodies in an RI’s freezer.”

“So, if there had been a glitch in the processing of a card six years ago, it’s possible someone could slip through the wind without being noticed.”

“I suppose so,” she answered, her uncertainty making it sound like a question. “I mean, I can’t see how they could use the card without the system flagging it, but these are computers, so what do I know?”

Marlot nodded. He knew. The odds of a glitch were low, but when they processed a billion of death every year, even a one percent chance became a certainty. “Thanks for the assistance Larmor.” He disconnected the call.

If this was a glitch, he wouldn’t be able to find anything in the system. He pulled the dead Hardir’s information. He had a family, a mate, and three cubs, Omatia Mixcoat’s number was in the system. She’d kept the last name. Was that an indication her mate was still in her life, or just of how much she loved him?

He smiled and wondered if he should take Trembor’s last name. Marlot wouldn’t lose much by abandoning the Blackclaw name. His family’s history didn’t extend past Low Valley, and what it meant to him there wasn’t something he cared to be reminded of.

He had her number entered in his pad when he hesitated. If she’d kept the last name because she loved him that deeply. If he was dead and Marlot was looking as another type of glitch, how much would having to revisit the death hurt her?

That death was common didn’t mean it stopped hurting.

He pulled her address. At the very least, he owed it to her to be there if the question caused her pain.

He hesitated, remembering the times he’d rushed to confront people with some painful fact because he needed information. He realized his history of putting what he wanted before other people’s feelings ran longer than when he’d hurt Trembor. How many times had Trembor warned him to be careful? Was this him rushing to trample

someone's feeling again?

His answer was no, of course not, but he'd told Trembor that each time, hadn't he?

He called Trembor and received the generic message again.

He couldn't ask for his lion's help. Maybe that was for the best. Marlot needed to learn to handle these situations himself. He pocketed his pad and stood.

He'd be careful, he promised himself. He'd make sure to keep his nose to the wind and not push any further than she let him. His need for information didn't outweigh someone else's feelings.

The knock came and Trembor opened the door.

The armadillo smiled. "Good afternoon, Mister Goldenmane, may I come in?"

He considered closing the door in the lawyer's face. If that might offend him and get him to throw the case in revenge, it would be worthwhile, but he was too professional for that. The firm his father had worked for didn't allow personal feelings to get in the way of a good defense.

Trembor stepped out of the way.

"If you don't mind my saying," Barany said, "you don't look too good."

"My brother's making my life difficult."

"Ah." The armadillo looked from the living room to the kitchen before heading to the table. "I hope you can resolve that in a timely manner."

Trembor didn't see that happening.

The lawyer sat and took files from his briefcase. Placing them on the table.

"Do you want something to drink?" Trembor asked, feeling his mother's presence pointing out he had a guest in his house.

"Yes, thank you." The armadillo looked up from the file as Trembor headed for the cooler. "Do you have Vegetable juice?"

Trembor shook his head. "Blood and water." He took a bottle, shook it, then grabbed another. One other left. He really needed to restock.

"Blood will do then."

He took the bottle of alcohol from the cupboard and showed it to the lawyer, who shook his head. Trembor placed the glass of blood before the armadillo, then sat his own glass before him.

Barany studied Trembor. "I would advise against consuming alcohol at present."

Trembor shrugged and sipped it. "After the day I've had, I need something to dull the edge before I claw the next person to annoy me." He grinned at the lawyer.

"I see."

Trembor eyed the stack of files. "Out of curiosity, do you know where Jasber Braid is being held?" No one he'd called had been willing to tell him; or tell him what condition she might be in. Even his friends weren't willing to risk getting pulled into his case by giving him information that might be deemed off-limits to someone being

prosecuted.

Barany thumbed through a few folders before pulling one out and looking through it. “She is being held at the Cave-in cage complex.”

Trembor nodded. Medium security complex. Many of the people held there were also part of the work details if they didn’t cause problems.

“Have you visited her?”

“No, I have the transcript of the interrogation. Until we are closer to the trial, I don’t see a need to evaluate her. Her arrest record, and the part you’ve played in it, is enough to establish some level of doubt as to its validity. At this time, I prefer working on preparing you.”

“What happens to its validity if she were to die?” Trembor asked. Was she even still alive?

The armadillo hesitated. “I don’t see why she would die.”

“It’s a cage complex,” Trembor said. “There are accidents, fights, and outright eating of other prisoners. It has to be a possibility you’ve considered.”

“That’s why testimonies are taken as early as possible, usually while still in enforcer custody.” He paused, straightening a misaligned folder. “But to answer your question. Her death wouldn’t help us. With her testimony taken, the prosecution has what they need to proceed. Her death would impede my ability to question her on the stand, demonstrate she had motivations to embroil you in what she and her partner did, but that’s only one element in your defense. The evidence is rather light and circumstantial.”

“So she’s more valuable to you alive than dead?”

“Marginally, but yes.” The armadillo studied Trembor. “May I ask why you are asking about her?”

“No reason.” If she was useful to his defense, did that mean the mole had no reason to arrange her death? “What about if she recants her testimony?”

“Mister Goldenmane, I must ask, what—”

“Trembor. Mister Goldenmane is my dad.” It occurred to him it was one a cliché line from just about every movie he’d seen, but it really didn’t sit well with him to be called ‘mister’ by someone at least a decade older than he was.

“Mister Goldenmane,” the lawyer insisted. “I must insist that you make no kind of plans toward taking a hand in your defense. To make the situation perfectly clear, as the crux of the prosecution’s case, her death, no matter how natural it might seem, will only sever to cast doubt on your innocence. In regard to her recanting her testimony. With your well-known connections within the enforcers, it would simply look like one of them had forced her to do so, again casting further doubt on your innocence. I hope I am making myself clear. It is a case where paying someone’s tax will not serve you, no matter what you might be used to.”

“That isn’t why I’m asking,” Trembor snapped. “My dad was a lawyer, you really think I’d resort to eating a witness?”

“You would be surprised what people will resort to. Our social system is built so that those who can afford it can resolve their legal problem themselves. It’s one of the

issues with allowing predation.”

“So you’re against it?”

“My personal beliefs are irrelevant. This is about you and how to best go about defending yourself. So Jasber Braid best serves us by remaining alive, is that clear?”

Trembor nodded.

“Good. Now, Prosecutor Ftattoo will come at you from your brother’s angle. Many of your friends and coworkers have testified to your strong ties to your family. To how you are the one they go to for help with their problems. She will seek to mark you as a fix-it male without regard to the laws or other people. So we need to find ways of downplaying your involvement in resolving your family’s issues.”

“You get it that it’s just them coming to me and talking, right? I’ll offer my advice and they do what they want.”

The armadillo smiled. “Good, then it should be simple to show that’s all Bolifen did.”

“He didn’t talk to me about his problems. That’s what caused all of this. I found out about his arrest from Herelex, and I knew Bo hadn’t done it. Everyone knew that. So I tried to prove it, but the evidence was solid. So I shifted it to who I thought was framing him.”

The armadillo nodded in understanding. “That, Mister Goldenmane, is exactly what you can’t say.”

“But it’s what I did.”

“Which marks you as someone who breaks the law.”

“I did break the law. Why do you think I didn’t do anything to get a lawyer? I broke the law, so I have to pay for it.”

“Are you certain you want to be marked as this criminal mastermind who commits crimes after crimes to keep his family and friends ‘safe’? Because that is what the prosecution is aiming to do.”

“What? I never broke the law before this.”

“I’m well aware, but Miss Flattooth doesn’t care. Your family is well off. You have friends and connections throughout the enforcers. She intends on building a scenario in which you are at the top of a criminal enterprise, and through you, she will skewer the enforcers and ‘track down’ all the tainted elements.”

Trembor stared at the armadillo. “You’re telling me my choices are you, lying about me being innocent, or being found guilty of running some criminal empire based on lies from that Hippo?”

“I will not lie,” the armadillo stated calmly. “While I cannot speak to Miss Flattooth’s intended methods, I do not believe she will lie either, but a lot can be implied in the mind of a court of law without ever being said. Inference will go much further at times than evidence.”

“What the fuck happened to going to court, proving what actually happened and the guilty getting what they deserve?”

The lawyer leveled his gaze on Trembor. “If that is your view of the judicial

system, I'm afraid it is outdated, if not outright naïve. The prosecution's goal is to prove that whoever sits opposite them is guilty. My job is to make sure they can't."

"And the truth?"

"The truth is subjective, Mister Goldenmane."

"No. The truth is the truth. The truth is that I broke the law. I did it to keep my brother from being unjustly accused of under aged predation. If I hadn't don't that, he would have been killed, eaten by the cub's family, before the truth had come out. I'm not proud of what I did, but that is the truth."

The armadillo sighed. "You framed an innocent conglomerate of gambling houses."

Trembor snorted. "They're criminals."

"Where is your evidence?"

Trembor opened his mouth, had to close it.

"Truth is subjective," the lawyer repeated. "I have no doubt you believe what you say and that you have valid reasons to believe it. But that is your truth. Their truth will be that they offer a public good. Gambling is a way for people to relax. Some go too far, but that can be said of everything."

"Fine. I was wrong, I'm not even trying to say I was right. I shouldn't have done it, but I was desperate. And I need to pay for that."

The armadillo sighed. "Then you need to accept that you will be spending a long time in a cage complex. Probably a maximum security one."

"I didn't do anything that bad!"

"Miss Flattooth's truth is that you did. That you are the face of everything she sees is wrong with the enforcers. That is what she will aim to imply and infer."

Trembor wanted to scream. Instead, he finished his drink and considered refilling it. He fixed his gaze on the armadillo. "I will not be found innocent." He couldn't. If he did, that would put him in those criminals' hands. They'd be in a position to force him to do what they wanted by threatening his family. He had no doubt they'd try that with him inside a cage complex, but as he'd told the lawyer. Accidents happened there.

To others, or if he came down to it, to himself.

The armadillo sighed. "Very well, I'll see what I can do to defang her evidence."

The Mixcoat household still lived in the house Hardir had before he died five years ago. It was in a higher-middle rated neighborhood for families. By the size, Marlot guessed they had three of four cubs. He could have pulled the family's information from the revenue database, but had decided to face them without any scent to preconceive his expectations. Having to raise her family alone couldn't have been easy on her or the cubs left behind.

He stepped out and hurried to the door, careful not to lose his footing on the not entirely cleared path leading to the house. He knocked and put his hands in his pocket. Before the cold could seep in too deep the door opened and Marlot stared at Hardir Mixcoat.

“Yeah?” the man asked, his voice sounding too young, and Marlot realized his eyes were gray instead of blue.

“I’m here to see Miss Mixcoat.” Marlot reached for his ID, but the man was already looking into the house

“Mom,” he called, “there’s someone here for you.” He motioned Marlot in. “Come in before you freeze your tail off.”

“Thanks you.” The door opened to the living room, which took the whole front of the house, where three cubs were playing. One a video game on the screen the other two with toys on the floor. Their colorings were brindled, but in varying shades of brown and reds. The one seated on the couch had to be in her low teens while the two on the floor close to ten.

The one who’d let him in was vanishing out of a door on the opposite side of the living room.

“Brathen, check on Vix, she’d been too quiet,” a female said as she appeared through another door, wiping her hands on a cloth. An indistinct reply came. She was rust colored, faded in places due to age. Marlot looked at the cubs, or maybe stress. She smiled at him. “Hello, how can I help you?”

Marlot showed his ID. “Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw, I’m wondering if I can have a word with you.” He looked at the cubs. “In private might be best.” The two on the floor were pulling a figure between them.

She chuckled. “I don’t know how private I can make any room, but follow me.” She turned. “Tarl, let your sister have the toy, there’s enough for both of you.”

He older of the two let go of the figure and the youngest gave him a raspberry. Then Marlot followed their mother out of the living room. The kitchen was cluttered, meat in the process of being cut, containers of vegetables, a lot of them, packages of pastry dough.

“I can’t afford to feed everyone an entirely meat base diet,” she said without trace of embarrassment.

“How many cubs do you have?”

“Six still living here. My eldest left two years ago. Brathen could leave, but he’s staying to help out. Without him, and Jareth before, I have no idea how I’d have managed.” She put on baking gloves. “I hope you don’t mind if I keep working while we talk. Preparing food of everyone isn’t fast. Take a seat. Do you want something to drink? Water is all I can offer I’m afraid, I have to keep the blood for the youngest, they need it the most since they’re still growing.”

“Water will be fine.” Marlot sat at the large table. As she poured him a glass of water from a container she took from the cooler, he tried to come up with a way to ask his question that showed more sensitivity than he felt he usually did.

“Ask your questions,” she said, putting the jug away. “I’m guessing you’re here because of Brathen’s hunting.”

“Why do you think that?”

“You’re an RI. Him and me are the only one of predation age and I know I

haven't left anyone lying around. Brathen..." she trailed off, "well, he's still young and not always as careful as he should be."

"I'm not here for him," Marlot replied. "I actually have question about your deceased mate." He hesitated. "He is deceased, correct?"

She nodded, going back to cutting meat. "A little more than five years ago now. Pardiss never got to know her father."

"What do you remember of the circumstances surrounding his death?"

She paused. "A hunting accident is what I figured happened. He didn't come home from work one evening, we were low on meat so I thought he was late in catching anything. As much as I loved him, Hardir was never the greatest provider, either of food or money."

"So having to use vegetables to round the meals isn't a new thing?"

She chuckled. "This is much better than back then. I can't remember how many times vegetables was all I ate so the cubs would have some meat on their plate." She dumped the cut meat in a large bowl and set about cutting vegetables.

"I'd have expected things to be worse after your mate's death, you say he wasn't a great provider, but he did provide."

"I was terrified for that week until I received his belongings. Of course by then I knew he was dead, and I was trying to figure out how I was going to keep us afloat, taking care of this bunch if a full time job and I had Jareth, my oldest, right out of the academy. She wasn't planned, but we didn't mind. Hardir was a hard worker, and keeping the three of us fed was simple. Even once Brathen came we still managed. For decade everything was fine."

She cut vegetables in silence for a few minutes, adding them to the bowl. "Thing his company downsized. He found work, but the pay was lower. Hardir was a male who dealt with stress through sex, and I was more than happy to help him, but it lead to making the family larger. More mouths to feed, more stress, more time in bed."

"Didn't you consider fertility treatments?"

"No, but those cost, so even if we had, I don't see how we could have afforded them. The females in my family are all quite fertile, so we learn out cycle young. But with the stress, keeping them wasn't easy for Hardir."

"Then he died," Marlot said to bring the conversation back on track. "You were afraid things would be worse, but clearly they weren't."

"Not as bad as I feared, no. His survivor's benefits were higher than I expected. Then Jareth was offered a new job, a higher paying one and she returned home to help out. With her here to help with the cubs, and Brathen also old enough to give a hand, I was able to find part time work at a restaurant not far from here. That also had the advantage that the owner let us split the food that was about to be thrown out. It wasn't much and it wasn't reliable, but everything helped. It was hard, but it got better."

"Have you received any outside help since then?"

"No. I applied for a few government support programs, but we were just above the approval limit. Jareth sends me what she can, but she'd building her own family now."

So we work a little harder, and now, everyone in this house had some meat on their plate at every meals.” She added a jar of sweet smelling sauce to the bowl and mixed it. “Even if it’s never all that fancy.”

“Would you mind looking at a picture?” Marlot brought up the one Jaxca had included for identification. There was no doubt the male was dead, but the head had been straightened, fur brushed. It was before he’d begone working on him. “The reason I’m here is that I have a body that’s a double of your dead mate, and he went by the same name.”

She paused in taking the pastry sheets out of their packaging and looked at his pad. “That certainly looks like him.” She studied it closer. “The fur doesn’t have his sheen, but this male’s dead, so I’m guessing that’s why. Yeah, I can see why you thought he might be my Hardir. He didn’t have any brothers, only two sisters, so I’m not sure who he can be.”

Marlot nodded. “Is there any chance your mate had contacts that would make it worth while for a look alike to assume his identity?”

She chuckled. “No, Hardir’s rating was definitely not going to increase. His family is middlingly like us, I think their’s doing a little better since all their children have moved out, but nowhere to a level that someone claiming to be Hardir would have anything to gain from them.”

Marlot nodded, putting the pad away. “How old was your mate when he died?”
“Forty-two. He was two years older than me.”

Forty-six matched Jaxca’s determination of the body’s age. Marlot’s instinct told him there was no way someone would take this male’s identity after his death, as the female said, he was just too middle-rating to bother, and his prospect had not been looking up. So that left him with this being the same Hardir Mixcoat who’d died six years ago. Only it made no sense. Why would anyone pretend to die? He’d have to live without an ID, which mean he was worth nothing. If he’d taken a different name, there had been the chance he was using a fake ID, but he still went by Hardir Mixcoat.

If he proved this was the same male, what did that mean for his case? Did he have to find who had kill him this time or because he was already dead was the case already closed? His first task was to prove under the law if they were the same person. The only certain way to do that was to match his DNA.

“Do you have anything of your mate I could have? This body’s not in the database, I’d like to at least confirm it isn’t him properly.” The lie had been so easy he almost corrected himself, then looked at her work.

“I think I still have the belongings they returned.” She was at ease with her situation. Her mate died years ago. “For a while I didn’t think I could move on without him.” She’d mourned him, gotten on with her life. Would it improve anything for Marlot to tell her his suspicions? For her to know that for six years her mate had lived in the city and not come to her? He thought it over as she took the backing gloves off. Wiped her hands. “I’m going to have to pull them out of storage, it might be a few minutes.”

“Take your time,” he answered, still thinking, trying to determine is this was him

going for the easy way to get what he wanted or if it was best for her family, because he needed to consider the cubs, her older son, even the daughter who'd moved out. Would any of them gain something if they found out their father had been around without their knowledge.

He couldn't see how they would. He couldn't see anyway in which knowing their fathers had been alive and not visited would make them feel anything but pain. Knowing that whatever his reasons had been, Hardir had preferred living without a rating to being with them.

When she returned with a revenue issue package he was at ease with his decision. Not telling them was for the best. He opened the package to take a piece of clothing that was certain to contain fur, maybe blood.

"Take it all," she said.

"Are you sure? One piece of clothing will be enough. I don't want to take all you have left of him."

She smiled. "That isn't been Hardir in years. I have the memories of the good time we shared. It's all I need anymore."

"You're cubs?" Marlot asked.

"That was at the bottom of a box. They haven't needed their father's scent either."

Marlot nodded. "I will return this once I'm done."

"Thank you, just don't feel you need to rush it on my account."

He stood and she escorted him to the door.

As he hurried to his car, Marlot realized he had another unanswered question. If Hardir went by his old identity, he had no ID card on him, so why would his killer leave a free meal to be claimed by someone else?

Trembor leaned back in the chair, sighing. "I'm not asking you to tell me where they are. I just want you to find out how they're doing."

"You know," the female on the other end of the call said, "if the prosecution finds out you're asking about the criminals accusing you of bankrolling them, they're going to see that as an admission of you being in league with them."

"In that case, don't tell them you're doing this for me, Zarr."

"I am curious why you want to know."

"You know I've arrested Jasber a few times when I was an enforcer with the rest of you. I just want to make sure the system is treating her fairly."

"I never got you, Trembor. How can you care about some criminals like that? Especially when she's the cause of your problems."

"They're people too. And I don't care about all of them. There are plenty of criminals I'd be happy to see become someone's meal."

She sighed. "Alright, I'll see what I can find out, and *if* it won't break any rules, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Zarr." Trembor terminated the call and tried to relax. Now that someone he trusted within the enforcers would look into Jasber and her partner's situation, he had

to hope the Burrows female wouldn't be able to hurt them again. Because Jasber was critical to a court case she was supposed to be protected from predation, but in a place like a cage complex, there was nothing like a no predation area. And the people held there weren't the kind to care about rules until they were at the receiving end of the enforcement, at which point Jasber or her partner would already be hurt.

So many people could end up hurt because those criminals had their claws in him. The mole had said they could use him even if he was found guilty, but somehow, Trembor didn't think they'd bother with that if he angered them enough. If he could arrange a lackluster defense, that let Flattooth send him away for as long as he liked, the criminals Maoma controlled with the complex would end him quickly. He chuckled and wondered if he could find a way of implicating Maoma's group during his trial.

He sobered. Her retaliation wouldn't be against him if he did that. His family would pay. Not to say Flattooth wanted his trial to open the door to 'cleaning out' the enforcers. He had no doubt some of them were dirty, but on the whole, he believed they were all good people.

He let his breath out. The simplest solution was for him to die. He could go out, find a healthy bull, and try to take him down and fail. Of course, he'd be saddling whoever killed him with his tax, which they might not be in a position to deal with. He might be able to arrange something so some of his money was diverted to help cover his tax, but if anyone in his family found out, it would be a clear indication he'd done this on purpose.

That would hurt his parents. That he'd given up. He'd survived Gorrek, he should be able to survive this. He could hear his mother argue. Only with Gorrek, he'd been the only one affected, at risk. Here everyone with Goldenmane as a name was at risk. Not that he didn't agree with her, giving up felt wrong. He simply had no other idea as to how to protect everyone he cared about.

He stood and took his empty glass to the sink.

He should still prepare himself. Go through his accounts, make sure he didn't have any outstanding bills that someone else would have to deal with. He'd have to reread the agreement on the payment for his house. He didn't remember what the death clause was, or if there was one. He hadn't read it as cautiously as he should have when he bought it.

He'd have to decide how to distribute his possessions and the money he had. Normally it would all go to his family, but he had to think of Marlot.

He swallowed and used the counter to remain standing. This was going to hurt his wolf so badly. He was going to have to be extremely careful around him. His scent could give away his intentions too easily. As much as the idea hurt, he should simply avoid Marlot until this was over. Write him a letter explaining why he did what he was going so that Marlot wouldn't be left wondering.

He washed the glass, dried it, and put it back in the cupboard. He was trying to put in order everything he needed to do when someone buzzed his door. He checked his pad in case he'd missed a message from his family warning they were coming over, then

went to open it.

“Hi,” the black wolf standing on the other side said shyly. He raised a package wrapped in butcher paper. “I didn’t remember what your cooler looked like so I brought meat.”

“Marl,” Trembor said when he found his voice. What was his wolf doing here? What would he do when he caught his scent? Right now the icy wind was pushing that deeper in the house. But if he entered?

“Trem, is everything okay?”

Trembor shook himself. “Yes, of course. Sorry, just a little tired.” He stepped out of the way. “Come on in out of the cold.”

Inside, with the door closed, the scents returned at Trembor watch as his wolf sniffed the air, then looked at him worriedly. There was no lying to him, and Trembor didn’t have his father’s skill at molding his words to imply something other than what he said. He hugged Marlot tightly before the wolf said anything.

When they let go of one another Marlot forced a smile and offered him the package. “I’ll let you bake this however you want.”

Trembor chuckled as he took it. “You said that because you know my baking isn’t all that much more elaborate than yours.”

“You add sauces and spices when you bake. That’s way more than what I do.”

Trembor looked in his wolf’s eyes, steeled himself against the barrage of questions. The demands Marlot was in his right to make.

Marlot canted an ear. “Unless you’re a much better baker than you’ve shown me, I don’t think the meat is going to end up baked with us standing in the entryway.”

Trembor shook himself again. Almost asked why Marlot wasn’t interrogating him, caught himself. He gazed deep into the wolf’s eyes, almost admitted everything right there. Only knowing Marlot would run out and take on Maoma and everyone in her organization, get himself killed in the process, kept him quiet. He took his wolf’s hand and led him to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry for the state I’m in,” Trembor finally said, opening the package, studying the cut of meat. Professional work. Marlot had a store process his bodies.

“The meeting with your lawyer didn’t go well?” the question was asked with hesitation.

“It depends on how you look at it.” He took out a cast iron pan, put it on the stove set it to high heat while he took ingredients out of the cooler. He stared at the almost empty bottle of blood. He took it out and emptied it in a glass and offered it to Marlot.

The wolf looked at the empty container on the counter. “Are you sure? It’s yours.”

“I’ve drunk too much already.” Once Marlot took it, he filled himself one with water, barely considering adding alcohol to it. The only way he enjoyed alcohol was with blood. “Barany, that’s my lawyer— He’d from dad’s old firm— is confident he can resolve this, in spite of who he’s up against.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

Trembor paused in the middle of mixing the sauce. “Marl, I’m guilty. I can’t stand

the idea of the system being used to let me walk away from this.” He shivered as the hand caressed his back.

“You’re a good male, Trem. This one thing doesn’t make you a criminal.” Marlot pressed against him.

It just allowed a bunch of them to get their claws into me. He felt, more than heard, Marlot sniff his fur.

“I’m sorry, I know this goes against who you are. I won’t ask anymore.”

“It’s not—” Trembor began and immediately felt himself grow defensive. He forced himself to go over what Marlot had said, realized he’d apologized, not accused, and relaxed. “How was your day?”

Marlot snorted. “Oh, nothing much, that body I’m investigating is turning out to be a male who was killed six years ago.” The wolf kissed the back of Trembor’s neck and moved away.

“How is that possible? I mean, how certain are you they’re the same people?”

“As certain as I can be without having run DNA. I spoke with his family and they kept the bag of his possessions when it was returned to them. So I dropped that off at the lab and asked gently for them to expedite it.”

Trembor turned to stare at his wolf. “You don’t have a habit of forcing your way ahead of the queue, but you’re more the telling type.”

Marlot’s ears folded back. “I’m trying to be more considerate of others.”

“Marl, you’re not—”

“Do you remember Telima?”

“The name sounds familiar.” Trembor went back to cutting the slab of meat while he tried to remember anything.

“Jackal, he was the boy toy of that cheetah vice president or something.”

“Right, the prowler.”

“Do you remember how I told him about her being pregnant without and consideration for how that would affect him? How her contracted mate happened to show up at the freezer. How devastated they both were?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the kind of male I can be. Seems to have a bad habit of being. I hadn’t realized how determined to get my way I tend to be. So I’m trying to pull back.”

Trembor wondered if that was why Marlot wasn’t questioning him about his scent. “Is that what your counselor told you to do?”

“I haven’t seen her yet. Tomorrow’s the first meeting, but I expect she will tell me something to that effect, yeah.”

“Then I think it’s a great thing you came up with it yourself.” He coated both cuts with the sauce before plopping them in the searing hot pan.

“But yeah, until I get the results, all I have is the fact it’s the only thing that makes sense. He was still using his name from before his death. Same coloring, if a little grayer taking into account he was older by six years and living without an ID had to be stressful. His mate recognized him, but of course, she only saw someone who looked like

him. Since he's dead."

"How did he die?" Trembor turned the meat and fragrance filled the kitchen.

"Broken neck, no signs he fought back."

"Suicide?" some of the joviality at talking about work left him as he was reminded of his own plans.

"Looks like it, but why? And why did his killer leave his body there? No ID means a free meal."

"Unless he just freaked out at the ease of the kill and didn't even think to look." He pushed away the gloom and focused on not ruining the meal. He was going to enjoy this time with Marlot since it might be the last time they spent together.

Marlot grinned as he entered the office. He picked up Jesdan's recent scent and didn't even feel like prying into what Hela'han and her boyfriend had been up to before he arrived. He was too happy.

The evening hadn't been perfect, Trembor hadn't told him everything that was troubling him, and more than once Marlot had wanted to ask—demand—he tell him everything, but he'd managed to put his need aside and enjoy the delicious meal. Afterward, they moved to the living room, where they caught the last ten minutes of the Survivor Experiment.

Marlot didn't remember what the next show had been, by then he and Trembor were making out on the couch, then on the floor, climaxing to explosions from the screen. Then it was in the lion's bed, slow but still passionate, and against this morning, almost making Marlot late.

He sat at his desk as his pad beep the five-minute reminder. He booted up his system, connected his pad, and placed the call. His computer's screen displayed a 'we will be with you momentarily' message. He took off his jacket and straightened his shirt. He chuckled and felt silly. This was just—

"Marlot," the jaguar said, smiling. "Right on time."

His ears heated up, but he kept them from folding back as he stopped adjusting the shirt. She'd seen him drunk, half undressed and dancing on a table. Being disheveled wouldn't bother her. His ears folded back. That was one memory he wished he could file away and never have returned.

"Hi Dohrma," He forced his ears back up. "Thanks for taking me as a client, I wasn't sure you'd be allowed since we're friends."

"If this has been mandated but the courts or your work, I'd have to refer you to someone impartial, but so long as you understand that for the next hour, I'm your counselor and not your friend, this can work."

Marlot nodded. "So, how does this work?"

"Start by telling me why you feel you need a counselor."

Marlot took a moment to figure out where to start, then decided on when he hacked Trembor's phone, causing him to walk away. Then he had to backtrack to explain the case, his home town, the community there, then the interactions between him and

Trembor while chasing Narik, although he avoided giving details on the chase, she couldn't tell anyone what they discussed, but he didn't want to place her in an awkward position. He finished with Gorrek, the realization of the abuse Trembor had suffered, and them agreeing to give their relationship a second try. He mentioned the dinner, but not what happened afterward, although he suspected his expression told her all she needed to know.

"Did you every pickup on this need I have to be obeyed?" he finally asked her. "In the times we hung out?"

She took her time replying. "I work hard not to analyze my friends outside of a visit like this. I had noticed you can be driven when you want something, but no, you never exhibited traits when we hung out that led me to think you might overdo it. Why do you think you feel this need to get your way?"

Marlot snorted. "I don't know." He rubbed the side of his muzzle, thinking about it. "Maybe it's because of my father and mother. Isn't there a joke about every problem we have being traced back to our parents?"

"They do take part in our formative years, so it's understandable they'd leave their mark. How do you think your parents instilled the need in you?"

"You never met them, it shows. They're people who always get their ways. My father is sneaking about it, I guess is the best way I can describe it. He won't raise his voice unless he's angry, but when he wants something, he will stare you down until you give in."

"That seems rather direct," Dorhma said, "why do you describe it as sneaky?"

"I guess because compared to my mother's constant insistence and demands, his staring felt that way."

"And do you feel your need stemmed from trying to follow their example?"

"More like overcompensating." He thought about it. "I wasn't assertive like my parents. Honestly, that place doesn't lend itself to building confidence, unless you do exactly what's expected of you. When I didn't show any interest in running my family's commune I marked myself as different. I don't remember my father ever berating me for it, but there was this sense they were indulging me to I'd see the error of my ways. When I studied to be an RI, I thought I'd be vital to the community in my own right so I'd be allowed to be my own male, but then I fell under the council's thumb."

"I have to admit I find it difficult to accept the farming communities can act so independently from the rest of the country."

Marlot shrugged. "So long as they don't disrupt the system outside their town limits, the rest of the world doesn't care. Providing vegetables to the herbivores of so many cities gives them the economic power to get their way a lot of the time."

"Like getting City Leader Sharporns to pressure you into taking their case."

"Yeah," he said bitterly. "Fortunately, I think that meat turned sufficiently rancid on them they won't do it again."

"And does that makeup for what happened?"

Marlot shook his head. "If I'd known what winning would cost me. I'd have left

the first time Trembor suggested it. I just—” he had trouble forming words as anger surged. “—I just wanted to get hem to choke on their pride. I needed them to pay for how they treated me, for their hypocrisy as clawing down anyone who dares be different when they’re a bunch of deviants themselves. I have no doubt if I’d stayed and dug more, that tiger wouldn’t have been the only one with crimes to expose. If I’d documented them, I could have had Arlion charged with so many obstructions of investigations he’d have been ruined.”

“Could you still do it? You have your case files from those days, don’t you?”

“What’s the point? Someone else would take his place. They’d make superficial changes and things would keep going the same way they have been for as long as the town’s been there.” He paused. “I got myself out of there. On an intellectual level, I know I could help the cubs and young adults by exposing the council, but in the end, I just don’t care about them. They’re part of that town.” A timer appeared in the corner of the screen, counting down from ten minutes. “I guess the session is coming to an end.”

“As much as I might want to spend the day helping you, I have other clients.”

“So what do I do now?”

“What do you think you should do?”

“Isn’t it your job to tell me?”

“Ignoring the fact you grew up with people constantly telling you what to do, and where that led you. My job as a counselor of more that of a guide. So tell me what you think you should do, and if I feel you need guidance, I’ll give it.”

“I need to stop putting my needs before everyone else,” Marlot said without hesitation.

“What does that look like? How can you go about doing that?”

That he needed to think about. “I guess I have to start by taking a step back and considering the consequences of my actions.”

“Like you did during the meal with Trembor; when you made a conscious decision not to press him about his mood.”

Marlot nodded. “I should also ask him for advice, well, more like listen to the advice he gives me. It isn’t like he’d approved of my charging ahead through people’s feelings.”

“Do you have other people whose opinions you can ask?”

“There’s Bahamel, you.” I realized he didn’t have the largest circle of people who he felt he could confide in. Most of his friends were techheads like him, and unless the problem was computer-related, he didn’t think they’d be able to do much. “That’s about it. Pretty pitiful isn’t it?”

“Not really. Most people only have a few close friends they feel comfortable confiding in, and who might have the perspective to offer advice that’s applicable.”

Marlot hadn’t expected his own judgment to mirror what she said. He motioned to the timer as it dropped below five minutes. “So when do you want to schedule the next session?”

“Do you feel you need another session?”

Marlot sighed. “This constant answering with a question is getting annoying, Dorhma.”

She smiled. “You need to endure it for a little more than four minutes.”

“Fine. But isn’t this how that works? You keep supervising my progress via more sessions.”

“It depends on the client. Do you feel you need constant supervision? Or is an ear to listen to you when you hit hard times enough?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I was hoping you’d tell me. My track record for decision making isn’t great.”

“Don’t let this make you question everything you do, Marlot. You’ve identified a flaw in how you react to the world. That doesn’t make you flawed. You have made far more good decisions to get where you are than bad ones. The bad ones just seem overwhelming because of how close to your heart they struck. If you want to schedule another session, we can do that.” She looked to the side of the screen. “We can talk again next week, at this time.”

“But you don’t think we have to?”

She looked at him and smiled. “You are someone who does most things on his own. You’ve identified the issue without me.” She raised her hand to silence his protest. “All we did is go over what you know, how you got there, and you told me what steps you should take from this point forward. You have my number anytime you need a friend to talk to, but if you feel you need more sessions with your counselor, I can also accommodate that.”

He looked at the timer, under a minute now. “I’m afraid that if I don’t have you to go over my decisions, I’ll just go back to the way I’ve done things and ruin things with Trem.”

She nodded. “Go over this last week, see where you charged through people’s feelings, and where you kept them in mind, try to see what the situation was, how they differed. You’ve already identified that when you get worked up is when you tend to lose track of other people. So try to pay attention to your emotional state.” She glanced the close which had shown zero for a few seconds now. “Our time’s up. Do you want to schedule another session?”

“I’m going to give this a try without supervision,” Marlot answered, “but don’t be surprised if I call you out of the blue.”

“Don’t hesitate, it’s what friends are for. Have a good day.” She ended the session and Marlot looked at a screen, thanking him for attending and asking for him to rate his session. He gave her top marks before terminating the call.

He took a minute to settle himself. He was concerned that he was left to himself still, but she was right. The six years he’d lived in the city included many decisions with good outcomes. He just needed to pay attention and avoid letting his emotions get the better of him.

And the next decision he needed to take was finding out what was going on with this body who’d been killed twice. The best place to start was by working out how that

first kill had happened.

He called the Revenue Department, identified himself. “I need the name of who paid the tax on Hardir Mixcoat.” He gave the male’s ID number and waited.

Letting Marlot go that morning had been difficult, but his wolf had to work. Without him there, moving forward had been difficult. Trembor sat at the table for too long, looking at his empty plate. He had things to do, needed to do, if only to get him to move, to stand, to clean his plate.

With a sigh, he took the plate to the sink, washed it along with his glass, dried them. Put them away, stared at the plates and glasses there. He shook himself. If this was how what he was planning left him, he needed to consider it might not be the right thing to do.

“Of course it isn’t,” he grumbled, “it’s just the only option left.”

He forced himself out of the kitchen, cleaned his bedroom, changed the scratching post, the filters in the air circulation system, put the used ones away, realized they didn’t belong with the clean ones, and threw them out; the cold air in the garage helped chase the fog out of his mind.

He had more important things to do than mope around the house. He grabbed his pad, put on a heavy jacket, and drove to the financial district.

* * * * *

The bank was busy and loud with people arguing. For as much of it that could be done over the network, it seemed most people still wanted to interact with others. Bare their teeth to get their point across, threaten the person on the other side of the counter when bank policy didn’t allow them to do what was demanded.

Absently, Trembor wondered what the employee rate of replacement was in an institution like this. Their rating would afford them some protection, but it had to be unnerving to have someone threaten them while seeing their accounts and knowing they could easily carry through with the threat.

Maybe they had a counselor on-site to help deal with the frayed nerves.

His time came, and he informed the young fox facing him he needed to access his safe deposit box. After confirming Trembor was who he claimed to be, he called an attendant who escorted him to the back. She unlocked the vault door, then entered the bank’s half of the code to his box. He entered his and she carried it to a private room. He entered the second code and unlocked the box itself once she’d left him alone.

He took out the items in it one at a time. Nothing had actual value, this was more a box of memories than wealth. The action figure grandfather Oliangha gave him a few days before his last hunt. The male had felt mythical to a young Trembor, doing his own hunting while being so old. Trembor’s father never did his own hunting, and he was young in comparison. It would take a long decade without his grandfather before Trembor understood he hunted his own food because his mates were all dead, or that the last hunt hadn’t been a hunt at all, just what his parents told him because even in a harsh world like the one they lived in, they were things a cub should be protected from; like

there came a time when a predator might decide he had enough of being a burden on those around him.

He took out pictures of the old male, then some of his parents, at various ages. Holding babies, his siblings. Pictures of said siblings holding their own babies. One picture was of Trembor, leaning against an older, darker lion. He'd been so in love when it was taken.

He'd kept it as a warning, a reminder that things weren't always what they seemed; that beautiful eyes, a tender touch, could hide viciousness. Now, with Gorrek dead, Trembor wasn't sure how he felt looking at the image. The pain was still there, but muted by time; by the knowledge he'd found someone who, for all his flaws, did try to be love and caring.

"Fuck." He dried his eyes and hurried through the box for the one item he needed.

The Will was a folded form. He'd filled it years ago; before the electronic version was introduced. He hadn't transferred it. A mix of not being as tech-minded at Marlot and sharing some of his father's distrust of the electronic medium as a place to keep valuable documents. He'd seen too many cases of hackers pass through his firm to believe it was as secure as the government claimed.

He unfolded it. It held a few lines detailing which of his few possessions would go to whom, with a few exceptions, everything went to his parents, since he trusted them to distribute them to those who could make the best use of what he left behind. If they weren't alive, Cerek was to handle it, then Elin. He scratched off Bolifen's name and replaced it with Baytil, initializing the change, then placed Marlot Blackclaw's name above his parents. Added his initials to make the change official.

He'd have to tell them, so they could be angry at him, instead of his wolf. That would be a difficult meeting. He'd have to keep them from scenting his intentions, while appeasing them, explaining that he and Marlot were working toward fixing things. Serene might make things easy on Trembor and gut him there.

He folded it, placed everything back in the box, added a picture of him and Marlot, his wolf looking nervous while Trembor had an arm around his shoulders. It had been during the celebration after Ruxul's death. They weren't actually together then, but it was when Trembor had decided he wanted to make the wolf his. There had been a kiss, later that night, after both of them had drunk a little too much, and he'd known then Marlot was interested in him too.

On top of the pictures, he placed the Will. He didn't want his father to have to dig through the memories to find it.

He closed the box, listened to it lock, and kept looking. Now what? He needed to tell his parents, but he wasn't doing that right now. He wouldn't be able to keep himself together. He needed to leave something for Marlot, an explanation, a justification. Something that wouldn't send his wolf on the warpath. Whatever he said, he would hurt him. He doubted there were words that existed to tell someone that no matter how much he loved him, they couldn't be together.

There were a few people he needed to say goodbye to. For all those he knew, only

a handful he felt he needed to see again one last time. And one institution, the one that had molded him in large part into who he was now.

That one might be easier to start with. Less personal. Less chances he'd accidentally reveal his intentions and set up a chain of events that would lead to Marlot trying to stop him.

He also needed to figure out his last hunt, but he had some time before that one.

Marlot showed his ID at the attendant monitoring the underground parking entrance. The apartment building was newer, on the outskirts of the city center. It catered to single people more interested in being close to their work than building families. The male he was here to see was a manager at a popular gambling house. The attendant assigned him a parking spot and Marlot drove to it.

The elevator was basic, the hall on the twenty-eighth floor immaculate, but without ornamentation; seemed the people living here didn't care to show their status.

He buzzed number fourteen, and a few seconds later a lynx a full head shorter than Marlot opened the door. He had a patch over his right eyes with three parallel scars visible above and below it.

"Vikor Growls?" Marlot asked, showing his ID. The lynx studied it, then nodded. "I'm Marlot Blackclaw. I'm wondering if I can ask you a few questions." Under his shirt, Vikor was solidly built.

"Sure, come on in." The male answered a growl in his voice that could be where his family got their name from. The living room was cluttered, plates on the low table before the couch, facing a large screen that played a muted movie. A couple walking in a field was all Marlot caught before it was turned.

Books and papers were strewn on a second chair, on shelves. The lynx caught Marlot looking and shrugged. "It's the end of a quarter and we're old style, so everything had to be tabulated manually."

Marlot didn't want to think about running any kind of business without computers at the forefront. "I'm wondering what you can tell me about a body you killed, Hardir Mixcoat, male, brindled wolf."

The lynx frowned. "I haven't killed a brindled wolf."

"It was five or six years ago."

Vikor stared at Marlot. "You're joking, right? I go through two bodies a month, three if I have to settle for something smaller. I don't keep track of my kills, unlike cub today, I'm not interested in trophies. I kill it, eat it, and forget it. I not saying I didn't kill that wolf, wolves do tend to have a good amount of meat on them, but that was at least sixty bodies ago. I couldn't tell you what I ate back then?"

"I understand. I'm just trying to account for an anomaly in the system," Marlot said, only realizing he'd lied after the words were out. It was too late to correct himself, and really, it wasn't exactly untrue. "Did you live here then?"

The lynx snorted. "Five years ago I was still a dealer. Even with how generous

players can be, I couldn't afford this. I lived at the Bloodsworth apartment building." Marlot noted it. "It's an hour away." The lynx looked around, trying to orient himself. "I don't remember where about it is from here. I haven't bothered going back there."

"It's okay, the mapping app will tell me." That would let him work out if they'd crossed paths. Marlot brought up Hardir's picture and stepped to the lynx to show it to him; not within his personal space, but close enough to catch his scent.

Vikor studied the image, then shrugged. "Doesn't look familiar, but like I said. I don't keep track of who I eat." His scent said he was telling the truth.

The idea had been barely a scent on the wind, Marlot admitted to himself. It could be an actual glitch in the system. He tried to remember if five years ago the processing of the kill tax was fully automated. It should have been, but even that didn't guarantee flawless operation. And if Vikor had taken part in this, what was it, fraud? If Vikor was part of it, there would be other indications Marlot would uncover, but he had to remember that old kill wasn't his priority. It only mattered if it shed light on his current investigation.

Marlot handed him a card. "In case you remember anything."

Vikor took it with a smirk. "You really have high hopes for my memory."

Marlot shrugged. "You never know what will trigger something."

The lynx pocketed it. "Sure. If I remember anything I'll let you know."

In the elevator, Marlot found the Bloodsworth building. It was in the general area the Mixcoat family lived in, so they could have crossed paths. But even if they knew each other, it didn't explain why the lynx would do it.

"Focus Marlot, the body is in your freezer right now, resolve that so it can be processed out of it, and explain how he was killed twice afterward if you're that bored." He sent a message to the revenue department's IT for them to look into the possibility of glitches in the processing of kill tax five years ago and readied himself for the mocking reply they were going to return to him.

Trembor stood by the door to his office, listening to the sounds of the precinct. The males and females enforcing the laws in the city. Discussions, arguments, laughter. This was an extension of his family. So many good years here, and even once he became an RI. Everyone here had had his back.

Most everyone, Trembor reminded himself.

That Maoma's people had gotten to Jasber while in a cage meant some of the people here worked for her. The thought soured the moment slightly. He knew there were reasons someone felt they had no choice, but for an enforcer to work for a group of criminals? Trembor couldn't understand that.

"Trembor," the tiger greeted him.

"Captain," he replied, continuing to watch the scene.

"I don't believe you're allowed to be here," the tiger said casually. "How did you get past Jurgen?"

Trembor smiled. "I told him I needed to pick up some things from my office."

"And why are you really here?"

Trembor sighed and did everything to remain calm, to not even give off a scent of the lie. "I just needed to see the place. Having nothing to do is a lot more boring than it sounds."

"Preparing for the trial should keep you busy."

"It's more my lawyer who handles it. I answer a question here and there. Mostly I'm home, cleaning. There's only so much cleaning I can deal with in a day."

The tiger nodded. "Do you really need anything from your office? I can unlock it for you."

Trembor thought about it and shook his head. Everything there was Registered Investigator related. Whoever they assigned to his territory could make use of it.

"Then I'm afraid I'll need to escort you out. Only enforcement and government personnel are allowed on this side."

Trembor followed the tiger. His goodbyes hadn't needed to be said out loud. He hadn't come here to tell any specific person. As many friends as he had in that room, this building; it was the organization as a whole that he felt he needed to settle with. And that was entirely in his head.

* * * * *

The rat almost knocked Trembor off his feet as he opened the door to the Watering Hole. "Get back here, you rat!" a lean fox yelled, forcing Trembor to step aside in the process of regaining his balance.

"Can't catch me!" the rat yelled over his shoulder, laughing.

Trembor shook his head, watching the two vanish down the sidewalk. Were they even old enough to drink? They couldn't be. He couldn't be so old that young adults looked *that* young. He did feel particularly old today.

"Hey cuz, you planing on turning my bar into a freezer?" L'nard called, his voice raised to carry over the sounds of the crowd.

Trembor closed the door. "Sorry, were those two of legal drinking age?"

"Yeah, believe it or not. Makes you feel old, doesn't it?"

Trembor sat on a stool. "Never realized this was what being old felt like."

"And I'm two years older than you," the lion on the other side of the bar said, placing a glass of alcoholized blood. "So imagine how I feel."

Trembor snorted. "You'll never be older than I am. For all that you've run a business, you're still just a cub at heart, while I'm..." he trailed off. He was on his last few days. Weeks at most if he found himself procrastinating seeing his parents.

"Don't worry about the trial, it'll be over in a flash and you'll be back running down anyone who even thinks of evading their taxes." L'nard stepped away to serve another customer.

Trembor looked into his glass and wondered how many he'd need if he decided to face his father today? How many more, if Serene was with him? Of the four of his parents, she was the one he had to watch for. Her protective instinct rivaled Marlot's. He

suspected it was why the two hadn't gotten along during the first few visits. Each felt it was their job to keep Trembor safe.

"So, what do you do to keep busy while you wait?" L'nard asked, returning, drying a glass.

"I clean and drink."

The lion winced. "You know, if you need something to do while you wait, I can always use someone to carry drinks to the tables."

Trembor snorted and chuckles in spite of himself. "I'm not that desperate yet."

"And a male like him shouldn't be relegated to serving drinks," a female said behind him. "He'd be of more use enforcing that sign by the door." The mole sat at the stool next to Trembor's. "Isn't that right, Mister Goldenmane?" she smiled at him.

"I haven't needed anyone enforcing it in years," L'nard said. Trembor was too stunned at Maoma's presence to say anything. What was she doing here? How was she here? He hadn't been here long enough for anyone to call her and drive her here. Had she been following him? Had he been so distracted by his plans he'd lost all awareness of his surroundings?

L'nard placed a wide glass half-filled with a golden liquid before her, then left to deal with more orders.

"Nice fellow," she commented, breathing in the aromas of the drink. "Relative of yours, I believe?"

"Cousin," Trembor answered before catching himself.

"Ahh. It's always nice to have family in a variety of businesses. Allows for a change if you feel you need one."

He bristled. "If you even think of touching this bar or L'nard," he growled quietly, "I will—"

"Please, Mister Goldenmane. No need for that. I'm not here to make threats. I just happened to be in the area and noticed your car here, so I thought I'd see how you were doing. A trial can be a stressful thing, trust me. I do know that."

"Right, I'm sure eating lawyers is so much stress for you."

She smiled around her glass and sighed after a short sip. "Keeping your sense of humor is good."

"Is that how you get through the day knowing anytime now someone might have enough and just eat you?"

"Hardly, my friends make sure nothing untoward happens to me. That is what friends are for, after all, isn't it?" she took another sip. "That and family."

Trembor knew that last one was aimed at him, but he was too busy looking around the bar for the friends she hinted at. No one he recognized, but that meant nothing. A handful of people were built to be her muscle, but they seemed to be enjoying their drinks, not eying him.

"Satisfied?" she asked, amused, when he turned back to his drink.

"No." He downed what was left of his drink and motioned to L'nard for another. "And leave my family out of this."

“As much as I can.” She shrugged. “It isn’t my intention to hurt them. In truth, I’m here because I’m concerned you will. I’ve heard that you seem down, despite my assurances everything will work out for the best. Depressed is what I was told. Someone even suggested suicidal. But that’s ridiculous, isn’t it? After all, a male like you would never go that route, not when you have so many people depending on you. It’s unthinkable that someone like you would put them through the pain of simply giving up. Can you imagine how the cubs who look up to you would react?” she took another sip, closed her eyes in satisfaction. “So I’m sure you standing at by the door to your office, looking into the distance, wasn’t what I was told it looked like. Was it?”

She had to be making it up. If he’d missed someone following him—no he had missed someone following him, so she’d know he’d gone to the precinct, but for one of the enforcers to call her to describe his mood, where he stood. He’d have noticed one of them watching him that carefully.

L’nard placed a new glass before Trembor, breaking him from the frightening thoughts.

“Tell me,” Maoma said to L’nard, “do you happen to know the owner of this wonderful establishment?”

“That’d be me,” the lion replied before Trembor could warn him.

“Oh, beautiful. Tell me, have you considered expanding? Maybe opening a second location?”

The lion chuckled. “I’ve thought about it, but I’m not ready for that yet. Maybe once I’ve built up more of a reserve.”

“You’re a very wise male. But what if you had investors? I happen to know people who would love to help a businessmale like yourself.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I had an ex that kept putting her muzzle in my affair. I don’t care for a repeat with strangers.”

“I can promise you they wouldn’t interfere in any way, they are the quiet types, simply happy to help out, but,” she said cutting off L’nard, “I do understand your position.” She finished her drink and pulls a card from a holder, handing it to the lion. “Should you ever change your mind, just contact me and I will be more than happy to put you in touch with them.” He indicated the empty glass. “That was wonderful by the way.”

She made her way to the door, joined by two females Trembor would never have guessed were with her. They were sleek dresses under what he expected were fashionable insulated jackets.

“Friend of yours?” L’nard asked, looking at the card.

“I barely know her,” Trembor answered, turning back to the bar. “Don’t call her.”

The lion chuckled. “After she tried way too hard to compliment me? I doubt I want to do business with her.” He picked the empty glass. “This was off-the-shelf liquor. Good, but in no way wonderful.” He tossed the card as he walked away.

Trembor eyed his glass of blood and hated her for pointing out all the worse of the way his plans would affect his family. His nieces and nephews. How would they deal

with his death? She was right that they looked up to him. Would failing at a hunt so badly it killed him even be something they could understand, or would they see it as what it was, in the way cubs could something see through the lies adults told them.

“Fuck,” he whispered and looked up, relaxing when L’nard was at the other end of the counter. Did it mean he couldn’t go through with his plans? Or could he come up with some other way, something that would ensure the cubs didn’t get hurt, somehow?

He looked at his full glass. One thing he did know was that he couldn’t afford to dull his senses, not with Maoma keeping such a close eye on him. He pushed the glass away and checked his pad. Half an hour and the alcohol should be burned out of his system enough for him to drive. And he’d do so keeping an eye out for anyone following him.

Marlot started the car as soon as he stepped in. “Warming weather my ass,” he grumbled. Another case of the forecast being wrong. Why did they even bother? He could make a more accurate forecast by putting his nose out the window and sniffing the air.

He called the office. “Hela’han. Can you pull what you can on Klieis Longtooth?” He gave her the female’s ID. “She’s relating to the Widepaw case.”

“Someone new who claims to have seen something?” the elephant replied, typing.

“This witness did have accurate information, so I’m hoping he didn’t simply piece it together from details the newsies put it. He claims the death is the result of a domestic dispute. He was their neighbor back then.”

“And he waited two years to come forward?”

“Claims he moved away a few months before Widepaw was killed and only caught the news about it on a rerun channel. It’s not going to cost us anything to at least confirm the story. Even if they weren’t mated, someone else would know something.”

“That they kept to themselves for two years?”

“Or that they didn’t realize they knew.” Marlot thought back on how his perspective had changed on many of his actions in the past, now that he knew about his tendency to barrel through without care for other people’s feelings. “Widepaw might have kept his problems to himself, or the people around him didn’t put two and two together. Talking to Miss Longtooth is at least movement on that case.”

“I’ll have a file by the time to get here.”

“Thanks, Hela’han.” He disconnected and brought up the office finances. He needed to do something about this. In a few weeks, the way things were going, he wouldn’t be able to afford to pay her salary. He should have moved to a smaller office the moment Trembor had taken his stuff. He should have told her—she had to know. She was a smart female. He wished capturing Nikal had brought in more, but only two deaths were on his territory, and the system had never been built to take into account hunters. His actions in closing the cases in other territories only rewarded him if the RI there decided to. Juran had given him a portion of what he’d been paid, but to date, he was the

only one.

Closing the Widepaw case would buy him a few weeks. Hopefully, it would be enough for Trembor to conclude his trial and come back to work. By pooling their territories again, they could keep the office as it was.

He connected to his tracker program and read the results of the latest adjustments to its programming. Nothing. Mixcoat had been walking around for years without tripping any societal flags. How did a male do that? How did he feed himself? How did he cover his rent? How did he hold a job?

That he'd been noticed before his death hinted that the way to go toward solving the case was by walking the street, but that was so much more Trembor's thing. Another reason he needed to return to the office as soon as possible.

Marlot smiled. Baring that, the two of them could have some one-on-one time and talk things over. Trembor had to have ideas.

The pad rang longer than Marlot expected, and he thought he'd have to leave a message when Trembor answer.

"Hey, Marl."

Marlot smiled as his lion's voice sent shivers down his back. "Hi Trem. You busy?"

"Not really." There was hesitation, and Marlot went over how he'd asked the question. Had his tone implied a demand?

"If you're not busy, do you feel like meeting up at Grebor's? We haven't sparred in a while, and no one else really measures up to you."

"I..." the silence stretched.

"Trem, are you okay?"

"Yes, sorry, just a bit out of sorts. This sitting at home with nothing to do has messed with my mood."

"Then sparring would be good for you." Marlot cursed himself do making it a statement. "Wouldn't it?"

"I guess you're right," Trembor said after a long moment, and Marlot was able to breathe again. Although the worry his lion was agreeing because Marlot had told him it would be good nagged at him. Would second guess everything he said for the rest of his life?

"Are you sure? If you'd rather not, I understand. I don't want to pressure you, Trem."

His lion laughed, and it sounded genuine. "You're not, I will tell you if you push too hard, Marl. It's just this funk. It's making it tough for my brain to engage. When do you want to meet up?"

"How about now?"

Trembor chuckled. "I don't think I'm quite that fit, even when I'm at my best. It'll be at least thirty minutes before I get there."

"Thirty minutes is fast enough for me. I'll see you there."

"Yeah... I'll be there." Trembor disconnected and Marlot started driving, doing

his best to ignore that final hesitation.

The scents, sounds, and sights were comforting. Sweat and exhaustion, bodies hitting the mats, grunts of efforts. People fighting in the rings. He nodded at the couple leaving as he entered, then searched the clipboard by the door for Marlot's name. He wasn't here yet. Trembor added their name to a ring.

"Well, I didn't think I'd see you again," a deep voice said. "Here to teach that wolf of yours a lesson for dropping you as a training partner?" The badger behind the counter grinned at him.

"Good to see you again, Grebor." Trembor nodded his greeting, not getting too close. How sharp was the badger's nose? "We've resolved our problems. No lessons needed other than me being the better fighter." He indicated the locker room. "Going to change, don't let anyone of them steal my wolf."

"Like Marlot would let himself get stolen," Grebor answered with a huff before returning to folding towels.

Chuckled, Trembor found a locker, his smile dropping as he remembered this was likely his last time here. Although he guessed saying goodbye to the place by sparring was the right way to do it. He placed his pack in the locker and undressed, pausing as he grabbed his underwear, sensing eyes on him.

"Don't stop," Marlot said, "that's the best part."

With a roll of the eyes, Trembor pushed them down. "Happy?"

The contented sigh was all the answer he needed. He turned and the sight of the black wolf chased his worries away.

"If you two start making out, a female said, I'm going to be sick."

Trembor shook himself, ears burning. How long had he stood, staring at his wolf?

"You'll find someone eventually," Marlot told the jaguar.

"I hate you," she replied without anger as she left.

"You know," his wolf said as he opened the locker next to Trembor's, "if you plan on sparring dressed like that, we might want to do it elsewhere."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Trembor took the shorts out of his pack.

"You, naked under me, all helpless and at my mercy." Marlot looked thoughtful. "Yes, I would like that." He gave Trembor a quick nuzzling before undressing.

The image of Trembor hidden in Marlot's house for the rest of his days passed through his head, accompanied with a mix of emotions, and one memory of being curled up in a corner, and dark-furred lion looking down on him with the promise he'd never let him go.

He shook Gorrek's memory out. The lion would never bother him again.

"Was I too forceful?" Marlot asked, concern in his tone.

"No, it's fine." Trembor smiled.

"I keep second-guessing myself."

Trembor squeezed his wolf's arm. "I'm glad you're paying attention, but don't

overdo it. I know you were being playful.”

“You smell worried.”

Trembor fought the fear and grinned. “You need to stop leading with that nose of yours. Not everyone appreciates having their emotional states exposed. And it’s the trial that’s worrying me, nothing more. My lawyer called and there’s something happening with the prosecution. He doesn’t know what, and it’s got him concerned. If he’s concerned, I’m worried because I know lawyers always downplay things to their clients.” At least Barany’s called had provided him with a way to divert his wolf’s curiosity.

“So still no idea when it’s going to be over?” Marlot was pulling his shorts up and Trembor considered making a job about not giving him a show, but the tone stopped him.

“Now you sound worried.”

His wolf shook his head. “Just finances. If the trial isn’t resolved soon, I might have to move to another office, or let Hela’han go.”

“Can Jesdan support her if that happens?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

Marlot smiled. “A certain lion told me not to pry into her life.”

“And you listened to him?” Trembor replied in disbelief. “Since when do you listen to what that lion says?”

Marlot’s smile faltered and Trembor cursed himself for going there, even in jest, with Marlot working to—the smile was back.

“Since he’d way smarter than I am.”

Trembor smiled back, putting on the feet protectors and gloves. “Talk to her about it. She’s an adult too, she deserves to know what’s going on; she probably knows already, she isn’t stupid. As for the office, I’d say downgrade right now.” He caught the surprised expression before Marlot could hide it. “There’s no telling how long the trial will go on. The female prosecutor had a piece of bad meat caught in her teeth about it. It’s easier to get a larger officer afterward than you ruining yourself trying to keep this one.”

“There are so many memories in it.”

Trembor took his dressed wolf’s arm and let him out of the locker room. “The memories won’t vanish because you’re in another building. And you’ll be able to make other memories.” Without me, popped in his head, and he had to close his mouth so his voice wouldn’t reveal more than he wanted.

They stepped into the ring and stretched. “How’s your investigation going?” he asked to turn the conversation away from him.

“Stalled,” Marlot replied, and launched himself at Trembor before the lion could say anything else. Trembor caught the arm and redirected his wolf in the ropes, only for Marlot to use them to launch himself at him again, this time dropping under Trembor’s arm and colliding with his legs, dropping them both to the mat. Trembor barrel rolled to get back up while Marlot rolled to his side, then stood.

“Stalled how?” Trembor raised his arms to protect his chest and face as he stepped sideways, watching his wolf for cues as to what he’d do.

“I told you Mixcoat was killed years ago according to the system, right?” Marlot moved to mirror Trembor, bobbing left and right as they moved, trying to confuse Trembor as to what his intentions were. “I found the male who paid his tax back then, but he doesn’t remember anything about it.”

Marlot came at him low, but his eyes were on Trembor’s chest, so he batted the arm when his wolf straightened at the last minute, and he spun, slamming his leg in Marlot’s side, sending him down. Trembor pushed his advantage but had to jump back as Marlot tried to scissor his legs out from under him.

“What do you know about his present death?”

“Broken neck.” Marlot got to his feet. “No indications he fought back. No trace of activities since that first death. A handful of sightings in the area where he died, which tells me he either went there regularly or had had business there in the days before he died. I have a general area where he might live, but it’s all apartment complex.”

Trembor went at Marlot with a series of kicks. “Sounds to me like you’re going to have to walk around and show the people in those building the picture.”

Marlot dodged, using his speed to his advantage. “I was hoping you’d do that for me.”

“What?” the surprise caused him to turn too slowly and he caught the foot in the side. Marlot didn’t have his strength, but there was enough there to unbalance him and Trembor had to catch himself in the ropes.

“You’re much better at dealing with people than I am.” Marlot stepped back instead of pressing his advantage.

“You know I can’t. My license is suspended.”

“Come on, who’s going to know?”

“Marl.”

“Trem.” His wolf smiled, then rushed him.

This time Trembor expected him. He moved to the side, caught his chest and stopped his momentum, putting his leg behind the wolf’s ensuring he ended up on his back, and then sat on him, legs on each side of his hips.

“It’s just you walking around, talking to people,” Marlot said, “it’ll give you something else to think about.”

“And if someone asked me why I’m doing it?”

His wolf shrugged. “Just tell them you’re helping out a friend, that’s not a lie.”

Trembor stood and offered Marlot his hand to pull him up. “I have the trial to deal with.” And other things. Like how to make sure those criminals couldn’t hurt my family after my death.

“And that’s stressing you. I’m not even trying and I can smell it, Trem.” Marlot dusted himself. “You can’t stop living just because of it. It’s going to pass, no matter how final it might seem now. You’ll get your license back.”

Trembor rubbed his face and moved to the opposite end of the ring. He needed

distance while he put himself together. “If the prosecutor even finds the hint of a scent I’m doing something I shouldn’t, it’s going to make things worse. I’m sorry, Marl, you’re on your own for this one. Or rather, I can’t help you. There are other RIs out there. Reach out to one of them.”

Marlot leaned against the corner. “You know how territorial we all are. It worked for us because of our relationship. None of them like me like you do.”

“I love you, Marl, not like, love.” It hurt to say it, knowing his plans.

“Exactly.” Marlot smiled. “None of them love me. A few actively hate me after Nikal.”

“Alright. So the other RIs are out. Have you talked with the department? They have technicians who have to be almost as good as you. If the system thinks he died six years ago, there has to be a report. Someone has to have noted the glitch.”

“No, it’s too long ago. The ID’s been filed away, the card destroyed.”

“Okay, then maybe it’s happened again.”

“What are the odds?”

“I don’t know, but if you don’t ask, you can’t know, can you?” Trembor stepped away from the ropes, feeling more confident about his emotional state and keeping the conversation on Marlot’s investigation. “Remember, there’s a system in place to help you. You don’t have to do this alone, even if I’m not there with you.” Trembor grinned as the realization registered on his wolf’s face, and he launched a series of kicks.

The lobby of the Revenue Bureau was teeming with activity, this male who was disputing his rating with a representative, that female who wanted to negotiate a higher survivor benefit on her dead mate. The one trying to claim she should be receiving the benefits, even if nobody had been found. No matter how fair a system was, there were always people unhappy with it, or errors that caused people difficulty. Fortunately, he didn’t have to bother with the lobby.

He swiped his ID to unlock the door and stepped into the machinery of the bureau. The people looking over the incidents the system flagged. The accountants who went over the system’s results because the people in charge still didn’t trust computers to be accurate. The programmers making sure the system was updated to the newest standard the government required.

Knowing the work required to accomplish that made Marlot happy he’d focused on his investigator career instead of making it his programing. He’d still be stuck back in Low Valley, dying with every second that passed. He stopped before the reception desk.

“RI Blackclaw, I need to speak with someone in regards to my case.”

“Is it about contesting that it’s yours?” the antelope asked.

“No, there’s anomalies with it and I’m hoping someone here has ideas about how I can handle it.”

“Consultant, got it.” She indicated a chair. “If you’ll have a seat, I’ll call someone.”

Marlot had just gotten comfortable in the chair when a fox offered him his hand. “RI Blackclaw, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Vlein, I’ll spare you my last name. My family’s originally from Arsbrugh and they never bothered getting it translated and my father’s a traditionalist who used to flay me alive anything I’d just translate it. ‘Don’t you have any respect for your ancestors?’ he’d yell. I loved the work you did as part of the bringing down Ruxul. And this recent capture of that hunter? That was impressive. Did you know only one hunter in a hundred is captured? Most of the time they are killed in the process of the hunt.”

Marlot shook the male’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He decided to ignore the praise. Being singled out for Ruxul still made him uncomfortable, and the less attention paid to Nikal, the better. “You’ll be my consultant?”

“I will, although I’m not sure how I’ll help. A male like you surely doesn’t need any help.”

“You realize there was a lot of luck involved in both captures, right?”

“Luck’s just the result of being well prepared, my grandfather always said.” He motions for Marlot to accompany him.

“I take it your grandfather didn’t track people down for a living.”

“Worked in a meat processing plant until his death.”

“Really? That seems odd for a predator to do.”

The fox shrugged. “My grandfather wasn’t the most aggressive male in his generation, timid is how most people described him. Grandmother is who did the hunting for their cubs.” He opened the door to an office. “He handled the finances.”

The office was spacious, with the wall in a calming sky blue and the floor covered with a grass-green carpet. Pictures of foxes covered one wall, bookcases the other two. Vlein indicated the chair as he stepped around his desk, then looked Marlot up and down as he sat.

“I’m mated,” Marlot said, uncomfortable under the hungry gaze.

“Sorry, I was calculating how much meat is on your body. That’s my primary job here. Resolving dispute of over the allocation of meat.”

“I didn’t realize that was an issue. Wouldn’t the predator who takes down the prey get the meat?”

“The problem arises when more with teams of predators. In a city this size, a lot of them find it easier to hunt in packs. Especially with the younger ones. Then of course comes time to paying the tax and as with almost anything revolving around money, no one wants to be the one doing it. The system isn’t designed to take payment from multiple people yet. Something we’re working on. But you’re not here for that, are you? How can I help you?”

“I’m not certain if you’re the right person. My problem isn’t around meat allocation.”

The fox waved that aside. “That’s my job. I’ve sort of become the go-to male for things out of the ordinary. Within the system. The odds are whatever your problem is, I’ve dealt with it in some way before.”

“This one might be a first even for you. I’m investigating a body that seems to have been killed twice.”

The fox leaned back in his chair. “Ah, the walking dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what I call them. Still walking around even those the system things they’re dead.”

“So it’s happened before?”

The fox chuckled. “I told you, if you’ve experienced it, I’ve come across it.”

“Then why didn’t the agent know about it when I called?”

Vlein grew serious. “Because they don’t know. The reason I’m the one handling most of them is that for the system to work, people at large have to believe it’s infallible. If the general population realized the system could be manipulated in any way. We’d go back to the early days when ninety percent of the bureau’s budget was spent having RI’s walk the street, adding the fear of being caught cheating the system to any hunt a predator engaged in.”

“Okay, but you know about them. So there’s a glitch in the system.”

Vlein shook his head. “We’ve gone over the system each time one was brought to our attention. As far as we can tell, they are caused by outside conditions.”

“Someone exploiting a flaw in the system?”

“No, not a flaw. They’re exploiting the way the system works itself.”

“But how?”

“You said it yourself. The person you’re investigating died twice. The system doesn’t care what happens to the body, so long as the tax is paid. The expectation is that they’re dead and will be eaten. But…” the fox looked at Marlot expectantly.

“The system doesn’t care if they aren’t.”

Vlein nodded.

“But why would anyone pay for a body they aren’t going to eat?” Marlot ask. “If you’re going to spend the money, you want to get something out of it.”

“I think that what they are getting out of it is labor.”

“You know who they are?” Marlot straightened. He hadn’t expected to get an actual answer to his problem.

“I know they’re criminals,” Vlein said, and Marlot deflated. Of course, they were criminals. “Organized crime, more specifically. I think this is some form of fraud they commit on the system, paying for a body that is worth little, then putting them to work in some fashion.” He pulled a form from a drawer and slid it toward Marlot. “That’s why I need you to fill this to the best of your ability as you investigate the body.”

“Paper?” Marlot stared at the fox, and he took it. “Wouldn’t it be easier to send it to my pad?” he looked it over.

“As I said, we need to keep this discreet. Right now, this market of fraudulent deaths is small, but if people realize it can be done. If corporations realized it. We’d have a giant problem on our hands.”

Marlot looked up from the form. “This is a productivity report. Hours worked,

value of the work. How do you expect me to know about those when I don't even know where the body lived?"

The fox smiled. "I have no doubt that a male like you can work it out."

Marlot wanted to glare, but as unusual as this was, it was his job. He needed to find out where Mixcoat lived, where he'd worked. If it wasn't tracked by the productivity system, getting exact numbers would be hard, but there was enough data to do estimations.

"How many cases of these fraudulent deaths have there been in, say, the last five years?"

"I'm aware of eight," Vlein answered.

Eight wasn't much, but it was a start. "Can I get the information you have on them?" he'd have to reconfigure his tracking program again. Get it to handle multiple data entry points, figure out some way to have it collect information on them from outside the system. That was going to be the tough one. The only way to function after 'death' was to keep away from anything that could record them.

"Do you have a way to use the information?" Vlein held a data slate.

"More like possible ideas. I won't know if they'll do my any good until I've tried them. How you found any kind of common element?"

"Various species, prey, and predators, if there's one element that could be called common, is that they all had a spell of bad luck before their 'death'."

"You think the criminal elements orchestrate that?"

The fox shrugged. "If they did, I didn't find any indications, but I'm not an investigator, so it's possible I missed the obvious. If you do find that they did engineer it, I'd like to know. That is one crime we could get them on if we can prove it." He handed the slate to Marlot. "You understand the nature of this information has to remain between us."

"I do." Marlot took the slate. "I'll keep the details to myself as much as possible. And not provide context when I do have to mention them." He looked at the sheet of paper. "You get I can't promise anything about this, right? I'm looking for who left the body to rot this time. Once I find him, I can close the case."

The fox smiled. "I'm confident a male as resourceful as you will find a way to complete most of this form in the process."

Marlot was annoyed that Vlein seemed to have taken his measure so quickly. He wouldn't be able to fill every box on the form, of that he was certain, but Marlot did intend to figure out as much as he could.

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "I'll keep you up to date."

* * * * *

The knock made Marlot look up from the screen. The lines of code were blurring together. Hela'han stood in the doorway. "I'm heading home, Jesdan just pulled up."

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow." He went back to the code. There had to be a way to get the multiple instances of identity to compare data as the program found them. He wrote more code.

* * * * *

He squinted at the screen and still couldn't make out what was on it. He glanced at his pad and his eyes took a few seconds to focus enough he saw the time. Way too late. He rubbed his eyes, which didn't help.

He saved his work. He could get back to it from home after eating.

He was outside, closing the door when the office pad rang. He debated getting it, but at this hour, when he shouldn't even be in the office anyway, it couldn't be urgent. He locked the office and headed home.

Trembor looked at the empty side of his bed. Marlot hadn't come over last night. Trembor hadn't asked, and Marlot hadn't offered. It wasn't like they'd spent every night together before, but one night with his wolf in bed with him and Trembor found himself missing his body. If not for what he was planning, he'd tell Marlot to sleep with him every night.

He ran a hand on the mattress.

Would it be so bad? He found himself wondering, to work for those criminals if it meant waking up next to his wolf every morning. He'd have to tell Marlot, of course. How would he take it, to have his strong and honest to a fault lion tarnished? To know that Trembor broke the law here and there because he was told to?

Marlot would go on a rampage. He would kill every one of them. Become a hunter, unless he made sure to only kill them as he could afford to pay for them. But that would put him up against the entire organization, and they would end up eating his wolf.

He grabbed a handful of sheets at the idea of Marlot eaten because of him. No. He wouldn't be the cause, even if it meant never seeing his wolf again. He smoothed the sheet and rolled on his back.

Getting up was becoming more difficult each morning. If he could he'd arranged to go to sleep and never wake up. There were probably pills that caused that. Maybe someone from vice would be able to point him in the right direction. No, they'd ask why, and it was possible that person would tell Maoma, then the mole would just send someone to harass him until Trembor gave up on that.

And did he really want to die that way? With a clear 'I gave up' message. He groaned. He'd never considered ending his life would be so complicated. And who paid for his tax if he killed himself? The pharmaceutical company whose pills he used? His family? No, he definitely wasn't doing that.

And before he did do it, he had things to do. People to say goodbye to. Affairs he needed to put in order. And that meant getting out of bed.

"Any minute now," he told the ceiling. Twenty minutes later, he was finally up at the insistence of his bladder. With that taken care of, his stomach made itself known and he headed to the kitchen and took the dregs out of the cooler. There was no putting that off anymore. He had to get himself meat today.

He added that to his list of things to do. Maybe he should pick a big prey and

hope that his distracted state would end everything. Only he couldn't saddle just anyone with his tax. He'd have to ask his father what happened to his productivity rating during the trial. He couldn't work, so his productivity should drop, but it was an outside cause. Since he hadn't been found guilty yet, his crime wouldn't affect it yet.

He added the question to his list and made a note to figure out how to ask it without having Torim realize why he was asking.

He was nearly done eating when someone buzzed his door. Unsure who it might be he answered it and was surprised to see a lioness a decade younger than he was. Before he could greet her, her eyes went wide, and she looked away, hand over her muzzle.

"Do you always answer the door naked, Trembor?" Dania asked.

He looked down at himself and the fog that had been clouding his mind burned away with a curse. He grabbed his jacket from the hook and covered himself. "What are you doing here Sis?"

She raised a bag without looking in his direction. "We got together, and I was chosen to bring you food. Mom figured you shouldn't have to go through your finances while you can't work."

He considered turning her away. He didn't think she was here to question him, but Dania was one of his smarter siblings. It wouldn't take much for her to notice things were off. Say, as if he refused help from his family?

Stifling a sigh, he stepped out of the way. "You know where the cooler is. I'm going to go get dressed."

Returning to the kitchen with pants and a shirt on, he watched his sister looking at the plate on the counter. "As usual, our timing's good. Were you actually waiting for us to bring you food?"

"No, I just." He fumbled for an excuse and settled on the truth. "I just forgot. I was going to go hunt today." Amidst everything else he was planning on doing.

"Let me warm you some edible cuts. Why do you keep gristle?"

Trembor shrugged. "I don't like to throw anything away. Normally I'll put it in the warmer for the day, let the gristle melt off. But I've... been preoccupied. How are things with you?"

"Oh, you know how the researcher's life is. All data and no excitement," Dania answered, placing a plate with a thick cut of meat in the warmer. Had they brought him the best cuts? "Although that's not entirely true right now. I've lost two assistants. Over the last two days. It's throwing my time table in shambles, and my bosses aren't happy about it." She leaned against the counter. "What about you? It's not like you to cut us off."

"I haven't cut you off," Trembor answered defensively. "I've just been busy."

The tilt of her ear was all the expression she needed to call him out on it.

"Fine. I've been out of it. This sitting at home not doing anything isn't exactly something I'm used to."

"You could visit our parents. I'm sure dad would enjoy the company."

“Right, because right now what I need to another lawyer telling me how I should behave to make sure the lawsuit goes in my favor.”

She chuckled. “Dad does have trouble leaving the law firm behind, doesn’t it?”

“You’d think that after six years he wouldn’t think of it anymore.”

The warmer dinged, and she handed him the plate. “Oh, he’s on the phone with them every day.”

“What? Since when?”

“Since he retired according to mom.”

He frowned, trying to ignore the smell of warm meat under his nose. “Lyria never mentioned that to me.”

“That’s because she’s my mother, not yours.”

Trembor tilted an ear at her. “They’re all out mothers.”

Dania sat opposite him. “Fine, but me and her share the bond of research. I mean, has your mom told you about that’s calls?”

Trembor shook his head. “No, but then I get most of my family news from the cubs and they aren’t exactly on top of what our parents are up to.”

She made a noise and looked at him expectantly.

“What?”

“Really? You’re going to claim you don’t know what I’m waiting on? You brought up the cubs. Bro, you haven’t taken their calls for two day now.”

Trembor patted himself for his pad, remembered it was in the bedroom, and rushed to get it. He couldn’t have turned it off. Marlot hadn’t spent the night. He grabbed it off the nightstand, and it *was* off. Had he been so out of it, he hadn’t remembered doing that? No, he had left it on, he realized as he tried to turn it on. And the battery had drained. When had he charged his pad last? That he didn’t remember.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, I’d say that’s the proper reaction to ignoring your nieces and nephews.”

“Good morning, Hela’han,” Marlot greeted the elephant as he stepped into the lobby, smiling. He’d thought of something to try with his tracking program, which should help collate the data he had and hopefully find common points. The weather also helped his mood. It had warmed to the point he was back to his usual suit jacket.

“Good morning, sir.”

“You’re looking particularly luminous today.” He sniffed the air. “Spent the night with Jesdan?”

Her ears fluttered and turned pink. She grabbed her trunk before it moved the keyboard. She stammered. “I, he.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you’re happy with him.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Marlot headed for the door to the office and turned. “Oh, I need to—”

“There was a call in the buffer,” Hela’han said at the same time. “I sent it to your desk.”

“Who was it?”

“A woman, she mentioned her name, but I didn’t note it down. Something about her husband.”

“Thanks. I’ll get back to her.” He entered the office and started his computer, setting his pad to link to it. Once it was connected, he listen to the message.

“Mister Blackclaw, it’s Mirden, you asked me questions a few days ago about my deceased husband, Hardir. Well, something strange just happened. I got home this evening, and I had a package waiting for me; from Hardir. It looks like it was mailed recently. You mentioned you thought he might not have died when I though the had, so this is making me think that maybe you were right. Because of that, I haven’t opened it. I figure it’s something you should do in case it’s important to your case. I’m going to be home all day tomorrow, so feel free to come by at any time.”

He called her back and received an automated message.

“The number you are calling has been put on hold due to the ID linked to it having been recorded as deceased, and the tax is being processed. If you are the owner of this number and you wish to contest the classification of deceased, please press one. If you are a relative and looking to inquire about survivor—” Marlot disconnected.

What were the odds it was a coincidence she’d been killed the night she’d received the package? Even if she’d implied her son fed the family, she was a predator. Her appearance matched her middle-level rating, so she wouldn’t be a cheap kill.

He called the revenue department and navigated the menu until he spoke to someone in the right department. He gave her his ID.

“How can I help you, RI Blackclaw?”

“I need to confirm a death, Mirden Mixcoat. She would have died during the night. I don’t have her ID, but I have her pad number, if that can help you.”

“Certainly.”

He gave it.

“Yes. Mirden Mixcoat’s tax was paid at ten forty-three last night.”

“Who paid it?”

“Can I have the case number this relates to?”

Marlot hesitated.

“Mister BlackClaw,” she said in the silence. “You know I can’t release that information without a case number.”

“I know. I’m just trying to decide if I can officially link her to it.”

“So she isn’t relevant to the case?”

“I’m certain she is, but it’s complicated. The body I’m investigating is her husband, only officially he died a few years ago. So I can’t name the body as such, the system keeps sending an error flag in response. Without giving my body her husband’s name and ID number, I’m not sure if any internal investigation will come back against me.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do anything about that.” She sounded as confident as Marlot felt.

“I understand. I’ll see what I can do to fix this and call back.” He disconnected and called the department again, this time going directly to Vlein.

“RI Blackclaw, such a pleasure to speak with you again, if it’s to tell me you’ve filled out the form, mailing it would have been enough.”

“That’s not why.” Right, the form. He needed to deal with that, too. “I’m hoping you can help me pull information on a kill. Hardir Mixcoat’s mate was killed last night. I can’t officially get the details about who paid her tax since I can’t name my body yet. How did the other RIs deal with the fact the body they were investigating had already died?”

“They filled out the form, found who had killed them, and we charged them. The system isn’t particular about who the body was, just that the tax is paid.”

“So it was paid as what, unidentified?”

“Yeah, we borrow the classification from the Missing Person Bureau.”

“Hasn’t anyone investigated the fact they died twice?”

“The details were sent to the enforcers, that’s their department.”

Marlot knew who he was going to call next. “Can you get me the details surrounding Mirden Mixcoat’s death? You said those walking dead cases probably have a link to organized crime, so I want to see if her death was linked to her husband dying again.”

“I can pull the information. I can have it for you later today.”

“Thank you.” He disconnected and called his contact within the enforcers.

“Hey Wolf,” Bahamel said in greeting, “tell me you aren’t calling because your lion is in trouble again and you’re freaking out.”

“I wasn’t freaking out that last time.”

“If you say so. How can I help you?”

“What do you know about cases of bodies dying twice?”

“It’s science fiction,” she replied flatly.

“I’m talking about fraud, Ba.”

“That’s more your department than mine.”

“The financial side of it has been dealt with, or so I’m told, so the investigation into who’s behind them has been sent your way.”

“When you say ‘who’s behind them’, you’re talking organized crime.”

“That’s what I’m told, although the Bureau agent who’s handling them doesn’t have evidence. It’s just the kind of thing he sees criminals doing.”

“I won’t disagree, but I haven’t heard anything about investigations on people dying twice. Are you sure they were sent to us? Organized crime comes through my department.”

“My understanding is that they don’t happen often. Can they have been resolved without needing to escalate to you?”

“Sure, if it’s a rare thing I’d expect stories to make the rounds.”

“Can you look into it and let me know?”

“Of course, anything for you, Wolf.”

“Thanks.” He disconnected and grabbed his jacket. Now he needed to confront a grieving family to get that package.

(need to indicate the results of the calls to the cubs)

The weather was pleasant, finally. Enough Trembor hadn't been able to stay inside. He'd driven randomly, and when even being in the car proved to be too confining, he parked and began walking. His driving hadn't been as random as he'd thought; he was walking through Safe Knoll. His hunting territory. Maybe his subconscious was reminding him he needed to hunt.

He had enough, with what Dania brought him, to last a week, and things could be over in a week. He hoped they would be. He hated this handing state, where he was stuck waiting for things to happen on one side and working up the strength to make them happen on the other.

Maybe a hunt *would* do him good. It wasn't like he had to worry about how much the body would cost him. It would give him something else to think about for a few minutes.

He looked at the other pedestrian, surprised to notice they were close to him. Normally they kept their distance from the predators walking the street. Had his mood been so dark he'd felt like one of them? Was that what marked prey? This constant waiting to die? For it to be over? He couldn't imagine that being true. He knew prey that were more alive than some predators.

He chuckled. More alive than he was these days. Hela'han, for all that she was quiet and shy, had a joy of living about her. More after Jesdan became part of her life.

His mood had to play a part in how he'd accidentally camouflaged himself; those closer to him were now away. They'd felt the change, realized a predator was among them?

He wasn't the only one. He could spot four others on the prowl, now that he was looking, it made him realize how archaic the mindset that called this neighborhood his territory was. A territory implied he was the only one allowed to make use of it. He was the only one who benefited from his RI territory. Had been the only one. So if this was really his hunting territory, he should chase off the intruders.

But he didn't feel the urge. Had never felt it. He had no problem sharing the neighborhood with other predators. It had to be a mindset dating to older times, back when the prey population wasn't as abundant. When the availability of naturally growing food kept their numbers down. Back then. Having another predator intrude in his territory could mean going hungry.

He wondered what it would be like to feel the need to protect what was his, and smiled. He knew what that was like. He'd almost killed a male to protect Marlot. He'd wanted him dead not because of hunger but because he'd dare hurt his wolf. He should have been angrier about what Nikal had but his brother through, but Bo was his brother, Marlot was his life.

He forcefully changed the direction his thought took. He couldn't think about Marlot now, not with what he'd do soon.

He realized now could be the best time. The prey around wouldn't kill him accidentally, but those predators would defend themselves if attacked. The problem there was that they might refuse to kill him, preferring litigation over food. Dressed in his wool vest and slacks, he looked more expensive than everyone else here. Predators had the training to hold back a scared prey lacked.

The lack of certainty of even that decision; to force a predator to kill him to defend themselves got to Trembor more than he expected. He'd thought more things in his life were certain. He'd thought how his death would happen was certain, a hunt gone bad, the way nearly all predators died. But now even that lacked certainty.

One of the predators took off running, and Trembor found her prey, an antelope calling for help, while the others just moved out of the way. This was common enough they knew not to get involved. They didn't even complain. It was simply the balance of life and death. Someone had to die, and today it wouldn't be them.

Did they rejoice? Did they celebrate this extra day of life? Or did they simply plod on, knowing it was only a question of time?

"And I'm getting too philosophical." He was a predator. Beyond making sure not to hunt an area to extinction, preys' lives shouldn't be a concern to him. "Maybe gaining sentience wasn't such a great thing after all." His ancestors almost certainly never wondered if the prey enjoyed life or not. Survival had been all-encompassing.

He paused, looked around. Was he going to hunt anyone? He didn't need the food, he couldn't be sure even the biggest prey would kill him. So what was he doing here? There were more enjoyable places to appreciate the warm weather while it lasted.

He turned to head back to his car and paused on seeing the pair of males approaching. A fox and a hyena; neither looked like they lived here, their jeans and jackets too clean, not sufficiently worn. They weren't hunting the people here. Their eyes were fixed on him.

Couldn't they just call, like everyone else? He waited for them.

The fox looked him over and smiled in appreciation.

"I'm mated," Trembor felt the need to say before he received a different offer than the one he expected.

"Am I supposed to care?" the fox replied, his voice full of malice. "It's my understanding you belong to us now."

"Someone wants to see you," the hyena said before Trembor could tell the fox what he thought of that, or show him. He could kill him, and he was certain he could afford him.

That leering smile made it difficult not to reach and snap his neck, but Trembor looked at the hyena. "Someone? Is it a thing with you people that you never use the name of the person giving you your orders, or has Maoma been replaced?"

"Oh, he's got a mouth on him," the fox said. "I'd love to see what it can do with he's not using it to talk."

“My mouth can bite it off, if that’s what you’re wondering about,” Trembor replied without looking away from the hyena.

“Maoma wants to see you. She said not to rough you up.” He glared at the fox. “Unless you made things difficult for us.”

The fox grinned. “So, if you’d be so accommodating as to make things difficult, I, for one, would really appreciate it.”

The hyena’s ears folded back. “Please don’t listen to him. I don’t want to have to hurt you.” The hyena was muscular, and had the controlled demeanor of someone used to their strength. Which meant there would be no accidentally killing Trembor.

“Lead the way,” Trembor said, and smiled at the disappointment the fox showed.

Marlot sat, watching the house. His instinct was to go there, knock and demand to see the package Mirden Mixcoat called him about. He’d set a foot out of the car when he wondered if that might not be him barging in to get what he wanted again. He’d called Trembor to get his opinion, but his buffer answered.

Now he was unsure what he should do. If the package had been sent by Hardir Mixcoat, it was linked to his case so he could make demands, but the family had just lost their mother. He wanted a second opinion on his plan of action.

What did it say about his relationship with his lion that for the years he’d known him, he’d basically ignored his advice anytime he said not to barge into other people’s lives to get what he wanted?

“That I can be a self-centered asshole, probably.” He took a breath and exited the car. “You can do this, Marlot. Just remember there are cubs there who have lost their mother, they won’t be as understanding about it as her older son.”

He buzzed the door and tried to make himself seem understanding. Her son hadn’t seemed particularly responsible, but Marlot had only seen him or a minute or so. For all he knew, he could be—

“Yes?” a female wolf asked. She was in her mid-twenties, her fur red, with only hints of brown. Her appearance threw Marlot, and he forgot what he’d planned to say. “Look,” she said, visibly keeping her annoyance under control. “If you’re here because of my mother, she died yesterday. Whatever she said, there’s nothing I can do about it.” She looked over her shoulder and Marlot realized there was quiet crying coming from the living room.

“I’m sorry,” Marlot managed to say and fumbled for his ID. “You’re her daughter, the eldest. I’m Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw.”

“I am.” She studied the ID. “Are there irregularities with my mother’s death?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I’m here...” he faltered. How much should he tell her? She was already dealing with the fallout of her mother’s death. Normally he’d just dump everything on her and ignore the disaster that caused. “She called me yesterday, sometime before her death, and said she’d received a package that’s relating to a case I’m investigating.”

“The dad lookalike!” a male said from the living room. “I told you about that,

Jar.”

Jar. Jareth, Mirden had said her oldest daughter was called that.

She rubbed her temple. “Okay, so she called you.”

“I’m wondering if you know where that package is.” She fixed her gaze on him, and Marlot decided running away might be a good idea.

“You’re kidding, right? Do you have any idea what it’s like to deal with five cubs who lost their mother and are too young to understand why? The only thing me and Brathen have been doing for the last eight hours is trying to explain and comfort them. I’m sorry, but I don’t have the time or interest to rummage around the house to look for some package.”

Marlot almost told her he could do it, but caught himself. They were grieving. Was his need to figure out what that package had to do with his case more important? His instinct screamed yes. But he decided that was his usual need to get things his way.

“Can I send you my information? In case you do find it when things calm down?”

Jareth looked like she’d rather slam the door in his face, but after letting out a slow breath, she took her pad out and Marlot sent her his contact. She closed the door before he could add anything.

At least she hadn’t slammed it, he told himself as he headed to the car.

He leaned against the door and raised his head, letting the sun warm him. What could he do without it? Nothing was the obvious answer.

How had she known it was from her husband? He’d written his name on it. He might even have written his address; some of the older folks back at the commune did that because back before the mail system was fully automated, packages tended to end up in strange places. Having the provenance on them meant they would be returned if, for some reason, it wasn’t delivered.

The automated system.

He took his pad out and searched for the mail office’s number. The system tracked every step in a package’s movement. It might have the provenance, or at least a smaller area to search for where Hardir had lived.

“I’m RI Blackclaw,” Marlot said, then gave his number. “I need to find out where a package originated from.”

“What’s the transit number?” the bored male asked.

“I don’t have it.”

“I’m sorry, without a transit number I can’t—”

“Look, I know you can. I have the destination address, you can do a search for that.”

“Sir, without a transit—”

“Listen to me carefully.” Marlot’s lips stretched in a smile, his desire to get his way pushing to the surface and feeling no need to stop it. “You don’t want me to have to show up and track you down in that office.” He wasn’t talking to a person, he was talking to the representative of a government organization. “So you’re going to do the search and track it back to its origin point. If I need to go and help you, the department

will need to find someone to sit at your desk.” He had the authority to get him to strip and dance on his desk if he could find a way to justify it as part of his investigation.

The imagery made him smile, as did the fear in the male’s voice as he hurried to do as he was told.

“What is it with you people and restaurants?” Trembor grumbled to himself as they entered the well-appointed establishment.

“Would you rather we take you in a seedy back alley?” the hyena asked.

“At least there would be no doubt as to what kind of organization you are.” He followed the hyena, with the fox trailing behind them, past the tables with sweet-smelling meats. He hadn’t had candied meat in years, and Trembor fought not to salivate. Lyria had a recipe he kept promising himself he’d try to replicate. He was sure he could win Marlot over to bake meats with those.

Maybe he could take Marlot here as a last meal together.

A beaded curtain led to a private dining room when Maoma sat eating a confection Trembor didn’t recognize. She bit into it and the surface cracked, letting juices flow that she hurried to lick with a chuckle.

“Forgive me,” she said as she cleaned her muzzle with a towel from a stack on a warming plate. “I haven’t eaten here in a few months and I didn’t think they would convince you to come this quickly.” She indicated the chair opposite her.

“I prefer getting things I don’t like out of the way as quickly as I can.” He sat and did his best not to make out what was on her plate. Large insects, he thought. He hadn’t expected it to be something restaurant prepared, since it was only a minority of species who ate them. Jaxca ordered his from an out of country provider.

“Really?” she gave him a knowing smile. “Then this refusal to accept my proposition is because you enjoy the position it places you in?”

“No. That’s a moral objection to having anything to do with criminals like you.”

She smiled. “I’ve told you before, Mister Goldenmane, we are a business, like so many others. The fact the government thinks the services we provide shouldn’t be allowed doesn’t change the fact that there’s a demand for them.”

“One you manufactured,” Trembor said flatly.

“Really? I’d be curious to know how you think we created the market we operate in. After all, we didn’t create the products we sell, nature did. We simply found ways to streamline the supply chain from production to customer.”

“You’re really going to try to convince me the facts there are plants with addictive properties in nature justifies you addicting people to them?”

“Someone has to provide a needed product. If not us...” she smiled. “Well. That’s not what we’re here to discuss, is it?”

“You forced me here, so you can talk about whatever you want.”

“Would you like one?” she indicated her plate. “Cracked roach. Very good. They’re dipped in melted sugar.” She paused. “I’m not certain how familiar with baking you are, or in this case candy making, this is closer to that than outright baking.”

“I thought you know everything about me? And no, I’ll pass, thank you.”

“I don’t know everything about you, Mister Goldenmane. No one can know everything about someone else, no matter how close they are. I simply know what I need to know about you to ensure our conversations are productive.”

“Seems to me productive would mean I’ve agreed to work for you, which I won’t.”

She shrugged and ate another of the candied insects, giggling as the sugary shell cracked and she had to hurry to eat it before the inside dripped all over her muzzle. She looked like a young female in that moment. And if not for the history between the two of them, Trembor might find it endearing—which might be the point, he realized.

She wiped her muzzle clean. “Tell me, how is your family doing?”

Trembor tensed. “If you have—”

She eyed him. “You tell me. If one of them had been attacked, they would come to you, wouldn’t they? Even in your current situation, you’re still your family’s confidant. Has anyone come to you with such problems? Like maybe one of your sisters?”

Trembor ground his teeth to keep from roaring. It wouldn’t scare that mole, and he shouldn’t be surprised they knew Dania had visited. After all, they’d demonstrated they could follow him with him knowing about it. Watching his house was simple comparatively.

Except Dania hadn’t mentioned any attacks. She’d brought him meat, they’d talk about her work, which was in jeopardy because she’d lost a few technicians. He glared at the mole.

“You ate Dania’s assistants,” he growled.

“I?” Maoma chuckled. “Please, do I look like someone how eats.” She motioned to him with a waving finger. “People? I had employees eat them.”

Trembor stood and planted his hands on the table, leaning on them. “If you do anything to hurt my sister, I am going to—”

“Please sit down, Mister Goldenmane.” She fixed her eyes on him and any amusement was gone. They were cold, calculating. The eyes of someone who did the intimidating, she received it. “I promised you I wouldn’t touch your family. And I haven’t. You never said anything about the people around your family. Isn’t it interesting how interconnected we all are? How one person becoming someone’s meal can make another’s work more difficult to do? Despite all the system society puts in place to maintain productivity, it does seem to break down someone on the individual level, doesn’t it? Especially among professionals. It’s not as easy to replace a skilled technician as it is a factory worker.”

Trembling with the effort not to jump over the table and eat her, Trembor sat. “I swear to you—”

“Please, don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she cut him off, tone flat. “It’s unbecoming of a male like you. The situation is simple. I’ve given you time to come to your senses. I’m still not going to force you. But you’re going to stop this downward

spiral you seem determined to proceed with.”

Trembor blinked, anger washed away by the surprise.

“Did you think I wouldn’t realize what your visit to the precinct you work out of was about? Or visiting your cousin’s bar? The talks you’ve had with other of your friends? The distance you’re keeping with the wolf you love so much?”

“If you even think of touching him or anyone around him, you’ll find out how dangerous I can be.”

She smiled. “No need to worry. I’m already familiar with how far you’re willing to go for him. If you’ll remember, your brother was there when he stopped you from killing that hunter. Bo was rather hurt you did that for the wolf, rather than him. So I promise, Marlot Blackclaw and the people around him are perfectly safe from me. I want you working for me, Mister Goldenmane, not on a crusade to destroy me and mine.”

“Then leave my family out of this.”

Her eyes went wide. “I have, you know I haven’t touched any—”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it,” he snapped. His anger returning. “You’re going to leave them, their job, the people they depend on, alone.”

Her smile turned nasty. “That depends entirely on you.”

“You can’t force me to do anything,” Trembor said through clenched teeth.

“I’m telling you, Mister Goldenmane, that this isn’t going to end with your death. I will keep eating away at the support system of everyone in your family. I will destroy them without breaking my word to you. Without even twisting what I said. You won’t know what’s happening to them, since you’ll be dead, but I do promise you this. They are going to wish you had taken them with you.”

Trembor’s stared at her, utterly calm. He didn’t know how he could be this calm since a second before he’d been ready to explode, but now he was calmly evaluating the situation. It was her, his two minders, and how many others right outside the door? She was smart enough not to think she was safe in his presence.

And would her death ensure his family was safe? What had she set in place as insurance? He stood and his minders tensed. She motioned them down.

He nodded to her. “You’ve accomplished what you wanted,” he told her coldly. “You’ve made sure my downward spiral is over.”

“I’m glad I could convince you to come to your senses. Kold and Groniel will escort you back to your car.”

“Not unless you want them to be my next meal.” Trembor looked at her. “You’re off-limits. No one else. If one of your thugs comes close to me again. I will eat them. Do we understand each other?”

She smiled. “We will keep our distances so long as you maintain that joy of life you used to have.”

The smile he responded with couldn’t be anything pleasant, but she didn’t react to it. “Oh, you have no idea how I’m going to enjoy this life I have from now on.” He turned and exited.

Once outside, he didn’t deflate as he’d expected. Whatever state he was in

continued as he called Cerek.

“Hey Bro, you okay? It’s not like you to call in the middle of the day.”

“I’m fine,” Trembor answered. “How about you?”

“I’m good. You know that.”

“How’s your job been?”

Cerek chuckled. “You know how it is in the advertising industry. Ups and downs. Artists are a fickle bunch.”

“So nothing out of the ordinary?”

“There’s a bug going around, but with winter coming and that cold snap of the last few days, it’s not surprising. It seems to be more virulent the usual, but they’ll get over it and our productivity is going to climb back. You’re starting to sound like mom.”

“Sorry, Dania’s had some bad luck at her job, lost a couple of technicians. I guess I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I appreciate that you worry, but I’m fine. I should be asking how you are. You seemed a little done last time I saw you.”

“I’m good, just the lawsuit. I’ll see you later.” He disconnected before Cerek could reply and had Bo’s number up before remembering he wouldn’t be reliable.

He called Elin, then Vex, Baytil, Fanea, Atilen, and Harezik, and the story was similar. Some difficulties at work because people around them were sick, or had lost a family member, or had gotten a better offer at another company. Nothing so grave they would mention it to him, but every working member of his family was having a bad few days.

If he wasn’t worried his parents would pick up on why he was calling, he’d check with them too, although he couldn’t see how Maoma could interfere with their retirement.

Once he was done with his calls, he had to admit she’d succeeded. He had no intention of killing himself anymore. No, he was going to make sure that his death was like a bomb exploding in the middle of her little organization and took as many of them as he could with him.

Now he just had to figure out how to do it without the mole realizing it.

The mail’s receiving center was on the ground floor of an apartment complex, accessible from both inside and outside. The building was located a few blocks from where the body had been found, so Marlot was hopeful he’d finally get something.

The people at the counter were clearly on the lower side of middle-rated, if not the upper one of low rated. The clothing everyone wore was worn to the threads, and they kept looking around furtively for anyone paying them too close attention. Even the few predators in the line to the counter tensed on noticing Marlot watching them. Prey or predator didn’t matter at their rating level, which made Marlot think they were even lower than they appeared.

He stepped in line. Other than the people, the room itself gave no indication of the

rating of the occupant. It was like all the others: a small room with the counter and the various envelopes and boxes for larger items on the walls for customers to purchase. Parcels were the only thing Marlot still mailed, everything else he handled through the network. But by the numbers of envelopes passing back and forth over the counter, here, most people still did things the old fashion way. Marlot even saw bills used to pay for what they mailed.

When his turn came the male behind the counter, a young, thin bear startled on standing from putting a package away. His scent was one of worry, bordering on fear. As Marlot took out his ID, the bear looked around and Marlot realized they were the only ones in the room.

“RI Blackclaw,” Marlot said. “I’m not hunting,” he added when that didn’t calm the young male. By his clothing, he lived in this area and probably shared in the low rating.

“How.” He swallowed. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for information on a package that was mailed from here eight days ago.”

“Eight days? I don’t remember that far.”

“Cut you use a computer, right?” Marlot nodded to it behind the counter. “You do scan every envelope and package that is shipped.”

The bear nodded, his fear cranking up. Marlot wondered if he wasn’t engaging in something less than legal in his position at this store. He’d mention it to Bahamel the next time he saw her. Unless his fear was covering up the scent of an unpaid body under the counter, it wasn’t something Marlot needed to investigate.

“So how about you pull out that day’s scan so I can search for the destination address?”

“I.” The bear’s fear cranked up again. The whole room reeked of it now. Marlot was getting worried he might drop dead of fear. He’d never heard a bear doing that, but if he didn’t calm this one, he might find out if they were susceptible.

“Do you know what a RI does?”

The bear shook his head.

“I investigate unpaid bodies. Nothing else. The way you’re reacting, I’m thinking you’re using your position to run a racket that might not be legal, but that isn’t my problem. So I’m going to promise you that I won’t mention how scared you are to anyone. So please calm down.”

The bear nodded, but it still took a full minute before he was able to do more than tremble. In that time, the door to the inside of the complex opened twice and immediately closed; the fear kept anyone from wanting to be in here with them.

Finally, the bear turned to the computer and produced a printout. The date matched, so Marlot went down the destination column until he had the one he wanted. Unfortunately, it didn’t give an address of origin.

With a curse, he pushed the printout away. He’d been so sure.

“What— what are you looking for?” the bear asked cautiously.

“I’m trying to find out where the package was sent from. I mean where the person lived.”

“Oh. Which entry is it?”

Marlot indicated the line.

“That came from apartment eighteen-o-six.” The bear had his finger in the column with a series of numbers. “We have to enter their apartment since they can’t pay with their Id.”

“Do you know who lives there?”

The bear shook his head. “I’m sorry, I deal with too many people.”

“Thanks.” Marlot entered the complex. The lobby was crowded with people milling around. Those closest to the door entered the mail center as soon as he stepped toward the elevators.

The eighteenth floor was cleaner than he expected. This wasn’t the first low-rate complex Marlot had had to visit in his times in the city, and one of the ways they tended to survive was by cutting as many corners as possible, which meant maintenance and cleaning were barely done. This hall in comparison looked better than some of the higher-middle rated apartment complex he’d been to.

He knocked and heard motion behind the door. Marlot glance around for a camera, but this was too low rated to provide the occupant with a way of seeing who was at their door. They had to open it to—

The door opened a crack, a chain keeping it from opening fully. “Yes?” a brown eye looked at him, widened, and the door closed, leaving traces of fear scent where the opening had been.

“Well, that was unexpected.” Marlot knocked again. “It’s too late to pretend you aren’t there,” he said, raising his voice. “If it helps, I’m not here for you.” *Unless you killed Hardir.* but Marlot didn’t think it was the case.

After a few seconds, the door opened again, stopping at the length of the chain. White fur around the eye, orange and black at the edges; A tiger. Still smelling scared. “What do you want?”

“RI Blackclaw.” Marlot showed his ID, and the male glanced at it. “Do you know Hardir Mixcoat?”

“No,” the tiger stated, and the scent of lying mixed with the fear.

“Can I come in?” Marlot asked.

“Am I a suspect?”

Marlot tilted an ear. That was quite the jump. “Should I consider you a suspect?”

The tiger’s fear climbed. Then he closed the door. The sound of the chain being removed, and the door opened.

The apartment was sparse but tidy. Marlot closed the door behind him but stayed by it. “Now, how about we do this again? Did you know Hardir Mixcoat?”

The tiger glanced at the closed door.

“I’m going to take that as a yes,” Marlot said before the tiger opened his mouth.

“I didn’t say anything.” The tiger hurried to say.

“Your body spoke for you. What’s your name?”

The tiger bit his lower lip as he dropped on the old couch. “Grift, Grift Stripes.” The name sounded made up. Too exact for who the tiger seemed to be, but Marlot decided not to bother with that.

“Grift, what is your connection to Hardir?” Marlot indicated the closed door

“We just shared the apartment,” the tiger answered, and he was too far for Marlot to scent if he was lying, but he was fidgeting. Not as reliable a signal, but an indicator the tiger wasn’t at ease.

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

Grift shrugged. “A while ago. He went out and didn’t come back.”

“Can check his room?”

“Go ahead, but there’s nothing much. He didn’t have anything.”

“Do you know where he was from?”

“We just shared the place, we weren’t friends or anything.” The tone made Marlot suspect that was the truth, but he had trouble imagining sharing a place and not at least becoming friendly with one another.

The room had a bed, a dresser, and nothing else. It smelled somewhat like the body, but the scent was definitely a week stale. The dresser contained clothing.

“What did Hardir do for a living?” Marlot asked, exiting the bedroom.

“I don’t know.” Again the tiger fidgeted. How far could Marlot push his authority? The tiger was already scared of him. Not enough to be entirely honest, but—the image of an elk behind an interrogation table. Marlot leaning on it screaming at him, the reek of fear filling the small room—no. He wasn’t ripping someone apart again on anything more than his desire for answers.

He let out a breath and looked around for any indication the death had happened here. With a broken neck, the body could have been moved without leaving a trace, but there wasn’t even the stale scent of death here. Grift was hiding something, but unless Marlot found evidence as part of his investigation linking the tiger to the death, he’d leave him alone.

“Thank you for answering my questions.”

The surprise on the tiger’s face confirmed he was hiding something. He’d clearly been scared Marlot would push something, and that almost made him stop and push, but he stepped out of the apartment.

He didn’t want to be that kind of male anymore.

That didn’t mean he couldn’t poke into who Grift really was. On the ground floor, he found the building manager and after showing him his ID and an explanation of the trouble the female could be in legally if she didn’t comply, he obtained a listing of all the occupants.

If she lodged a complaint against him, he did trace Hardir all the way to the building as justification for requesting the list.

The bustle of the house almost broke Trembor’s facade.

“Trem!” Cerek called as his brother hurried by. “Where have you been?” he vanished in the kitchen before Trembor could answer him. The females were there, so he’d timed it right. He wouldn’t have to try to entertain the cubs for hours while everyone waited.

“Trembor,” Arina said, approaching arms wide, and covered in blood, “How are you doing?”

He stopped his mother with a hand. “I’m good. Messy kill?”

“Oh, sorry, yes. Alasa got over-excited today and forgot to sheath her claws. Opened the neck.” She chuckled. “It’s been a long time since I had to clean this much blood out of my clothes.”

“Are you okay?” Trembor asked before he could stop himself? “Is dad, Sarene, and Lyria?”

“Of course.” She searched his face, losing some of her joviality. “Is there a reason we wouldn’t be?”

“No, of course not.” He shook his head and reminded himself he couldn’t raise suspicion. There would be nothing worse than his family realizing the problems they were having were his fault. They’d insist on helping him fix everything, and he could be responsible for them being injured. “The whole trial thing’s got me seeing problems everywhere.”

“Well, just remember that we’re here for you. I better go change. You should go see the cubs. They’ve missed you.”

“I will.” He kissed his mother on the cheek before she left. “Ufen,” he called, seeing Baytil’s mate bringing plates to the table.

“Hey Trem, how are you holding up?”

“I should be asking you, shouldn’t I? Have things improved?”

He chuckled. “The news cycles shift fast, but not that fast. It was only yesterday you asked me that. Don’t worry. The network will have more newsies on the street before the rating drop by more than a point or two. I can still spare someone to cover your trial if you want. We can make it a heart-warmer. Brother gets in legal trouble to protect his brother. It would be easy to turn the public in your favor.”

“Thanks, but that’s still a no. With all due respect for you and your network, newsies turn everything into a circus. I just want this to go by quietly.” He took some of the plates and help his brother-in-law.

“Not my territory, got it; but if another network publishes the story, you and I will have words.”

“If they do, it’s against my wishes, so we can hunt them down together.”

Ufen grinned. “Oh, a hunt, that’d be a change. Bay is a bit of a traditionalist on those, she lets me in on every fourth or fifth one.” He lowered his voice and Trembor readied himself for something juicy about his sister. “Do you need me to write up a piece to smooth things over once your dad finds out about you and a certain wolf having been seen together?”

Trembor’s jaw dropped.

Ufen snorted. “You should see your face.”

“How? How do you know? Do my parents?”

“Well, I didn’t know, not until now. Knowing your parents, we wouldn’t be talking if they knew. As for the how, Bo called a few days ago, and we talked. He implied a thing or two and my instincts said there was something to it and now I know. Don’t worry. Not going to make it a news story, but if you need me to spin what’s happening in a way your parents will not skin you and the wolf alive when they find out, I’m going to need details.”

“What did you and Bo talk about?” Trembor didn’t like the timing. They talked only a few days before Ufen’s network’s began losing their best newsies? He hadn’t thought about asking that when he’d called his siblings, and he wasn’t sure it would have helped. Everyone in his family talked to everyone else.

“Life, work, you know the usual.”

Trembor nodded, and they finished setting the table.

“Vex,” he called another of his brother. “You seen Bo today?”

“The way he and dad almost unsheathed claws the last time? I doubt he’ll be over.”

“You spoke to him recently? Any idea how he’s doing?”

“A few days ago, maybe four or five. Like I told you, things have been busy at work, sort of lost track of time. I’m going to have to get right back there after dinner to cover one of the shit.” He began heading away and turned. “Bro, how pissed would you be if I called that wolf to see if he’s willing to help out? He’s got programming knowledge and we could really use a few extra hands until we fill the vacancies.”

“His name is Marlot, and go ahead. I’m sure that if he isn’t busy with cases, he’d love helping you.”

Vexori stared at him.

“What?”

“You used his name.”

“It is his name.”

“You used his name without cursing immediately after.” His brother’s lips stretched into a smile. “You and him are back together.”

Trembor grabbed him by the neck before his brother could open his mouth again. “Keep that to yourself.”

“Come on, you and him were perfect, are perfect. I’m happy for you.”

“And I’m happy too.” Although Trembor was cursing himself for letting it slip. “But can you imagine Serene’s reaction to me and him being together after she was ready to eat him? He broke her heart. I can’t just walk in and tell them we’re trying again after that.” And even less because it wouldn’t amount to anything but everyone in his family raising their hopes for him, and then he’d be the one disappointing them.

“Okay. I get your point. But bro, you are going to have to watch what you say if you don’t want the others to figure it out. Ufen can piece things together better than anyone of us.”

“He already knows.”

“See. If you don’t go back to being morose and cursing that wolf every time you open your mouth, even my mother will figure things out, and as much as I love her, she is the slowest of those four.”

“I know. I’m trying to be careful.”

“Trem, you were never careful with your heart. It’s why we love so much and come to you with our problems. You won’t try to act like it doesn’t affect you we can see how badly we screwed up on your face even when you pick your words carefully. Honestly, you should just tell them.”

“Once the trial is over,” Trembor said, figuring everything would be done before that considering how long his lawyer would stretch it out as a way to discourage Prosecutor Flattooth from pursuing this to the maximum she’d promised she would.

“Okay, that’s fair. One problem at a time, right?”

“Yeah.” Trembor sat in his father’s chair to get out of the way of the others. Torim wouldn’t mind since he was preparing the body for dinner with... he looked around or who was missing. Cerek, obviously, Herelix too and, Jures and Tiven.

A mass landed on his lap and Dayra stared at him. “Why didn’t you come up?”

“That’s grandpa’s chair,” Nerik said, climbing next to Dayra. “You are in so much trouble.”

The rest of the cubs entered the living room and Trembor had to entertain them until dinner was ready.

* * * * *

“And to those who are absent,” Torim said, finishing the toast. His father had purposely avoided Bo’s empty seat, while Herelix had been stoic, and Isenson hunched in on himself. Trembor wasn’t sure how the two had made it here without their fathers. He’d make sure to ask before the evening was over. Isenson seemed to be taking all of it pretty badly, and Trembor was sure Herelix acted like he did just because he thought that as the oldest he needed to be the adult. He had to talk some sense into his brother, for the sake of these two if nothing else.

“Sorry,” he told Fanea, who’d just asked him a question. “What?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re usually better at paying attention, brother.”

“I’m usually not buried under a lawsuit,” he replied, going for making light of his situation.

It only caused her to fold her ears back with the next eyeroll. “Please, with Torim as our father, a lawsuit is no more threatening than a rabbit.”

Trembor considered telling her about Nikal to demonstrate that rabbits could be serious threats, but figured that would just open himself up to more questions, and Marlot had been involved. He couldn’t afford to slip at the table, not with Serene with earshot.

“What was your question?”

“How are you doing?” she said, slowly, enunciating each word as he if was a simpleton.

Trembor glared at his sister. “Just for that, I really shouldn’t be answering you.”

“Please answer your sister,” Serene said, her tone somewhat flat. “We’re all interested in knowing how you’re doing.” Her words quieted the table.

There was no doubting her hearing now.

“I’m fine,” Trembor said with a sigh. “A bit bored with all the waiting, but at least my house is clean now.”

That earned chuckles.

But not from Serene. She studied him, ever the huntress, looking for a weakness in his story, even when it was no more than a dozen words long. Finally, she nodded. Not satisfied, but her quiet acquiescence that she wouldn’t press.

His pad buzzed and the conversation that had restarted stopped again as he pulled it out. Overly conscious of all the stares, he read his lawyer’s message.

“Everything okay, Son?” Torim asked.

“Yeah, just Barany telling me we’re meeting early tomorrow. Seems the prosecution finally got off their asses and are ready to proceed.” His father tilted an ear in concern. “I’m paraphrasing, dad. Barany’s language is proper.” His father nodded. Even retired he expected those still practicing law to behave according to his standards.

Putting the pad away, Trembor considered the message. The timing was good since he needed to run his plan by him if it had any chance of success. Once Barany was appraised, he’d have to figure out who in the enforcers he could tell. Bahamel, if she knew about him and Marlot. If she didn’t, it would be best not to tempt her into eating him before his plan was in motion.

Fanea leaned close to him. “If you don’t start eating right now, Mother’s going to start questioning you again.”

Trembor looked up to see Serene’s gaze on him as she ate slowly. Great, with the huntress on his scent, he’d have to be even more careful if he wanted to die without dragging his family into this.

Marlot looked at the data on the screen for the fifth time, hoping to see something new this time. Wasn’t there something about smelling the same air over and over while expecting different scents, a sign of insanity? It wasn’t that the information made no sense, barely; it was that he was seeing so much or if he wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Grift Stripe was the name on the lease for the apartment the tiger lived in. There was no ID indicated which, while unusual, was not illegal. It meant he had to pay in person, which meant he needed to carry the money or hide it in his apartment. In this neighborhood, it couldn’t be safe to have that much money.

If it was only the tiger, maybe a handful of others, Marlot wouldn’t question it, but in a building with three hundred and fifteen apartments, more than a hundred and fifty of them didn’t have an ID linked to them. That was a hundred and fifty people handing over money to the building manager every month, and according to the ledger, they paid on the same day.

That the manager agreed to it was suspect at best, but that the company which

owned the building didn't mind? How did they ensure the manager didn't skim some of it? For all the indication the building was barely managed, the corporation, Affordable Lodging Affiliated, was properly registered, part of a series of holding Marlot had traced to a small conglomeration which included transports, leisure, housing, restaurants, and a variety of shops. He'd loved to see their finances, but they weren't his case. Once he was done, he might take a look.

Grift could still be a false name, it wasn't like Marlot could go on the registry to find out if this tiger was in it. Or rather, he had and had found that Stripe was a common surname among tigers, and a few other species; and for all that it screamed 'fabrication' Grift was common enough as a name he'd stopped looking after a dozen pages. There were two dozens Grift Stripe in the country.

The others who paid in person also had common surnames; Spots, Claws, Hooves. Blotches, Fast, Runs, Hides. Without visiting each one to confirm it, he couldn't be sure, but based on the surnames, he estimated the building to have seven prey for each predator. The ratio made sense, except for it being in one building. The halls created isolation, which made it easy for a predator to just grab whoever passed by.

Even in affluent areas, larger apartment buildings tended to be almost a hundred percent prey, while the smaller ones tended to end up with the predators. And here, Marlot was beginning to suspect the people were borderline homeless. Which meant their value was so low even the predators in the same situation could eat one of them.

Grift's apartment had two bedrooms, so Hardir could have lived there without being on the building registry. It would reduce how much the tiger had to get, and would ensure he didn't ask too many questions, such as 'what did you do before you fell on hard times?' 'being alive' would just lead to awkward questions. Or...

Vlein had said he had multiple cases like Hardir. The walking dead. By definition, they wouldn't be able to use IDs and they'd need a place to live. A building where the manager didn't mind insist on the use of ID would be ideal. The common ground might even lead to predators being less likely to hunt the neighbors, after all, without an ID predators were just as tempting as prey to anyone else.

Marlot imagined a building full of people he could pick out at his leisure and never have to worry about going broke. He'd have to hunt there more often, because based on Grift, there wouldn't be a lot of meat on their body. Still, Marlot marked the building as a backup in case he fell on hard times himself.

So, how could he find out if anyone there was one of those walking dead? And would Vlein demand an accounting of how each earned a living for the purpose of calculating their tax? The building was in Marlot's territory, after all. Hopefully, if he could prove they were walking dead, it would become someone else's problem.

He started by making a call.

"That's twice in a week, wolf," Bahamel answered. "If you're about to tell me you and your lion have broken up again, I might just have to eat you myself for monumental bad judgment."

"And I love you too, Ba. We're both busy without individual problems, but as far

as I know, me and Trem are good.”

“I am glad to hear that. If that’s not the problem, what’s got you calling me a second time?”

“What did you find out about those cases the Bureau sent to you?”

“You mean those walking dead?” She asked, sounding distasteful.

“You spoke to Vlein, then.”

“I had to. He a weird one, with calling fraudulent deaths ‘walking dead’. But yeah, I needed to find out who he filed it with because no one here knows anything about those cases. He sent it through the pipeline so I’m having IT look into the system for bugs or outright malware.”

“Do you think he’s right an organized crime is involved?”

“Could be. Or we’re dealing with the benefit of all this wonderful technology,” she said sarcastically. “So to answer your question, I don’t have anything yet.”

“Maybe you want to look into this company.” He gave her the names associated with Affordable Lodging Affiliated he’d pulled. “No promises it will lead anywhere, but I’m seeing some odd things there.”

“Did that Vlein character draft you out of the RI side and fully into Fraud?”

Marlot paused. “I think he did.” He hung his head. “I’m going to have to have words with him.”

“Have them over pad, you can’t afford him.”

“Might be worth it for the paperwork he stuck me with. I don’t even know how to figure out how my body earned his living if I can’t put his ID in my tracking program, and he wants me to tabulate how much his tax amounts to.”

“You said you have a building full of people in the same situation as him. If you figure out how one of them earns a living without having an ID, it’s reasonable to think your body earned it the same way.”

Marlot groaned. “That means following one of them all day.”

Bahamel chuckled. “Think of it as a hunt in slow motion.”

“A hunt usually ends up with me hungry and with meat on my plate.”

“If whoever you follow doesn’t have an ID, you can still have meat on your plate and it won’t even cost you anything.”

Marlot snorted. “Vlein is going to make sure it costs me something. He probably won’t let me touch the meat until after I’ve reported all the ways it earned enough to pay its rent.”

“That’s why I do vice and not Fraud.”

“No, that’s why you’re in charge and not a grunt. You get to decide who paid for your bad mood.”

“You right, that is why I’m in charge,” she answered, her voice bright. “So go trail someone.”

“I don’t report to you,” Marlot grumbled good-naturedly; He was still looking at a full day of walking around, hoping to catch a useful scent.

The meeting room was a large room with a glass wall looking onto another meeting room on the other side of the hall, and a wall of windows looking out over the city; if a taller building didn't block the view.

"Thank you for coming," the armadillo said, entering the room. "As I said in my message, the prosecutor's office is finally ready to proceed after all these delays and Flattooth wants to meet. We have to make sure we are on the same page in regard to how to handle any offer she makes before she arrives in—" he consulted his pad "—thirty minutes."

Trembor nodded. "That should be enough time." He motioned to the room as he sat at the table where his entire family could sit and have vacant seats left. "Is there a camera system?"

"No. Judicial laws prohibit third part recording of meetings between me and a client. I record it on my pad." The armadillo placed the pad on the table as he sat next to him, then took out folders from a briefcase.

More papers, Trembor thought in amusement. It died as he eyed the pad. "Can you turn off the recorder?"

"It's not on yet."

"Can you show me?"

His lawyer paused in the arranging of the folders before him and studied Trembor. Barany handled the pad, then turned it so he could see the program wasn't recording.

"We need to talk about something before she arrives," Trembor said.

The armadillo put it back on the table but didn't go back to his files. He turned in his chair to angle himself toward Trembor. "I get the sense this is something I should have known about before now."

Trembor shrugged. "Things have changed."

Barany didn't look pleased, but motioned for Trembor to continue.

"So you know how I interfered in an investigation, and how."

"You falsified evidence to exonerate your brother, who was then freed when the actual killed came forward to claim the death."

"Do you know who I framed?"

The armadillo shook his head. "As far as I know, that party never came forward to sue you."

"That's because they were more than happy to deal with it themselves."

Barany's lips became a tight line. "Will them attempting to eat you interfere with the case?" It amused Trembor his lawyer wasn't even bothered by the idea someone wanted to eat him. How many cases were terminated because one party decided to eat the other?

"They're not trying to eat me. They're trying to destroy my family."

Barany startled. "That seems excessive. Maybe you should start at the beginning." He looked at the pad. "But keep it brief."

"My brother, Bo, is in debt with a group of criminals running a gambling house.

When he was arrested for the death of a cub, I framed them. Seems some enforcers acted on that information and ate a few subordinates before they found out it was false information. The organization took umbrage at what I did and, as a way to balance the scale, they tried to convince me to work for them. I turned them down flat, but they took it as me ‘needing to think about it.’ They reminded me a few times of their offer and I reached the point where I considered getting myself eaten as a way of ending it; but they realized what I was doing, and now, as a way of keeping me in control, they have been eating the people working with my siblings, making their own work harder and endangering their productivity rating.”

“I see. I have to point out that getting yourself eaten would have interfered with your case. I don’t recommend—”

“You’re missing the point, Barany,” Trembor stated.

“No,” the lawyer replied. “I perfectly understand what you intended to do. I just don’t understand why a predator like you is willing to simply lie on his back and turn prey. Your father was vicious in court, he took on anyone trying to bring down his clients, in and out of the courts. I can’t tell you the number of times someone tried to eat him.”

“I can,” Trembor replied. “He had the scars and the stories. But I’m not him.”

“You’re still a predator. Explain to me why you’d just give up.”

“Because I’m just one male and they’re a larger organization than I thought, who have claws inside the enforcers. Yes, I’m pretty sure of that at this point. I thought that removing myself completely would force them to leave me and my family alone, but they’ve demonstrated they don’t intend to ever stop. So I am going to stop them. No matter the cost.”

The armadillo sighed. “And how do you intend to do that?” he demanded.

“By turning myself over to the prosecutor’s office and becoming their informant.”

“No, absolutely not!”

“It’s the only way to stop that group. I act like I go along with them, record every meeting until we have enough actual evidence to destroy them completely.”

“You have no idea what you’re suggesting. Flatthooth is ruthless. She’ll have no problem putting you in a situation that could get you killed just for the chance of getting some extra piece of evidence.”

“If my death takes them down, I’m good with that.”

The armadillo glared at Trembor, but before he replied there was a knock at the door and a komodo dragon looked at them through the glass. He opened the door when the armadillo turned the glare on him.

“What?” Barany demanded.

“I’m here for the meeting,” the dragon replied smoothly. He wore an expensive suit in a darker gray than his scaly hide.

“You have the wrong room,” Barany snapped.

“This is the City versus Goldenmane meeting, correct?” he seemed unaffected by the armadillo’s anger, closing the door.

“Yes, but until Prosecutor Flattooth arrives, you can stay outside.”

“Ah, I take it you weren’t informed.” He pulled a chair opposite Trembor and Barany. “She won’t be coming. She’s having a—” he smiled at Trembor “—family emergency. Has been for a while, actually. She was hoping to have it resolved quickly enough to be able to continue herself, but you know how those can go, don’t you? They just seem to get worse and worse at times. I’m Sathers Hardskin. It was decided I’d take over the case.”

Trembor glared, hands into fists, feeling his claws pricking his palm.

“Then you can come back in once the meeting officially starts,” Barany said. “I still need to speak with my client.”

The komodo dragon paused in the process of sitting, reached across the table to turn the armadillo’s pad, and look at it. He waited ten seconds. “It’s starting now.” Then sat.

Trembor glanced at the time, time had passed faster than he’d thought. He went back to staring at the smiling lizard.

With a sigh, Barany turned the pad back to him and turned the recording program on. “Is there any chance you’ll give me and my client another ten minutes of privacy?”

“I don’t see why you need it.”

“To discuss private matters,” Barany said flatly.

“I can come back, if you insist, but I’d think you’d want to get this resolved right here, and right now. Prosecutor Flattooth’s extreme reaction to your case never represented the opinion of those in charge. She used her position to come at you as if you were prey. Overcompensating for being one herself, if you ask me. But seeing how, ultimately, the case against your client is based entirely on the words of a criminal with a history of being arrested by your client, and who has managed to get herself eaten while incarcerated, we—”

“Jasber is dead?” Trembor asked, surprised.

The komodo dragon quickly read through his pad. “Yes, the criminal’s name was Jasber Braid. Good memory.” He smiled at Trembor. “Or do you remember her name due to a more recent meeting?”

“Don’t answer that,” Barany said as Trembor opened his mouth.

He closed it. What did it matter now? He thought dejectedly. This prosecutor was clearly under the criminal’s claws. Not that he seemed to mind by the jovial expression as he explained how Trembor could walk away free if he play his part.

Even Barany seemed suspicious, even though this was the outcome he was hoping to get in court. This would save time and money.

“So, the partners, after weighing the pros and cons of this lawsuit, have decided that so long as your client is willing to sign the document stating he had no contact with the criminal known as Jasber Braid in the last six months, the case will be dropped, he will be reinstated as an RI for the city, his territory will be returned to him without penalties.” He read something. “I understand your partner is having difficulties meeting the rent on the office by himself.”

“Is that a threat?” Trembor growled.

“Simply a statement of the facts,” the dragon replied, seeming surprised, but grinning. “I’m certain he will be overjoyed to have you back at his side.”

Trembor wanted to rip the male’s throat out. He wanted to paint the wall with his blood, to eat his heart. When Barany placed a hand on his arm to calm him, Trembor considered eating him too, but he calmed himself at the cautious expression on his lawyer’s face. At least he wasn’t overjoyed at being handed exactly what he wanted.

“Have your office write the documents stating everything you want my clients to agree to in exchange for the case to be dropped,” Barany said. “I will go over it, and once I’ve decided there are no hidden clauses tricking my client into taking full responsibility for the crime, I will discuss it with him.”

“We would never try to trick your client,” the komodo dragon said, offended. “Mister Goldenmane is a valued member of society. His work as a Registered Investigator is without reproach. Even his history with the enforcers is impeccable. I, personally, am hoping he can get past this bad scent and move on so that if we ever need to call on him in the future, he will have no issues working with us.”

“As I said, once I’ve read over the document, I will discuss it with my client. I’ll contact you to set up a meeting.”

The dragon smiled and stood. “I’ll get on that immediately.” He looked at Trembor. “I look forward to the chance of working with you in the future.”

Once the male was out of the room, Barany let out a soft curse. “Don’t tell your father I said this, but you might very well be fucked.”

Marlot watched for a parking lot across the housing building as three busses pulled in front and people piled into them. Among them was Grift Stripe; he was dressed better than when Marlot had spoken with him. Not enough to work at a top-rated company, but his pants and shirt were clean, as were the others. If not for the fact he recognized one of two from when he’d waited in the post office, and seen how they dressed then, he’d think the whole group was your average-rated workers taking transit to wherever they needed to go. They’d also talked like they were used to hanging out before the building waiting for the busses.

He noted the busses’ tags, then followed them. When they separated, he followed the second one; the one Grift stepped in. As much as possible he wanted to stay with the tiger.

Marlot realized this couldn’t be normal as the quality of the neighborhoods went up. Not difficult to do from where they had begun, but the value kept increasing past his own neighborhood, past Trembor’s parents, past anything he’d even been to.

When the bus pulled into a driveway leading to a house larger than Marlot’s entire block, he thought Grift and his bus full might do some sort of labor on the small property. He noted that for Vlein and found a parking spot that let him watch without being noticed.

An impossible thing when every car parked before the properties were worth a

dozen of his, so he had to park a long block away and hurry to walk back to the front of the house, tightening his jacket against the cold wind.

He got there as a car pulled into the driveway. Marlot took pictures of the ram that stepped out of the house dressed in a business suit and got in the car. He couldn't see the tag as it left. He wasn't certain, but Marlot thought the ram had been one of the people on the bus.

Another car came, and a bull got in, better dressed than he'd arrived, but more for manual labor than an office. After that, it was a weasel, dressed for office work. Over the next hour, car after car drove to the car to pick up someone who'd arrived looking like a factory worker and exited looking like they belonged a few rungs higher on the productivity ladder.

When Grift stepped out of the house, Marlot ran to his car, cursing he'd had to park so far. Fortunately, as he got in it, the car passed before where he'd parked. Unfortunately, his car wouldn't start, no matter what he did. After cursing, he opened the hood; the electrical around the engine had been trashed. Checking the area around the hood's latch and lock, he saw the signs of tampering.

He slammed the hood shut and looked around. Obviously, whoever had done this was better at hiding their trail than Marlot had been. That was what he got for getting roped into something that wasn't his job.

Of course, if his surveying of the house had caused his car to be disabled, it meant there was something there. Unless it had been simple vandalism? He looked at the wealthy houses and other untouched cars and had trouble imagining any youth walking around breaking into the hood of his car. Of course, his car did stand out, so maybe this was their way to telling him he didn't belong.

He knew that already.

He called a towing company and began working on who he was going to pay to watch the house. He looked around again. Did he know anyone who could look like they fit in? The better question was, would he have any money left to afford his next hunt after this?

He needed to talk to Vlein about covering his expenses if he was going to do investigations that didn't relate directly to a body.

Trembor sat in his living room, not relaxing. Even the nearly empty glass of alcohol hadn't helped his mood or body relax. He'd been ready to act, and having the pounce knocked out of him left him angry. He considered going directly to Flattooth, getting Marlot to find out where she lived, but the komodo dragon's comments about her having family problems were clearly an indication those criminals had gotten to her like they'd gotten to him.

Just who were they that they had that kind of reach? And why were they bothering with him, if they did? They had claws in the enforcers, within the prosecutor's offices, they had to have RIs already, even if Maoma implied they didn't. It wasn't like

he could trust what she said.

At least Barany hadn't jumped on the chance of having the case dropped, but he'd warned Trembor that once he had the file, he couldn't take too long before they'd grow suspicious. No one in their right mind passed on being exonerated.

Trembor wasn't in his right mind. Hadn't been in months now. Part of him blamed Marlot, and he didn't like that. If Marlot had had the will to not take that case back in LowValley, they wouldn't have their falling out. He wouldn't have been out of sorts as did something as stupid as frame the criminal group for the crime Bo had been accused, and now he wouldn't be in this mess.

He was Bo's fault too. Why couldn't his brother listen to their father's advice and stay away from gambling? None of this would happen if not for that. Or Nikal, he was at fault too with butting into his and Marlot's life. Trying to get them back together by framing Bo.

Yeah, it really was that hunter's fault. If not for the hare, Trembor wouldn't be here right now. Contemplating ways of killing himself. There had to be one that would force those criminals to leave his family alone. If the hunter hadn't vanished out of the caging complex, he'd just visit him and offer himself.

He should just find a big and healthy bison and try to eat them. Once dead he wouldn't care what happened to his family, he thought miserably. What kind of son was he, that he thought no longer being able to care about his parents, his family, was a good thing? He looked at the empty glass.

"You're supposed to numb me to all that," he complained to it. Maybe that was another option. Become a drunk. Numb himself to everything with alcohol. Nip would act faster, although it might be more expensive. At least Nip would be more reliable. He stood as he considered if the numbness would be worth getting used to how horrible Nip tasted and smelled.

What would Marlot think of him for smoking Nip?

Why hadn't his wolf given up on him already? All of this would be so much easier if Marlot realized Trembor wasn't worth his time.

He chuckled. Wouldn't Gorrek be please to hear him admit that? Hadn't it been his mantra? How Trembor wasn't worth anyone's time; how he should be happy the lion had deigned to pay attention to him if only Trembor hadn't been an ingrate.

The door buzz redirected him on his way to the cooler. On the other side stood a hyena. Trembor stared at her, trying to understand what she was doing here. He'd already said goodbye to that part of his life.

"Good to know you're still among the living," Derimak said, studying him.

Trembor debated closing the door. He didn't want to deal with old friends.

"How many of those have you had?" she asked, indicating the empty glass.

Not enough, Trembor thought. His thoughts were too clear, his misery too intense. But his reflexes weren't that great as he found himself no longer holding the glass, the hyena having plucked it out of his fingers.

"I timed this right," she said, putting the glass on the table by the door and

grabbing his jacket off the peg. “Come on, you need to get out of this place before you just give up and do something stupid.”

“Might be too late,” he grumbled.

“Until you stop breathing, it isn’t.” She forced the jacket in his hands. “It’s not so warm you can stand out here in just your shirt. Put that on.”

“I’m not good company.” He tried to put the jacket back on the peg.

“No kidding,” she replied with a laugh, catching his arm. “Consider this punishment for all the times we wouldn’t let me be miserable in peace. Now put the jacket on before I throw you over my shoulder and carry you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She beamed. “You just try me. What will that wolf of yours say when he finds out a female swept you off your feet and carried you away?”

Trembor snorted. “You do know what Marlot has a habit of doing to people who threaten me, right?”

“Believe it or not, I saw that wolf fret over you being arrested. I’m confident he’ll help throw you over my shoulder when he sees the state you’re in. Now, are you coming, or am I calling Marlot?”

Trembor glared at the hyena. “I hate you,” he said, putting the jacket on.

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied. “You and the whole precinct. I’m just that horrible of a female.”

* * * * *

He stared at the name of the restaurant. ‘Better Than Meat’. If he entered it and saw that mole, he was going to kill her and then Derimak for being in league with them.

“Come on, don’t let the fact they serve artificial meat deter you. It’s quite good when prepared properly.” She held the door open for him.

Reluctantly, he stepped through and looked around. No mole in sight. Not a lot of people, really. “If this place is so good, where are all the customers?”

“You try to convince predators to eat artificial meat,” she said in a low voice.

“You can always throw them over your shoulder and force them to come here,” he replied in annoyance.

“Finally, your sense of humor is returning.”

He glared at the back of her head as she led him to a table and a young hyena handed them menus.

“Family?” Trembor asked once the youth had left.

“Oh, no. You couldn’t get me to sit at a table with any of my brothers. Bunch of assholes, the lot of them.”

“So it’s just a coincidence this restaurant is a hyena operation?”

She shrugged. “Who else is going to give artificial meat a chance? We’ve never been the best hunters, and not all of us can start processing stores to get some of your scraps. You should try the Varnian Sweet Meats,” she said without looking at the menu. “It’s what I’m having.”

He looked at the names and description of the offering, noticed the section

describing what went into the artificial meats, and actively looked away. He didn't think he could stomach eating if he knew what he wasn't in his food. Maybe he could have a plate of greens? Nope, they'd thought of that and didn't offer it. Did dying of food poisoning qualify as Derimak killing him, since she'd taken him here, or would the restaurant be on the hook?

The youth returned with a hopeful expression, and Trembor couldn't disappoint him. "What did you say that platter was called?" he asked Derimak.

"We'll have a Varnian each, Fallin."

The young hyena beamed and ran to the kitchen.

"First name basis? You sure you aren't family?"

"Like you don't learn everyone's name on meeting them," she answered. He couldn't really contradict her. "Now, what's going on with you?"

He looked at her. "I'd think that's obvious."

"A lawsuit wouldn't cause you to stand on the side of the precinct looking at all of us like you weren't ever going to see us again."

Trembor looked at the tabletop.

"Or cause you to not be able to look at me when I ask you that question."

"I didn't think you'd noticed," Trembor mumbled.

She leaned in and lowered her voice. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret. I'm an enforcer. Noticing stuff is sort of what I do."

Trembor felt himself smile in spite of himself.

"I'm not the only one either."

His burgeoning smile fell. Now he was going to have to field the questions, find ways of diverting her attention away from his problems. Maybe he could find her brothers and start them feuding?

"Let me tell you what we work out," she said and smiled as he stared at her, ears folded back in horror. "You can tell me how close we got to the truth."

"No." He stood, but she grabbed his arm.

"Trembor, you walking out isn't going to make us go away. We're your friends."

He let her pull him back to his seat.

"No, we know it started with your bother, Bo. You being you, weren't going to let him take the fall, so you planted evidence. Took some digging, but we found that you framed the Underdark Cartel, which is gutsy, considering how entrenched they are in the city, but you were never one to do thing small."

"You're kidding, that's who they are? What are they doing running gambling houses? I thought they were involved in political stuff." At least it explained how they'd gotten to Flattooth. The Cartel had always been rumored to have their claws in every level of the government. If he'd know it was them he'd... he'd probably have done the same thing, Bo had been in trouble, after all.

"They started small. Gambling, protection, as they grew larger, so did their ambitions. They went after more powerful prey but never released what they already had. I thought you knew."

“I thought it was just a small group of criminals running one, maybe a handful of gambling houses. I thought they were the ones framing Bo as a way of getting him to go along with what they wanted.”

“And now they’re planting their claws into you as payback.”

Trembor sighed. So much for dealing with this without anyone noticing.

“A bunch of us at the precinct talked and we figure that if we pool our money, we can take out a handful of will places operators. You tell us who, and we will—”

“No.”

“Trembor, we aren’t leaving you to—”

“You aren’t ruining yourself financially or professionally on my account. And they’ll know before you try anything. They have their claws in the enforcers.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course they do. We know who they are.”

Trembor stared. “Why haven’t they been arrested?”

She smiled. “That’s why you’re better as an RI than an enforcer. If we arrest them, the Cartel will just get their claws in someone else. This way we can control what they find out. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than being suspicious of everyone.”

“Okay, but I still don’t want you to do anything, Derimak, even with pooling every enforcer in the city, you can’t afford the tax on the people high enough in the Cartel to make a difference, those people have the veneer of legitimacy and the tax rating to back it. All you’d end up doing is start a war and everyone loses if that happens.”

“And you think that you being eaten is going to solve anything?”

Trembor sighed. “I don’t know what else to do.”

She watched him silently as the youth returned with amazing smelling platters of meats with greens on the side. He studied the platter, looking for any indications the strips were other than meat, but the smell was right, as was the appearance.

“Have you considered being an inside agent?” she asked as she cut a strip of meat and ate.

“I did, but they have their claws within the prosecutor’s office.” He cut a small piece and tentatively bit into it. The texture was okay. Quite good, actually. This was nothing like the packages of dried artificial meats he’d tried.

“Who says you need to go through their offices?” she asked.

Trembor stared at her. “The rules.”

She smirked. “Their offices have been clawed. Fuck the rules.”

Trembor went back to chewing, to enjoying the meat. And considered what Derimak offered. If he could get himself to play the part, he could get damaging evidence. Enough and even the bosses’ tax rating would plummet, then even if they couldn’t take them legally, they eat a chunk of the Cartel.

Trembor smiled and found the meat tasted even better. “How difficult do you think it’ll be to arrange?”

Marlot watched the tiger enter the store, accompanied by the male he’d begun thinking of as his handler since he had accompanied him ever since they left the wealthy

house.

“Thanks for driving me, Ukely,” he told the zebra.

“Nothing much to do today, cub’s with his dad, work’s slow. This is a nice distraction.”

Marlot nodded as he stepped out of the car. At least the weather was still on the warm side. He’d had her park as far as she could while still being able to see the car parked before the store. He looked around, hoping no one had noticed them.

“You better head home,” he told her.

“I can stay and help,” she replied eagerly.

“Getting me here is help enough, you’re a programmer, Ukely, not an investigator. I’m not putting you at risk.”

“If you’re sure, call me when you need to get home, I’ll come pick you up.”

“Thanks, I’ll use transit for that.”

“It’s really no problem.”

“I know.” He smiled. “And I am grateful. But they already did something to my car when they noticed me previously. I don’t want to put you in danger. If it’s a comfort, it’ll be a few days before my car’s fixed, so I’ll probably need you to drive me around again.”

“Okay, just call me.”

Marlot stepped away from the car and she drove off. He looked at his options to keep watch. He’d dressed casually, in his hunting clothes instead of his usual suit. It should be enough to keep anyone on watch from identifying him, so long as he could keep from standing out.

The neighborhood was on the lower side of middle-rated. With stores lining the main road in various states of disrepair. He could tell where attempts at revitalizing took place, fresher paint, newer brickwork, but it hadn’t helped.

The stores were a mix of clothing, electronics, various housing supplies, a few drink places, and food preparation supplies. He ordered a glass of spiced blood from a window and kept the receipt. He’d gotten Vlein to agree to reimburse his expensed while he did this work, since it was more for the bureau than to find out how his body had died.

As he joined the handful of other predators at the tables, Grift’s handler left the store alone. The store was cleverly named ‘Karlix housing supplies’. If Karlix was the female behind the counter he could see through the large glass facade. She was an ibex. She seemed comfortable around the tiger, which spoke of his presence being a regular thing.

Quickly, his choice of Grift as who he followed proved to be a problem. The tiger didn’t stand around being seen in the facade. When he was visible, all he seemed to do was refill the shelves. The store seemed to be one doing well in the neighborhood. To be able to tell if the tiger did more, Marlot would have to go into the store, but he’d been in the tiger’s presence. Even if he didn’t recognize him by how he was dressed, he’d know his scent.

He noticed a different car parked by another store, selling vegetables, and a

female exited it, reminding Marlot a lot of Grift's handler, got in the car, and drove off. He couldn't tell who was in that store, but if they were from the same group, it could give Marlot a sense of exactly what they were up to in there.

He used the time it took to finish his glass to weigh the advantages and disadvantages. He didn't think they could have given anyone else more than his description, and black wolves were common enough even if he'd walked back the person in the vegetable store, they couldn't tell. The whiff of a scent wasn't the same as standing in his presence. With the glass empty, he crossed the street. He had nothing to lose by taking a look.

The store smelled stuffy, which surprised him. Even the warehouses where the vegetables were stored back at the commune had a fresh scent to them. This smelled like the vegetables were a week old. And by the looks of them, resting on their shelves, they might be. Who would want to buy these? He looked around at the prey, and the few predators in the store, looking the selection over, and it seemed quite a few were satisfied with the selection.

A ram refilled the shelves from stock out of the backroom. She moved mechanically, hardly any life in her eyes. If the customers looked depressed, she looked like she'd given up and was waiting for someone to eat her. He'd noticed that look from the homeless population, not someone holding a job.

He exited without buying anything.

He did think she was like Grift, which meant the tiger was also refilling shelves. Why would those walking dead do this? The better question, Marlot realized, was why would they be made to do this. He bought another drink at a different shop, this one sweetened blood. The sweetener tried to cover up the artificial taste of the blood and failed.

He spent the day watching the supply store Grift worked in, catching sight of him placing items on shelves, going into the other stores, only two more with walking dead working there, changing drink shop and searching for one drink that didn't have the taste of artificial blood in them.

As the sun dipped over the tallest buildings and the temperature cooled, a car parked in front of the supply store, as well as the vegetable one and the two others. Marlot took discreet pictures of the vehicles and the people exiting them. A female wolf entered the supply store, which was the only one he had a good view of the counter, so he watched as the two females spoke. There was none of the casual comfort the ibex had with Grift; the tension was clear as they spoke.

The wolf took out a book, paper, and pen, and looked at something the ibex showed her that Marlot couldn't see. The day's tally? The wolf made notes, then the ibex handed over money, which seemed to confirm it had been the day's sales. So, was this some form of protection racket? Only there was nothing threatening about Grift, even him being a predator, so his presence had to be more than to ensure the ibex behaved. And why do work if he was there to keep her in line? It wasn't like he was being paid for it.

Marlot had to keep himself from reacting.

He wasn't being paid.

The store was a two-person operation, but if one didn't have an ID, officially it was a one-person store that somehow managed to report the productivity of two. In this area it might not be enough for the discrepancy to register on the revenue bureau level, but for the owner? It could make the difference between continuing to run or lying on your back and waiting for the end. Even if the people providing Grift took a small cut of the increased profits, there would be enough of an increase the ibex would stay open.

Did that explain why the attempt at rejuvenation failed? If the area became too prosperous, the bureau would have to pay more attention.

"But how does he pay for his apartment?" Marlot noticed the look his neighbor gave him and made sure his muzzle remained closed.

Did he pay for his apartment? The building manager's ledger said he did, but like the transaction with the ibex, it was paid with physical money, not electronic transfer. Which meant it was impossible to demonstrate the payment had happened unless they were seen exchanging money.

Food? A similar situation? Grift looked undernourished, and he had to be. Without an ID, he couldn't hunt unless he settled for the homeless or his neighbors. So food had to be provided by his handlers. They'd only give him the minimum needed to survive because they'd want to keep the cost low.

Marlot was watching the revenue system being defrauded.

It shouldn't surprise him, there was always someone looking to keep a larger cut of what they earned, or stole, but it did. The system was as fair as it was possible to have. By committing fraud, they were forcing everyone else to pay more. Vlein would be happy with what Marlot had found, not that he knew what the fox would do about it.

His pad buzzed; the office.

"Hela'han, I'll be back in a bit, I think I've worked out what's going on here."

"Can you come back now?" she asked, sounding worried.

"What's wrong?" He stood and threw the half-filled glass in the trash.

"A Miss Jareth is here to see you. She said she is the daughter of—"

"Hardir Mixcoat." Would transit be fast enough?

"Yes, she has a package for you, but she will only hand it to you personally."

Fuck transit, he wasn't taking any longer than he had to, not after what had happened to her mother after saying she had a package for him.

"Do everything you can to have her wait for me. I'm ordering a lift and I'll be there as soon as I can." Hopefully, Vlein would cover that expense too.

Marlot impatiently waited for the driver to print and hand him the receipt, then ran for the office door. Inside, Hela'han and the rust-colored wolf were talking, Jareth indicating something on her pad.

"Mister Blackclaw," the elephant greeted him, "This is Jareth Mixcoat."

Jareth took a package wrapped in butcher paper off Hela'han's desk and handed it

to him. For a moment he thought she'd brought him meat, but the package was too heavy for the size, the edges too sharp.

"I think that's what you were looking for," she said.

"You found it," Marlot stated the obvious, and Hela'han held her trunk as she smiled.

"No, we haven't found whatever mom received. This was waiting for me at home when I went by for a change of clothing and to grab food out of my cooler."

"This is a second package?" Had Hardir known the people using him would try to go to length to retrieve it? Had he suspected they'd be willing to kill? He had to. They had the fund to pay anyone's tax, Marlot suspected.

"Look," Jareth said, "I don't know what this is about, and I don't care," she added as Marlot opened his mouth to explain. "With mom gone, I need to look after my family. I can work out that whatever mom got is responsible for getting her eaten, so I'd really like it if you kept me out of this. Brath is a good guy, but he isn't responsible enough to look after the others. They need me. They can't afford to lose me, do you understand?"

Marlot nodded, trying to think of something he could do to help ensure her safety. He could tell Bahamel, or maybe Vlein would have people he could assign. Or maybe the best thing to do was not draw attention to her at all?

"Who knows you got the package?"

"I didn't tell anyone. I found it between the doors and came right here. The postal service knows about it."

"But they're no reason they'd know the significance." Mirden could have been under surveillance due to being Hardir's mate. There had been no indication he'd sent out two packages from the store, not that Marlot had thought to ask.

Was his pad being listened to? It was easy enough to do, but why would anyone, especially that criminal organization do that? It wasn't until after Mirden's death he began looking into what they were doing.

He was over complicating things. There was a direct line between Hardir and Mirden. She might have had the package when she died, probably at their claws, so they would think they'd covered their scent.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," he told the rust-colored wolf. "But keep your nose to the wind, just in case. If you can do it in a way that won't raise suspicion, try to remain among larger groups."

"You want me to act like prey?" as asked, offended.

"It's a suggestion," he replied, raising a hand to forestall other comments. "I'm sorry I made it sound like an order. But you have a family to think about. I think your pride can afford to stand upwind for a few days."

Her eyes narrowed, but before she could say anything Hela'han took her hand.

"Why don't we talk about if there's anything less extreme you can do to stay safe?" she smiled at Jareth. "I happen to have some experience acting like prey, so I'm sure we can come up with something."

Marlot thanked his receptionist with a smile of his own and a canted ear, then

retreated to his office. Definitely something Trembor would have handled better.

He placed the package on the desk and opened it.

Papers.

Yet more papers. He didn't think he'd ever seen as many papers as he had in these last few days. Looking quickly through them in an attempt to figure out what it was Hardir had sent and why, he looked through lists of names with numbers that might be IDs, or possibly banking accounts, or other things entirely. A handful of pages were businesses, with more numbers, too long for ID or accounts. Some internal accounting system. Here and there pictures were included. Clearly taken furtively by someone who wasn't an expert. In some, he couldn't tell who was the target of the picture in the group since all the people were fuzzy, the blank wall behind them the thing in focus. No names were attached to the pictures to make their significance easier to grasp.

Looking them over, all he could tell was that it wouldn't be easy to figure out why Hardir had wanted this to be in his mate and his daughter's hands. It couldn't be as insurance, since the one his mate received had been sent (need to establish if it was sent before or after his death). He could track down this package's provenance since he had the tracking information stamped on it.

He called Trembor. "Hey Trem, are you okay if I don't come over tonight? I just got a stack of information I need to untangle."

"Were you supposed to come over?" the lion answered, sounding tired.

Marlot frowned. "Didn't I? I forgot to call you to ask, didn't I? Sorry, it's been busy."

"It's okay, it's been busy for me too."

"How are you doing?"

"I'm alive, and it's looking like the lawsuit will be dropped."

"You don't sound as happy about that as I'd expect."

Trembor was quiet for a few seconds. "Just exhaustion, I guess."

Marlot looked at the papers. "Alright, I'm coming over."

"No, don't." Trembor sighed. "I'm good. I promise, I just need sleep and for things to get back to normal. Finish your case and hopefully, in a few days I'll be back in the office."

Marlot looked at the empty desk and smiled. "I can't wait."

"Me neither."

"Okay, I'll let you go, but if you need anything, call me. I mean it. This isn't more important than you."

"I will; now go back to work. I love you."

"I love you too." Marlot's lips hurt from smiling so hard.

He called Bahamel, and left a message telling her he might have more information soon about the organization behind the fraud, then set to work putting everything before him in some sort of order.

Trembor woke up tired. It seemed to be the norm now, but this morning he had a

sense of why. The dreams left him disturbed; memories of him chaining himself the front of a train moving toward his family. Bo being sucked into a hole in the ground, and Trembor pushing him down instead of helping him. Sitting in court, Torim the judge, his mothers the jury, reciting a list of crimes he couldn't hear. They judged him guilty and fed him to his nephews and nieces.

Not exactly nightmares, he decided, but not conducive to a restful sleep. Considering his thoughts of the last weeks, he was surprised none of the dreams had included taking his own life.

He'd expected to be back to his old self, now that he and Derimak had a plan of action, but nothing could happen until the case was finally canceled, and Barany was still going over the agreement for hidden clauses. Trembor wanted to forget about it and expedite it, but he couldn't do that without explaining the plan and he'd agreed with Derimak, no one else could be brought in. So he was left mid-pounce until then.

On top of that, in a few more days, he'd have to figure out how to handle Marlot. Should he tell him? Lying to his wolf felt wrong, dangerous, after what they'd gone through, but how would he take Trembor working for organized crime, even as a way to take them down?

Marlot had refused to let Trembor sully his hands by killing Nikal in anger, how would he feel about his law-abiding lions breaking laws? Trembor had no misconceptions about it. Maoma would get to break the law, he expected it was the first thing she'd do, slowly claw through his hide until it felt normal.

Maybe she suspected what he was planning and didn't care, figuring that in time she could break him so thoroughly he wouldn't want to destroy them anymore. Gorrek had broken him and it had taken his parents for Trembor to get back on his feet. Return to himself. Would that experience make him easier to break, or tougher?

His pad buzzed, and in the middle of it, the alarm sounded. Time to get up. He shut the alarm off, and the pad stopped buzz after the fifth one, transferring Dayra to his message center. He'd pay for it later, if not with Dayra getting her mother to bring her here, at the next family dinner.

He just couldn't deal with her jovial inquisitiveness right now.

How was he going to hide what he was doing from them? He'd always impressed on them the need to be honest. That curiosity was a good thing. He always answered their questions, and unlike their parents, Trembor had no delusions as to how perceptive the cubs were. They knew his current stress was the court case, but how was he going to explain it once it was over? Or did he believe he was that good of an actor he could fool them?

The pad buzzed again. Dayra would have called Nerik, bullied him into trying to get through to Trembor. If he didn't answer, they'd get every one of their cousins to call. This wouldn't end until he answered one of them.

He took the pad off the headboard, looked at the display. Nerik, as he'd expected. Noted the pad needed to be charged. It stopped buzzing.

Who would be next? Nerik would report to Dayra; who would she rope into

calling him next? Or would she just wait? Even without prompting, Vanya would call at some point, as well as Gansir. Would she get the teens involved? They liked to claim they were too old to play Dayra's 'games' but when she got something in her mind, she could be a small terror getting it.

Trembor smiled. She would be a copy of her grandmother when she grew up. Fierce and protective. The one who stood before her family's enemies, fangs bared, claws out. Fearless.

Would Trembor be the enemy by then?

He set the family lock on his pad and focused on not throwing up.

Could he do this? Could he compromise his principles?

"Isn't it a little late?" he snarled and got out of bed. He'd agreed with Derimak. He understood this was the only way he had out of this in such a way he could keep his family safe. But it left him feeling like he'd have to cut ties with him to accomplish it.

Marlot would be angry, but he'd understand, if Trembor explained everything to him. But his family? Even if he explained the situation, His father wouldn't understand. Serene would be furious at him for not telling her, for dealing with this by himself. She wouldn't care about the danger to them; only that he'd put himself in danger. Allowed himself to be abused again.

She would make her anger at Marlot look like cuddling.

He decided not to bother with his morning exercises and dropped the pad on the charger and on his way to the shower. After that ate, forced meat down slowly, having to fight throwing it up anytime he thought about the situation he was in. He'd have to get stress medicine to get through this. With nothing else to do, after eating, he set to tidying up the house again.

He'd just started when his pad buzzed.

By the time he reached it, it was halfway through them before the transfer to his message center. Herelex.

Had Dayra gotten him to call, knowing he had the bypass? No, Herelex was too mature to abuse his privilege like that.

"Herelex, what's wrong?"

His nephew didn't immediately respond, and Trembor heard the sounds of the transit system. People talking, the clacking of the rails. The underground. Why was Herelex taking transit, Bo's work took him by the academy.

"Herelex?"

"I don't know what to do."

"What's wrong?"

Again, a stretching silence. The clanking slowed then stopped. The announcement of a station. Trembor couldn't make out the words, the distortions of the speakers as the pad.

"It's probably nothing. I'm just acting like prey."

Trembor straightened. That was not like his nephew. "Herelex, if you think something wrong, it probably is. What is it?"

He sighed. “Guys at the academy had been trying to get me to use Nip, one suggested I could make money selling it. Another one, a teacher, I think, said there was a market for someone like me; whatever that means. I know I’m being a cub for thinking that, but aren’t I supposed to be safe on the academy grounds? Now it’s like everyone’s trying to get me to do stuff.” He was silent, but Trembor sensed his nephew wasn’t done. “Bad stuff.”

“You said one of them is a teacher?”

“I think so. He’s not a student, that I’m sure of, but I don’t know every adult at the academy. And it was more than one. I’m pretty sure one implied I could be paid to be recorded while having sex.” Trembor heard he shudder in Herelex’s voice.

His nephew was still dealing with his first heat. He’d probably had had his first experience at this point, but it would still be a few weeks until it passed completely and he could think rationally about who he wanted to have sex with. That a teacher was proposing that he be recorded, now, was utterly reprehensible.

“You know you don’t have to do what the other students tell you to, right?”

“Of course, but it’s like all of a sudden, they all found me. Everyone who thinks the academy is just them for them to waste time until they can move on to more productive things, all of which seemed to barely be legal, wants to let me in on it, whatever it is.”

Trembor’s hackles went up; they wouldn’t dare. It was one thing for them to go after the adults in his family, but the cubs? Still, all he could do was support Herelex as he stood up to the other students, but the teachers? He wasn’t who could help.

“You need to tell your father about the teachers who are pressuring you. It’s inappropriate for someone in that position to do that to you. He can call the academy and lodge a complaint.”

Another long silence and Trembor felt the dread rise.

“I did.”

“What did your father say in response?” he asked cautiously.

“Dad said I might as well listen to their offer, that we can always use more money.”

Trembor’s fatigue vanished. “He said what?” he growled.

“He said that hustling on the side was a good thing, that it would get me ready for life outside the academy.” The words were flat and reminded Trembor of how he’d felt while contemplating ending his life.

“How long had this been going on?” he did his best to make his tone gentle.

“A while,” Herelex replied dismissively. Trembor wanted to demand why he’d waited so long to call him, but he’d been young too. It wasn’t like he’d ever asked for help with Gorrek, even once he knew how destructive his situation was. At least Herelex was talking with him now.

“I’ll have a talk with your father,” Trembor said as neutrally as he could considering the boiling anger. What was Bo thinking, letting criminals get their claws into his son? “After that, I’ll stop by the academy and make sure they know this is going

on. If another one of the teachers approaches you, try to get their name and pad it to me. The more details I have the easier it's going to be for me to get the academy to do the right thing."

Trembor wasn't sure he heard the snuffle, but the hitch in Herelex's voice was clear. "Thank you."

Trembor couldn't imagine how his nephew felt. For his father to hand him over like that; he was going to have more than words with his brother. If Bo was very lucky, Trembor might leave him some hide to cover his shame with.

Marlot snapped awake, lifting his head off the desk. He looked around at the room, momentarily confused as to where he was, then he remembered, in his office, at home.

He'd planned on staying at the office, but his stomach had had other ideas. Drinking flavored blood while watching a store hadn't nourished him, and without Trembor working, he hadn't kept meat there. So he'd packed the papers and brought them home. He ate, then set to work.

He looked at the pages spread on the desk and the screen where his notes were written.

He'd confirmed a quarter of the pages were lists of walking dead. He'd done so by looking for and finding the one name he knew for certain was without an ID, Grift Stripe, and in the process remembered he had a second name to work with. Hardir Mixcoat, when he found it too. In the end, he had close to two hundred walking dead, but still couldn't confirm what the numbers attached to each name meant.

The businesses were simpler to figure out. He began with Karlix Housing Supplies a search on the network returned enough information to confirm it was legitimate. The number attached to it was their business ID; he couldn't do an indepth search through those in the system for irregularities, since his authority as an RI didn't stretch into business productivity.

Something for Vlein to look into himself.

What gave him pause were the names on one page, names with valid ID attached to them. He'd run through a few of them. One was employed within the judicial system, a filing clerk, one was a teacher at the academy, the next few worked in a variety of stores, none of which were on the other pages.

What annoyed him was that for all that was there, nothing helped him figure out what it had to do with his body. It told him what he'd done to live, but not how or who had killed him.

His pad buzzes.

"Hello."

"Registered Investigator Blackclaw?" an official-sounding male asked.

"Yes, it's me." Marlot straightened reflexively and looked at the time. Late morning, way too late morning.

“I’m enforcer Longjump. I need you to come to your office, there’s been a break-in and—”

“His Hela’han okay?” Marlot’s thought’s raced. Why break into his office? If Hela’han had been hurt, they would have more to worry about than charges of breaking and entering.

“She’s fine. They’re both fine. It seems they surprised the intruders. There was a scuffle, but in the end, the intruders ran off before anyone was seriously hurt. We need you to come and see if anything’s missing.”

They? Both of them? If Jesdan had driven Hela’han, he might have saved her life. As imposing as she was, she wasn’t a fighter. “I’ll be right over.” He disconnected and was out of the office when a possible reason for the break-in occurred to him. He came back and looked at the papers on his desk.

If they knew he had this. They’d want them back. He might not understand exactly what they represented. But they were important enough for Hardir to have ensured two copies made it to his family. The question was, how could they know? He looked at his pad. They knew who he was from his car. They hadn’t hacked his pad, but there were so many other ways to listen in on a call it was a certainty they could.

He’d called Trembor. Had he given details? He couldn’t remember, all he recalled was that his lion hadn’t been in a great mood. He’d called Ba, and he’d at least mentioned organized crime and have new information.

Once he left, would they break into his home? He had to assume they would, which meant he couldn’t leave the papers here. Could he bring them back to the office now that they had already looked there? The enforcers presence would draw the curious, which would allow anyone to watch and not be noticed. He showed up with a package and he’d advertise where they are. Camouflaging them was simple enough, but he had to expect them to watch anything he did.

He placed a call. “Ukely, Marlot. Any chance you can give me a ride to my office? Thanks, I’ll be waiting.”

While he waited, he got things ready.

* * * * *

“You’re running late today.” The zebra said as Marlot sat in her car.

“I didn’t sleep well,” Marlot answered, “slept through the alarm, and there was a break-in at the office. It’s why I’m not busing it there.”

“Is anything important missing?” She drove off.

“It’s what I’m heading to find out. At least Hela’han wasn’t badly hurt.” Now that they were moving, he unbuttoned his jacket, revealing the butcher paper over his stomach, held in place with strings.

Ukely glanced, looked again, and Marlot indicated the road when she looked at him and shook his head as she opened her mouth. He’d run his pad through every invasive program detection app he knew, but he also knew enough not to believe they were infallible. Even without something on his pad to listen to their conversation, listening to people in a moving car was difficult, not impossible.

He slipped a piece of paper to the zebra as discretely as he could. On it, he'd written: *Pretty sure I'm in trouble and being watched. I'm leaving evidence with you. When you can do so without attracting attention, take it to the others, we need to figure out what it's about.*

Then he slowly removed every other paper and let them slip to the floor. He didn't bother organizing them, only using his feet to make a stack of them. He needed anyone watching them to think he'd left them at home or had missed them at his office.

She crumbled the piece and put it in a pocket, then talked about nothing important.

* * * * *

The scene around his office wasn't the chaos he'd expected. Only one enforcer car was there, and only a handful of watchers stood around. Marlot did his best not to appear to do so as he looked them over, trying to figure out which one of them was part of the organized crime group he'd stumbled onto, but he knew his neighboring business more by scent than by sight, and while not a busy street, there were always people walking up and down it.

Inside, he found a scene he hadn't expected. Jesdan stood before an enforcer, chest puffed out. "You are not touching her." What made it unusual was that the enforcer was a panther, a predator, and that even with a wide ear bandaged, a broken tush, and bandages over his cheek, the elephant was not backing down.

"I don't want to touch her," the panther replied, "but I need to take her statement now that she's settled down."

Behind Jesdan, Hela'han sat, eyes glazed over, trunk darting about, searching for things to grab. She was nowhere near settled.

"It might be best if you give her more time," Marlot said.

Jesdan turned his gaze on him, and the fierceness in them surprised Marlot, before it faded to relief. He'd known how the elephant felt for Hela'han, but he hadn't thought him capable of standing up to a predator like that, let alone be willing to take on two.

"I'm Marlot Blackclaw, this is my office, are you officer Longjump?"

The panther shook his head. "Officer Augor. My partner is outside, looking for any indication of how they broke in."

"They probably bypassed the lock. There's a lot of apps available on the network." Marlot looked at Jesdan. "How are you? Looks like you stood your ground."

The elephant touched his injuries. "They scared Hela. I wasn't going to let them hurt her."

Marlot nodded. "You can look after her. I'll keep officer Augor busy until she'd ready to talk with him." He motioned to his office. "If they took anything, it's going to be in there." He opened the door to the mess they had made of his office.

He sighed as he looked at the opened up computer. At least everything important was on the network, and he'd trapped his tracking program, so if they tried to get that to work, all they'd end up with would be broken code.

Just like they'd left him with a broken computer. It was due for an upgrade,

anyway. Rebuilding it was as good of an excuse as anything else.

The financial(need to confirm that) company his brother worked for took the entire ninth floor of a building in the city center. Trembor was alone in the elevator, his low growl having kept anyone else from entering it with him. The doors opened to what had to be a welcoming lobby, but he barely paid it any attention. He stalked past the receptionist, who stood to step before him.

“Sir,” the jackal said, backing when Trembor didn’t stop. “Do you have an appointment? Can I help you? You can’t just barge in like this.”

Trembor shoved him aside, possibly too forcefully, and continued through the rows of cubicles, eyes on the lion standing by one, smiling and talking with the occupant. Bo glanced in his direction and frowned.

“Trem, what are you doing here?”

“What the fuck are you thinking, telling your son to go along with everything they tell him?”

Bo looked around, lips tight. “Let’s take this to my office, where we’ll have privacy.”

“Fuck privacy.” Trembor shoved his brother back. “It’s not enough that you ignored dad’s advice and gambled, but now you’re dragging Herelex down with you?”

“What is that son of mine doing talking with you?” Bo snapped back.

“Who else is he going to talk to when his own father’s telling him to do what criminals tell him to?”

“You have no fucking business putting your muzzle in my family’s business.”

“He’s my nephew, I’m not going to let you turn him into a criminal.”

“Get off your fucking hill, okay? He’s not going to hurt anyone.”

Trembor grabbed his brother by the collar and pulled him close. “How about hurting himself?” He growled deeply. “Do you even know what they want him to do?”

Bo shoved Trembor away, the strength behind his lean brother’s arms surprising him enough to let go. “Whatever the fuck he needs to. You think it’s easy for the rest of us?” Bo motioned to the cubicles. “Not all of us have the benefit of a great job that pays all our bills. Some of us have to take side jobs to make sure we can feed out cubs.”

“Is that what you call gambling your money away?” Trembor saw heads rise over cubicle walls in his peripheral vision. “You have a better paying job than I do, so don’t fucking blame that. You got yourself in your situation, and I didn’t give a fuck about it. I tried to talk to you, your family tried to help. You turned us down.”

“Help? That’s what you call dad screaming at me?”

“Do you even see how much what you did hurt him? You’re following his scent where he never wanted us to go! He did everything he could so we’d known the danger! And what do you do? Strut in a gambling house as if his warnings were bedside stories you were too old to listen to! Of course he’s going to scream, he’s terrified of what’s going to happen to you and your family!”

“It’s my fucking family! None of you have any business marking them!”

“Are you fucking blind Bo, deaf? We’re trying to help you!”

“I don’t fucking need your help, I’m handling things fine!”

“By telling your son to let them make sex movies with him? What’s next? They’re going to make him a fixture in one of their sex houses? He’s barely out of his heat. Do you have any idea what kind of damage that’s going to do?”

“Oh, fuck off. You were sleeping with any guy that offered himself days after that female laid you.”

“My choice, Bo. I wanted to. Herelex doesn’t even know what he wants yet. You’d know that if you’d bothered listening to him.”

“Sure, you know my son so much better than I do. You must love that, having all the cubs tell you their secrets, holding that over their parents, must make you feel all-powerful.”

“What the fuck?” Trembor was surprised at the chuckle that escaped him. “Bo, you know fucking well that I always send them to their parents when they have problems. I told Herelex to talk to you when he said that because I thought you’d be smart enough to make sure your son didn’t get buried in your shit. But instead, you’re pushing him in it. *That* I’m not going to stand for.”

Bo let out a bitter laugh. “And what are you going to do when they tell you to guide my son to that sex house yourself? When they tell you to tell sweet little Dayra she can help her family by parading herself for some hungry males?”

Trembor stiffened. “I’m going to tell them to go fuck themselves.”

Bo’s smile was nasty. “Oh, you think they’re going to do what you want? High and mighty Trembor Goldenmane’s going to make them see the error of their ways? Let me remind you, you’re in the same shit I am. They have their claws in you just as deep. When they tell you what to do, you’re going to do it.”

“Never,” Trembor snarled. “I will never work for them. I don’t care what happens to me, but I am going to eat the bodies of anyone who threatens my family. You know that better than anyone else.”

“Right,” Bo said with derision, “because it was me you were fucking saving. If that wolf hadn’t been there. You’d have been happy to let me die, were probably looking forward to it, taking in my sons, raise them as yours, since you’re never going to fuck a female and have them yourself. You don’t give a fuck about me, about the rest of us. It’s just you and your wolf. You fucking live to be abused.”

Trembor’s hand hurt. He didn’t remember moving closer, or raising his arm, or striking his brother, but Bo was on the floor, rubbing his bleeding muzzle and Trembor’s hand hurt from the impact.

“Don’t you ever say that about Marlot again,” Trembor growled.

Bo snorted and looked at his hand. “He’s got you fucking well trained. You hated him one day, now you’re hitting your brother to defend him. Even Gorrek never got you to do that.”

Trembor took a step forward before he could stop himself. The growl reverberated through his body. He wanted to eat that male who’d dared compare his wolf to that

monster of a lion. He wanted to taste his blood, spread his entrails everywhere as a warning to anyone else who'd think to do the same.

Trembor turned on his heels and stormed out of the office. If he stayed, someone would die, and he didn't want to eat his brother, not really, he told himself. The elevator emptied itself as he forced his way in. He wasn't growling anymore, but he expected his scent warned everyone of the state he was in. He wasn't even trying to control himself.

When the doors opened on the ground floor, a weasel stepped in from outside and waved at Trembor, broad smile on his muzzle. "Hey buddy, I think we need to—"

This time Trembor was conscious of the fist he planted in the weasel's face. He didn't know if it was the same one he's encountered before, but he had no doubt who he worked for. No one else would be this familiar with Trembor right now.

The weasel's eyes turned angry as he staggered back. "Buddy, you better think about—"

Trembor punched him again, considered striking him with an open hand, claws out. He couldn't be worth that much, and he did need meat, but he needed to send a message. Trembor grabbed the weasel by the neck before he could recover and slammed him against the wall.

"Tell your boss that I am going to eat her. I am going to eat all of you, and if she even thinks of touching someone in my family, I'm going to eat her alive." He looked the weasel up and down. "You too."

He let him go and stormed out of the building.

Marlot was halfway through assembling the computer when his pad buzzed with a message from Ukely.

Work's boring so I'm making it a short day. Going to go hang with friends. If you need me to drive you home, it'll take a little longer to pick you up.

He didn't bother replying. He understood what she meant, and, not that he expected anyone intercepting his message to be technical, but she was also not lying. Joren, Afirna, and Harik were her friends.

He went back to building the computer. He kept the design simple, with off-the-shelf parts—Harik would scream if he knew—but Marlot preferred spending the money on processing power and memory rather than a brand name with components designed for specific but narrow tasks.

Not that he didn't appreciate a dedicated computer that could outclass anything Marlot built, but his needs were more general.

He had the computer assembled and was halfway through installing the operating system when his pad buzzed with the office tone. It was almost at the point where it would transfer to the buffer when he remembered he's set Hela'han home with Jesdan.

"RI Marlot Blackclaw speaking," he hurried to say.

"Sounds like I'm bothering you," Joren said with a chuckle. "Has that secretary finally had enough of your drooling over her? You know, keeping your potential meal under your employ had to break some sort of employment rules."

“Funny, I don’t think her future mate would let me eat her, if that had ever been my intention.”

“I never took you for the kind to let that stop you.”

“He didn’t see the beating he took from the people who broke into the office to keep her safe. She was too shaken to work. And I’m rebuilding the computer they broke apart in their search.”

“Will that keep you busy long?”

“What wrong?” Marlot tried to keep his tone casual, but if they were in trouble because of—

“My computer’s shitting garbage on me.”

“What?” this didn’t make sense.

Joren sighed. “I think I let in a malicious program. Before you complain about me going on site I shouldn’t, I was careful.”

“You don’t—” Marlot’s brain finally caught up to the situation. Joren was one of the more aware programmers he knew. Not only wouldn’t he go to any site with malicious programs, but he had written his own code to keep them out of his computers. So if this call wasn’t about his computer. “—call getting infected being careful.”

He looked at the progress bar, still forty percent to go. He couldn’t leave until it was installed. The checks he could run tomorrow, or even later. In a pinch, his pad had all he needed to work a case.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Joren sounded chastised. “When could you come over and fix it?”

“I need maybe thirty minutes to get my computer to a point I can leave it alone. Then I’ll have to bus to your place, my car’s still in the shop.” He didn’t want to call Ukely in case someone was watching her. She’d be at Harik’s place, but so would Joren at this point.

“Can’t you be here quicker?”

“I’m not rushing just because you weren’t careful, Joren. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, we’ll be waiting.”

* * * * *

The door to Harik’s house opened, and the mouse remained hidden behind it. “Get in,” he said. Once he closed the door, he nodded to the last of five isolation cages on the side table. They looked hurriedly put together, but they would be effective in blocking any signals from the pads in each of them. Marlot placed his in the empty cage. Harik didn’t call his condition paranoia. He called it extreme carefulness.

In silence, Harik led Marlot to the other side of the house. One of the bedrooms had been converted into a workroom with five computers set up in the center in a circle, three of them occupied by his friends. With that door closed, Harik relaxed.

“As far as I can tell, no one is watching my house, but we’re not taking any chances. These systems were put together from parts I had lying around.”

“Except his,” Afirna said, looking at the Interon on one desk with envy.

“Privilege of being in my house,” Harik replied. “We’ve already digitized everything, and we started looking through the information, but we’re missing context to make sense of it.”

Marlot sat at the last computer. It looked ugly, without the case and components poking out at odd angles because they had been designed for a larger computer, but it would out-perform anything Marlot used. Harik’s leftovers were better than anything Marlot could afford, the privilege of selling his services to computer parts manufacturer as tester and engineer. He got all the best stuff.

“Context,” he said, ordering his thoughts. “A body was left unclaimed in my territory. Turns out his tax was paid five years ago, he was walking around days before it was reported, so it’s not some joker who kept the body in a freezer all this time. Looking into his movements, I’ve been able to link some of it to organized crime, which resulted in my car being sabotaged, the body’s wife being eaten, and because I consulted with the revenue bureau on this, me being drafted into finding a way to codify whatever work these walking dead are doing so they can be properly taxed. So take it seriously when I say this is dangerous stuff.”

“Oh, I was taking this seriously already,” Harik said. He forced a smile. “My safety is always top priority.”

“Okay,” Ukely paused. “That actually helps with what I was going through.” She typed something and names and images appeared on Marlot’s screen, the others too, by how intently they studied them. “I had that first page of names, I narrowed the search to this city only and because that number doesn’t correspond to an ID, I removed anyone alive. Because of the message you passed me in the car, I thought they were people whoever you’re looking into killed and didn’t want found, so I cross-referenced them with the missing person bureau, no luck, but then I got a series of pings as part of people who’s tax was paid. The time frame is between six months to ten years ago, with one outlier at thirteen.”

“How many pings?” Joren asked, already typing.

“Twenty-eight out of the fifty-three on the page I had.”

“There were two other pages with names not connected to IDs,” Marlot said.

“I have page two,” Afirna said.

“Starting on page three,” Harik.

“Sending you the program I wrote to speed things up,” Ukely said.

Harik looked up. “You call this a program? It’s a mess.”

“We can’t all be the genius you are,” the zebra replied. “That’s what I can write in fifteen minutes. It works.”

“But you have redundant command calls and—”

“Can we focus?” Joren said. “If it works, we use it. When we’re done we can work on cleaning it up. I’m sure someone would be happy to pay for a program that can tabulate who pays whose tax from outside the revenue bureau.”

“Insurers, for one,” Marlot mumbled, using his RI ID to pull more detailed information on the people’s death. Writing a quick program of his own, it took the

information on who paid the taxes and created a file with them.

“I’m pulling those who paid the tax,” Afirmá said.

“Ignore anything Ukely already sent,” Marlot replied. “Already doing those.” They exchanged a smile, and he didn’t ask how she was getting the information out of the bureau. Unlike him, she didn’t have authorized access.

“Then I’m sending what I have to you and I’m going to look into the deads’ backgrounds.”

More names appeared on his screen and he modified his program so it automatically added any names sent to his computer, while he kept an eye on the result of the program. A lot of names repeated. At a glance, Marlot thought that for every ten dead, there was only one person that had paid their taxes. In a city this size that made sense, but that each of them then turned up in a file of walking dead?

“Harik, how comfortable are you getting into the banking system?” Marlot asked.

“I’ll take that,” Joren answered with a smile. “I happen to love the banking system’s programs, so accommodating to an outsider.” The typing paused for a second as they all stared at him. Joren shrugged, and the typing restarted.

“I’m sending you those who paid the tax,” Marlot said. “that’s a lot of money from an individual. Work out their income scheme.” Another modification to his program so it would automatically send the results to Joren.

“I have something resembling a common denominator,” Afirmá said. “I’m seeing a lot of financial troubles in the weeks before they ‘died’.”

“If you were already in the banking system,” Joren said, “you could have said so.”

“I’m not, I’m looking through creditor sites and communications. The interesting thing is that all those problems stop with the deaths.”

“Normal,” Harik replied. “The dead can’t pay.”

“But they all have families. The debts were shifted there, but the survivor’s benefits were enough to cover them, and with enough left over for the family to get back on their feet.”

“No, you have something wrong there,” Ukely said. “If they were in trouble already that means their tax was in freefall, survivor benefits correspond to their tax. There’s no way they’d get enough to deal with debt.”

“And yet they do,” Marlot said. “Mirden, my body’s wife said something similar. After he died, the benefits came in and they were able to get out from under the debts. She also mentioned some luck in getting a better job.”

“Adding that to what I’m looking into,” Afirmá said. “I’m trying to find a provenance for the payments. I’m guessing this was part of the incentives to get the bodies to go along with whatever this is.”

“Undocumented workers,” Harik said. “Without any recourse to escape their situation.”

“Serfdom,” Joren added in a whisper.

They all stopped. Serfdom was something Marlot had only heard of in history class. History so old it predated the tax system but had kept going past it. For as long as

there had been kings, there had been serfs. People without value or rights; forced to work for almost nothing. If hunger didn't take them, it was one of the other serfs to the people in charge of watching over them. He didn't remember when that system had been overturned, but the idea of it still existing, even in an altered form, made Marlot sick.

The system of predation they had was based on the concept that everyone had a right to ensure their survival. It wasn't always easy, some gave up on it, but the right was there. Work hard enough and you became too expensive for the average predator. Work even more and fewer of them could afford you.

That a group of people was reduced to nothing more than the homeless, while still having to work was wrong. If they worked, they had value.

Marlot looked at the names still appearing. More walking dead.

This was why Hardir had died. Had let himself be killed. So that this injustice would be brought to light.

Marlot would honor him by doing just that.

He'd shine a light so bright on the people behind this it would burn their value away and then they would be hunted down and feed those they had wronged.

He smiled. Trembor would like that kind of justice.

"I think that you owe me an explanation," the female said, sliding the pad over the table. Trembor caught it. A paused video was on the display. The title was 'my boss has a family tiff'. It showed Bo and him screaming at one another. He hadn't realized their argument had been recorded, but he should have. Everyone recorded everything, it seemed these days. He readied himself and played it,

"...because it was me you were fucking saving. If that wolf hadn't been there. You'd have been happy to let me die, were probably looking forward to it, taking in my sons, raise them as yours, since you're never going to fuck a female and have them yourself. You don't give a fuck about me, about the rest of us. It's just you and your wolf. You fucking live to be abused." The derision came through clearly.

He didn't pause it in time and watched himself punch his brother. The motion had been quick, without preamble, and precise. It surprised Trembor. He trained with his feet much more than his fist. In the still, Bo was almost on his back, Trembor was stiff.

"Well?" Serene asked.

This wasn't the confrontation he'd expected, planned for.

"Me and Bo got in an argument, it got out of hand. I'll apologize for hitting him when I see him again." He could give details, tell her what Bo had encouraged Herelex to give into. Watch her tear his brother apart. As satisfying as that would be, he wasn't a cub, to go cry to one of his mothers to take his side in an argument. And her getting involved in this would certainly bring the organization forcing his brother to do what he was doing down on his family.

"That isn't what I'm talking about, Trembor," she growled, "and you know it. That wolf abuse—"

"His name his Marlot, Mother," he said firmly, if not as loudly as he'd intended.

She stared at him. “Why are you back with him after he hurt you like he did?”

“He made a mistake.”

“Doesn’t that sound a little familiar, Trembor? He didn’t mean to do it, he won’t do it again. After what you went through, how can you believe anything he says?”

“He’s talking with a counselor, if nothing else. He didn’t make excuses for what he did. Unlike Gorrek, Marlot realizes he had issues, and he tries to do better. And maybe if I’d told him about Gorrek and what he did to me, Marlot would have been more careful about how he treated me.” He smiled. “That is, once he’d eaten Gorrek.”

“Trembor, why are you taking the chance? That—Marlot has already shown he’s willing to hurt you. You can’t know he might not do it again.”

“Why are you still with dad?” Trembor replied without anger. He understood Serene’s position. She was the protector of their family. She already saw what Marlot had done as her failing him. That he was willing to put himself at risk again meant she’d failed even more. It was as much a repeat of Gorrek for her as it had been for him.

“I don’t see what your father has to do with this.”

“How many times did he go back to the gambling house after you thought you’d made him understand how bad it was for him and the rest of you? Why didn’t you leave after that first time? Or the second one?”

“Your father had a problem. I wasn’t going to abandon him while he was fighting through it. When you love someone, you help them.”

Trembor smiled at his mother. “I love him, and unlike Gorrek, Marlot loves me. He is a little possessive, and when stress gets too much he becomes demanding and stubborn, but not just with me, he makes the same stupid mistakes with the rest of the world as he does with me when stressed.”

“And that makes it okay?”

“No, but it means he’s not targeting me, the way Gorrek did. Gorrek never, ever, lost his temper with someone he hadn’t hooked. He was always the perfect male. How else was he going to hook anyone? Marlot is just someone who copes with stress by trying to control everything. He doesn’t even try to be sneaky about it. He runs right through other people to get what he wants. And now, after seeing what his actions did to me. He is trying to change. Would you, after what you went through with dad, really tell me to abandon him?”

He watched her study him. She would respect his decision, ultimately, no matter how she felt about it. He’d have to be careful if he brought Marlot to a family dinner again, but he didn’t believe she’d eat him. After all, she hadn’t eaten Gorrek, and that was one male who would have deserved it; if only he’d seen that back then and not stop her.

She sighed. “All right. I won’t eat the wolf. But I am warning you; if he hurts you again I’ll—”

“Do nothing. And he is going to hurt me. He’s not perfect, he’s not going to fix his problem with one visit to a counselor. It’s going to take time, but I’m going to be there for him.” For as long as I can. Fuck, he was acting like he and Marlot had years

together. Of course, to do otherwise would give his mother the scent that something was off. And the rest of the video was enough.

“I miss the days when you thought the world was perfect,” she said.

“I don’t. It led to Gorrek.”

“True.” She nodded to the pad. “About the rest?”

He pressed his lips together. He didn’t want to watch the rest. The memory of what he’d said and done was still fresh. But he didn’t know how much had been recorded. “What did you hear?” he knew better than to volunteer information.

“Bo says something about them having their claws in you too. I’m assuming he’s referring to the people behind the gambling house. You say something about him pushing Herelex into making sex movies, having them turn him into one of their males in a sex house. And you made it clear you were never going to work for them.”

Trembor sighed. That was going to cause him more trouble than anything else. Derimak couldn’t have seen the video yet, otherwise, she’d been here, fighting his mother for the right to be pissed at him. “I made the mistake of putting myself between Bo and the organization he’s in trouble with. They turned around and decided they were going to force me to work for them.”

“Bo being framed for underage predation,” she said. “Your lawsuit for interfering in an investigation.”

He nodded. “I am handling it, mother. You can’t get involved.”

She tilted an ear. “Can’t? Child, do you have any idea when the last time someone told me I couldn’t do something?”

She smiled. “A few months ago, when I told you you couldn’t eat Marlot.”

She narrowed her eyes. “He wasn’t threatening two of my children.”

If only you knew the whole story, Trembor thought. *You wouldn’t let me talk you out of this*. “This isn’t as simple as a tiff between lovers. It’s a matter for the enforcers, and I am working with them to take them down.” Not that he expected that to last, but so long as he could keep her from getting involved. He didn’t think he could bring himself to outright lie to her, so he’d have to skirt around the truth.

“I don’t like that it seems to mean you have work with those criminals, Trembor. You were always so adamant about following the law.”

“This is about doing what’s right. I can survive bending the law to take them down. And I’ll have Marlot to go home to.”

“And how does he feel about you putting yourself at risk like this?”

Oh, that’s a conversation I am not looking forward to having.

“You haven’t told him, have you?” she said.

“Not yet. He’s been busy with his cases, I’ve been busy with the lawsuit and this mess. We talk over pad every few days, but we haven’t sat down together in a while.”

“Tell him. Don’t wait until it’s too late, because as much as I don’t like him if you’re serious about him loving you. If he loses you and doesn’t know why, he will hate you for it.”

But if I tell him, he will never let me go through this alone, and I cannot put him

in that kind of danger. “I will.”

She hugged him. “Be careful.” She kissed the side of his head and he escorted her to the door. On the other side, a hyena in an enforcer uniform was about to knock, or, by the expression on her face, obliterate the door. She forced her expression into something resembling neutrality as she stepped away.

“Derimak,” Trembor greeted her. “This is one of my mothers, Serene.”

“Ma’am,” the hyena greeted her.

“You must be who Trembor is working with on this,” Serene said, studying the enforcer. “I’ll let you get to it.” She paused. “If you get my son hurt, I will come for you.” She headed for her car.

“She’s not your mother, mother, right?” Derimak asked. “I met her at our graduation, she was nowhere near that intense.”

“Serene is my mother through mating, not birth. She’s still my mother.” He closed the door once the hyena was inside, and Derimak looked out the window, waiting until a car drove off.

“You told her?” she demanded.

Trembor chuckled. “You don’t lie to Serene.” He headed to the kitchen and filled two glasses with blood. “But I didn’t tell her everything, just enough she wouldn’t take on the organization herself to protect me and Bo.”

“So you lied to her. Because after that stunt you pulled, I can’t see how you can have convinced her there’s any chance we can pull this off anymore.” She had her back in hand, with the same video loaded on the screen.

“I’ve seen it, and I was there.”

“And do you understand the results? You specifically say that you’d rather eat them than work with them. I don’t know if there’s any way to convince them it was just you being angry.”

“Especially not with me punching the guy they sent to calm me and telling them they are all on the menu if they threaten my family, starting with their boss.”

Her ears folded flat. “Trem, you have to know they aren’t going to lie on their backs and bare their necks for you. You’ve just declared war on them.”

“I know.”

“You sound way too calm about this,” she responded.

“I’m dead, Der. I’ve accepted that.” He chuckled. “I’ve been trying to find a way of making it happen for weeks now. Ever since they came to me with their promise I’d end up working for them.”

“Taking your own life isn’t going to solve anything, Trem.”

“No, but making sure I take as many of them down with me, will.”

“And how are you going to do that? Even if hunt them one after the other, there’s always going to be someone to take their place. This isn’t some pack on the street you can clear out in an afternoon. They are everywhere.”

Trembor smiled. “Including the enforcers.”

“You shouldn’t look this happy they have their claws in some of us.”

“Why not? It means we know where to go hunt for someone who knows more about them than we do.” Trembor canted his head. “You do know at least one enforcer who works for them, right?”

“More than one, yes. Why?” she asked cautiously.

“Good, I’m going to get them to turn on the organization.”

Marlot showed his ID to the guard and was allowed through onto the academy grounds. Unlike his last visit, he has to walk to the administration center, which lets him get more of a sense of the students and they mill around him, talking, young predators being casual with young prey groups seated by trees, studying and relaxing. In the distance, a small tent with someone speaking to a crowd.

He couldn’t hear what they said, but recognized the colors of the anti-predation political party. It was their time to waste. As far as Marlot was concerned, politics would never change nature.

The second set of names was what brought Marlot to the academy. Joren had matched a third of them with students. He had refused to get their records because he didn’t want to cause the academy problems. The others had been busy and by then Marlot had needed the air. Being in a room with three prey had become a distraction.

Closer to the administration building, by the athletic one, they had exercise machines outside, and a crowd watched the males and females using them. Some of the watchers were too old to be students, possibly teachers, but Marlot suspected a few were prowlers, looking for their next plaything.

The thought made him wonder how Telima was doing. It had been months now since Aiden, learning he’d only been a toy for her sexual enjoyment. Since Marlot had nearly ruined the young male by telling him about the unborn cub. *That* was enough to kill any desire to go check on the jackal. He had to still hate him for it.

Inside the administration building, he showed his ID, and an adviser led him to an office.

“How can I help you, RI Blackclaw?” the black panther asked, typing on the keyboard, then waiting.

That was the question. In his hurry to get here, Marlot hadn’t even thought of that, too busy with what it would mean for the criminal organization to be picking cubs out of the academy. It wasn’t like this had anything to do with his body anymore.

“I’ve been tasked by the Revenue Bureau to look into an anomaly, and that’s led me to you with a list of students I’d like information on.”

“Shouldn’t that be the enforcer’s job?”

“Normally, but I uncovered the anomaly, so my reward is to have to work that case.”

The panther chuckled. “Good to know good work is rewarded the same everywhere. Can you pad me the list?”

Marlot handed the adviser the printout with the student’s name and received a tilted ear in return before the panther began entering the names.

Marlot had an electronic copy stored on an older pad Harik had handed him before he left.

“This thing is disconnected from everything. As for as you’re concerned, it’s scent-blind, deaf, and dumb.”

“Like my sister,” Afirna had offered.

“You are not to connected it to anything, am I clear?” the mouse had continued. “Most definitely not your pad. We can’t know what malicious apps they installed on it without running it through an extensive scrub. If you need to move information from one to the other, you use slates, and you run it through every scrub you can think of, if you can’t think of enough of them I will give you my collection.”

Marlot could have handed a slate with the names to the panther, but at some point, the slate would have come back with more information on it and he would have had to take out the pad Harik had handed him. The old, bulky, ugly thing of a pad. Marlot appreciated that older meant easier to secure these days, but if he could help it, he’d rather no one knew he used it.

“You certainly know how to pick them,” the panther commented as he typed and read.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve looked at eight of the names already and they are not our brightest students.”

“Predator or prey?”

“A mix, heavier on prey.”

“So destined for menial work and low tax rating?”

“If they clean up their act. If not, it’s going to be a cage complex within a few years of reaching adulthood. Two of them have already been arrested for narcotics distribution.”

“Nip?”

“Nip, cacao, pardinalin.” He indicated the screen. “This one, Or’dindak smoothscale was removed from the academy after she almost killed a teacher.” He continued typing. “It looks like you somehow unearth the academy’s very own organized crime ring. Selling test results, distributing sex video to underage students, why is he still here?” the panther mused. “Each has had talks with the enforcers at least once.” He stared at the screen. “Why did this one have so much money on him?”

Money mule, Marlot thought. Every group needed at least one. Taking the payments owed, giving what was needed to conduct business. The larger the organization, the more they had to spread the risk, but within the closed environment of the academy, there would be a lack of trustworthy people for the position.

“You called it an organized crime ring. Do you know who they are affiliated with? They can’t be independent from one of the outside groups.”

“I just called it that because they’re all criminals. I’m not sure they’re even affiliated with one another.”

“So that’s all of them?”

“I’m just looking quickly now, and yeah, each had either a criminal annotation from the enforcers because of something they were caught doing off-campus or at least one from campus security, like this one for sexually propositioning her adviser. Not illegal, but also not permitted.” When he stopped typing, he looked at the list and underlined a name. “This is the only one without any crimes in the system. She’s either an anomaly or your list knows something we don’t.”

“Thirty-eight students,” Marlot whispered.

“On a campus of nearly four thousand, it isn’t many.”

“It’s still too many.” And that Hardir had included them as part of six pages of names Joren hadn’t been able to establish why they were there had to mean something. Were they potential walking dead? People whose behavior would undoubtedly lead to financial trouble? It didn’t feel right. The few other names Joren had managed to identify on the list were reasonably comfortable in the middle productivity range.

“I’m guessing you keep an archive of previous students, right?”

“Of course.”

Reluctantly, Marlot took the old pad out of his jacket and inserted a slate. “Do you have access to it?”

“I’d need to request permission. We keep it for statistical reasons.”

“To establish the academy’s productivity,” Marlot said, transferring the full six pages to the slate. “I’m aware no one can avoid being rated, even an institution as vital as the academy.” He handed the slate to the panther, who was looking at the brick of a pad Marlot held. He’d just been identified as some ancestor unable to keep up with the times, he was sure of it. He suppressed the need to take his other pad out because then he’d have to explain why he had two of them. “This the full list where those thirty-eight came from. Can you run it against your archive, if I can get a sense of who they were as students, maybe the list will start making sense.”

The adviser inserted the slate in his computer. “That is a lot of names. I’m going to have to get permission before I can give you that much information on previous students.”

“I understand, any idea how long it might take?”

“If you can give me more information on why you’re looking into them, it’ll speed up getting the authorization, but after that, I’ll still have to pull each name, and go over the records to ensure there isn’t anything confidential that isn’t covered by your investigation. That’s on top of my other duties.”

Marlot gave the panther Vlein’s contact information. “He will be able to provide you with all the details you need. He’s in charge of the investigation.”

“It’s still going to take a while.”

“I understand.” Marlot put the old pad away and stood. “You have my contact, let me know when you’re done and I’ll pick up the slate.”

“I can message you the results.”

“I’d rather you don’t. Also don’t discuss details with anyone.”

“You’re sounding paranoid now.”

Marlot smiled. "I'd preferred to think of myself as cautious. Those names are only a small part of what I've come across."

"I see."

"I'm simply asking that you use a good dose of caution as you do this."

"I will."

Marlot left and was standing by the bus stop when his real pad buzzed. What did Ezk'Eriel want? He didn't have any meat waiting there.

"Ezk'Eriel, how are you doing?"

"I'm good, but I have that mink you sent to me here and we need to talk about this."

"Mink? I'm sorry, what are you talking about?"

The hyena was silent. "You did send me a mink a few weeks ago, right? He showed up with a message from you saying to feed him, that you'd have the body in here before he'd gone through it."

Marlot sighed. "Yeah, sorry, I forgot. Has he gone through all of it yet?"

"Well, considering I never saw the body, I can't tell you, I just figured you were good for it."

"I am. Has he been making unreasonable requests about it?"

"He hadn't, he'd been happy asking for less than he should have been, until now. He's here asking to get the rest of the meat. If you want me to give him that, I'm going to have to see a body so I can calculate how much that is."

Marlot considered it. Getting Ezk'Eriel to see the wolf's body wouldn't be a problem, but why would the mink want all that was left? "I'm going to head to your store now, try to make sure he stays, tell him that I need to be there to confirm it if that will work."

"I don't think he's going anywhere without his meat, so yeah, it shouldn't be a problem."

"See you in a bit."

Marlot brought up the transit site and looked for the fastest route to the meat preparation store. Then he was running to reach a different stop before that bus arrived.

Late afternoon was a busy time for Ezk'Eriel and his brothers, enough that except for the occasional chuckle, it was all serious. Marlot caught Ezk'Eriel's attention, then remained out of the way until the hyena got one of his brother to take his place at the counter. Marlot tried to find the mink, but he didn't even remember what he looked like and he'd removed the battery from his pad to ensure no one listened in on this.

He was getting as paranoid as Harik.

"Is he still here?"

"He didn't like the crowd, so I set him in my office." Ezk'Eriel led Marlot to the back, pausing to exchange a few words in his native tongue with an elderly hyena in a baking apron and gloves. He noticed Marlot and angled her body to hide her workspace from his view.

“Mother’s protective of her recipes,” Ezk’Eriel commented as he continued down a hallway to an office. “If you end up killing him, do me a favor and keep the blood to a minimum.”

“I’m not killing him,” Marlot answered. “But, what’s his name?”

The hyena canted an ear. “Shouldn’t you know that?”

“It’s on my pad, which someone hacked. Until I can sanitize it, I’m not using it.”

“Galden.”

Marlot entered, and the mink stood, looking around nervously. He was still as thin as Marlot remembered him, but his fur had more of a sheen to it. Ezk’Eriel had said he took smaller portions, but they had done him some good.

“Galden,” Marlot greeted the mink.

“Hi.” He took a step back as Marlot approached. “Look, you didn’t have to come. I’m not doing anything wrong. I just wanted the meat you said I could take.”

Marlot leaned back against the door. “And you can have it once you tell me why.”

“That’s none of your business,” the mink replied defiantly. “You said it was mine, I need to take now.”

“Where are you going to store it?”

“I’ll figure out something.”

“So you aren’t prepared to take it.”

“Just give it to me already.”

“Galden, why do you want what’s left all of a sudden when you don’t have a cooler ready for it. You take more than you can eat and the rest is going to be wasted, do you really want that?”

The mink paced the length of the opposing wall, in front of the shelves holding books on baking, a diploma in a language Marlot didn’t recognize, and a trophy of someone bulky carrying someone smaller under his arm.

“I can’t stay here,” Galden said.

“Once you explain what’s going on, you can take the meat and leave.”

“Not here.” The mink motioned at the office. “Here.” He made a broader sweeping gesture. “It’s not safe anymore.”

“Galden, you’re homeless, without a rating. It’s never been safe for you.”

“No one was looking for me before,” the mink snapped.

Marlot straightened, now they were getting somewhere. Not that he liked where that was. “Who is looking for you?”

“I don’t know, but people have been sniffing around where he died. Asking people what happened, who saw what. I don’t like how they look.”

“How do they look?”

Galden glared at him. “Like people who don’t belong in that part of the city. Well dressed, too well dressed, with the locals baring their throat for them. They don’t belong, they shouldn’t be helping them.”

“Calm down, Galden, they don’t know who you are, and I’m not going to tell them.”

“Someone saw me there, talking with you.”

“Yes, but you were away from the people watching. At best they know a mink spoke with me.”

“The enforcer took my name!”

Marlot nodded, but if the enforcer had put the name in a report, Galden would already be dead, he suspected. It wasn't often Marlot was happy for someone not doing their job properly.

“It's my case,” Marlot said in as calm a voice as he could. “So I'm the only one who has your name.” If he'd even thought to write it down, someone. He was no longer sure since he was confident that crime group had access to what was on his pad.

It didn't calm Galden. “This isn't how it was supposed to go,” he grumbled.

“How was it supposed to go?” Marlot asked.

“Not like this.” The mink snapped. “You were supposed to finish this quickly, and I'd get his body and no one would bother me.”

Marlot chuckled. “How told you that? Investigations like these age never quick.”

“They did, before he killed—” the mink froze. “I mean, he did before—” He looked around scared.

Marlot stepped forward. “Before who killed whom?”

“No one!” Galden retreated to a corner, and Marlot resisted the urge to crowd him. He needed him coherent, not combative. “I told you, I didn't see anything. I just found the body. That's what he said I had to—”

“Galden!”

The mink jerked, eyes wide, pupil dilated, ready to bolt or fight.

“Calm down. Whatever happened, I promise you are not in trouble. Just take a breath.” At least minks weren't set off by predator scents, being meat eaters themselves. Marlot stepped back. “I need you to tell me what happened. What did you see? When you said he died, you mean Hardir, right? The brindled-furred wolf.”

Galden still looked ready to bolt, but he nodded.

“You said someone killed him. Was it a tiger?” it would make sense that the male who shared his apartment be involved.

The mink shook his head. “A wolverine.”

Marlot tried to remember if he'd come across any wolverine in the investigation. “Start from the beginning, Galden.”

“It's like I said, I was heading to the building to get out of the cold because the shelters were full. I surprised them there and almost bolted, but the wolf called me over. Said I could help them. The wolverine wasn't happy about it, he didn't stop him. The wolf told me his friend was going to kill him, and he wanted me to call it in once his friend had left, and not to mention him. He said I'd be able to have his body after you were done with it. It was food, so I said yes.”

“Did he say me specifically?”

The mink shook his head. “He said once the investigator was done.”

Marlot felt better, he had enough of people picking him to get something done.

Then his mood soured. Hardir had arranged to die in his territory. That couldn't be a coincidence.

"The wolverine, do you know who he is?"

Galden shook his head.

"Did Hardir call him his friend, or was that your interpretation of their relationship?"

"He said it. The wolverine didn't look happy to be there. I don't think he wanted to do it."

Possibly not, but he was still the one who'd killed Hardir, so the one who needed to pay the tax; whatever Vlein decided that was. Then why leave the body lying around was so Marlot would be involved? Easy, without that, he wouldn't have contacted Hardir's mate, so she wouldn't have known to contact him about the package.

Now, all he needed to do was track down the wolverine and he could close the case and... and what? Did that end his involvement with everything else? He doubted Vlein would allow him to drop the investigation into the walking dead, but Marlot could argue it wasn't what he was retained to do. He was an RI, not Vlein's go-to investigator.

Not that he wanted to stop. He wanted to dig this all the way to the bottom. And if the wolverine had taken part in killing Hardir, he probably knew something of the why Hardir had felt the need to leave the scent as he had.

That left Galden. With what he'd said, Marlot no longer needed him. But it felt wrong to just leave him to whoever was asking around about people involved in Hardir's death.

"If I find you a place to hide out until this is over, will you stick around? If you take your meat and run, I can't ensure they won't find you."

"Who'll take me in?" the mink asked in disbelief.

Marlot had no idea. He couldn't ask Harik, for all the extra rooms he had. The mouse was nervous around Marlot, and they'd known each other for years. He also couldn't trust that Galden wouldn't give in to his hunger being around a prey all the time.

Bahamel might agree to it. With her children moved out, she had rooms. Maybe she could also help Galden get back on his feet; if the mink could survive her gruff way of dealing with people.

Trembor? No. He had enough with his own problems. Marlot wouldn't add to that.

"I have someone, tell me you'll stick around and I'll make the arrangement. It's going to be a roof over your head and a warm bed. Do you really want to stay outside with the coming winter and someone after you?"

"Okay," Galden finally said.

"Stay here." Marlot took his pad out, remembered the battery wasn't in it, and why. He made it to the front and borrowed Ezk'Eriek's pad to call Bahamel, and after finally convincing her to help him and come pickup Galden, he called Trembor. He needed to spend time with his lion, and being around the scene of Ezk'Eriel's mother baking had made him hungry.

A hunt would be nice. He smiled. Their first hunt as a mated pair. Nikal didn't count. They'd still been angry at one another. This was going to be their first hunt together.

Trembor ran, following the scent of fear and the sounds of feet trying to stay ahead of him. The elephant was faster than he'd have thought, but Marlot had warned him. His wolf knew more about the male than Trembor thought could be possible, like where they'd find him, that part of the neighborhood to corral him to so he would be cornered.

It had been a long time since he'd hunted with someone else. The last time it had been his the older females in his family; his mothers and aunts, learning to track and to take down prey. They'd corralled it as a group, like this, but he had taken it down on his own. He didn't remember what species it had been, which surprised him; he had expected to remember his first kill.

A growl came from ahead, one of the alleys the elephant had angled to and Trembor sped up to block the other side. They needed him to keep going forward. Two didn't make for a pack, but the elephant didn't know that. In his scared state, he didn't take the time to differentiate the scents, noticed there was only two of them, so he could stop and take them. He out massed the two of them. He was older but strong. A bull who had had a long life, his productivity declining with his physical abilities, but he could still take on two predators if he didn't let himself be run down to exhaustion.

He was reaching that point; he slowed anytime Marlot and Trembor gave him space, picking up speed only once one of them nipped at his heels again.

They entered a courtyard formed by the wall of factories on each side. Scents of people relaxing filled it, stale but still there due to the lack of wind the walls caused. The elephant stopped in the center, turning to examine the space. There were metal doors on each wall, but they only opened from the inside.

He looked at Trembor and Marlot, his panting heavy. Looked over them, searching for more.

"Just you?" he asked in disbelief, his voice a deep rumble. He cursed. "I got tricked but the two of you?" The elephant rolled up his sleeves. "I am not going to be eaten by the likes of you. I've lived too long for it to end here."

Marlot moved to the side and Trembor mirrored him. Even tired the elephant was still a danger, not simply the tusks, which looked to have been sharpened to a point, instead of allowed to grow dull, but his strength was enough to break bones with a blow.

"One after the other," Marlot had explained while they waited for the elephant to leave the factory where he managed workers. "We use the other's distraction to strike."

Trembor had been taken aback on seeing their prey. Even when hunting for both of them, he'd never gone after someone this big, but they were hunting in tandem. Marlot had squeezed his hand, kissed him, and followed the elephant, while Trembor had moved to the other side of the road.

Marlot struck first, as the elephant looked toward the approaching lion, a series of

punched before jumping back as the elephant turned to strike him. Trembor ran, sending a spin kick at the elephant's head, but only grazing the head as he ducked at the last moment. Trembor threw himself to the side, the trunk grabbing the end of his pant-leg and jerking Trembor to his back as it ripped.

"You think you can take me?" the elephant said with a snort. "Better than you have tried and I'm still here."

Where you were younger, Trembor thought, noting the elephant's still heavy breathing as he turned to face Marlot. Trembor was up and behind, kicking the side of their prey's knee. He didn't break it, but the elephant was off balance and Marlot took advantage of it, grabbing a tusk to pull himself up and slamming a knee in the elephant's face before dropping back. As his wolf stood, Trembor noticed the red line along the rip of the calf. The elephant still had some speed to him.

They circled him and the elephant tried to keep both in sight, but he was beginning to panic. Focusing more on Trembor, the larger of the two, so the more dangerous to the prey's mind. Trembor feinted forward, and the elephant stepped back before he could stop himself.

Marlot struck him at the back of the neck, staggering him and shifting the focus to himself. Trembor was behind the elephant, grabbing him by the neck and slamming a knee in the kidneys.

With a roar, a large hand closed on Trembor's arm and threw him at Marlot, who rolled out of the way before attacking. By the time Trembor was on his feet, Marlot had the elephant facing away from the lion again and he ran, planting an elbow in the back of the elephant's neck before stepping out of reach and allowing Marlot to attack.

In this way, over the next five minutes, they brought the elephant to his knees, then on all four, his breathing ragged. When he looked up at Marlot, Trembor was behind him and wrapped his arm around the elephant's neck.

"You put up a good fight, old-timer," Marlot said, his own breathing heavy, "but it's over. Time to feed a younger generation."

The elephant didn't respond or fight back as Trembor tightened his grip, stopping the blood flow to the male's brain. With someone this large, the best way to bring them down was to bleed them to death, but he and Marlot liked their blood fresh, not store-bought, so first, he'd render their prey unconscious, then he'd break his neck.

When he was done, Trembor sat, leaning against the body. "That was harder than I thought."

Marlot sat next to him. "But it was fun."

The lion put an arm over his wolf's shoulder and pulled him against him. "Yes, it was."

"I'm going to enjoy doing this with you more often."

Trembor stiffened and Marlot tried to pull away.

"You do want us to hunt together again, right?" he asked worriedly.

"Of course." Trembor forced himself to relax. He so wanted to hunt with his wolf every night for the rest of their lives. If only they could have more time. Derimak hadn't

found someone they could convince to turn on the crime family yet, but she was hopeful.

“Trem?”

“I’m okay, still worried about the trial.”

“I thought that was getting resolved. Didn’t you say it was almost over? The new prosecutor was more amicable to forgetting about the whole thing?”

Trembor tried to remember what he’d told Marlot. “Barany’s saying there might be changes. It’s the courts, until the judge signs everything, anything is possible.” He smiled at his wolf. “Makes it tough to relax.” He kissed him gently. “Now, how about we carry our meal to my car and see if we can fit him into the trunk? I need to impress you with my preparation skills.”

“You don’t have to, we can—”

Trembor kissed him again. “Marl, you have no idea how long I’ve wanted to prepare a body for you. So you’re going to let me do my duty as your mate.” At least he’d get to do this once.

“Alright, then I guess it means I’m the one to has to carry the body to the car?”

Trembor laughed at the image of his wolf trying to pull the elephant over his shoulder. “I think this one’s a two-person job, just like the hunt.”

“We could have dropped the body off at a preparation store,” Marlot said as they maneuvered it through the door to Trembor’s house. “The one I use would have given us baked pies in exchanged for a few chunks of it.”

“Baked good?” Trembor studied his wolf over the elephant’s slumped body in amusement. “You would have taken baked goods over straight meat off the bone?”

The wolf rolled his eyes, ears folding back. “I’ve told you before. I don’t see a point of doing the baking myself, but I can enjoy well baked and seasons meat.”

Trembor smiled. “Well, let me do this for you.” Their first kill as mates, his first time preparing a body for his mate. He realized that for him this, more than the signing of the contract, was the proof they were mated.

“You have a table?” They had to move sideways for the body and them to fit through the hall, and even then, the tusks added a scratch here and there on the opposing wall. “Your kitchen is kind of small.”

“It’s not the massive one my dad uses, but it gets the job done.” He leaned the body against the wall before the kitchen door. “Hold it there, I need to take it out and set it up.”

“Sure, leave me holding the body. What if the enforcers show up?” Marlot cursed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“It’s okay.” Trembor pulled the folded table from the pantry and let his breath out, focusing on keeping his voice light. “At this point, I’m more worried about Barany showing up to tell me something wrong again.”

“Any indication of when it’s finally going to be over?”

“Soon, I hope.” With one end on the floor, he unfolded two legs, locking them in place. “The papers are filed, they just have to reach the judge, but the queue isn’t short.

There's only one signatory judge for criminal cases.”

“Why don't they have more?”

All legs extended, Trembor tested the table for wobble and adjusted it. “The more signatory judges, the more chances you hit one with a different interpretation of contract laws, which is what the dismissal of my case is, basically.”

“Everything's a contract, it feels like,” Marlot said as Trembor took his side of the body and they maneuvered it into the kitchen, having to bump the prep table out of the way, then move it back into place with a foot. As Marlot had said, Trembor's kitchen was small.

The body overhung on one side, and Trembor studied it. That was an added complication he hadn't expected. He'd need Marlot help as he worked to adjust it. He took the prep knife out of its box, along with the edging stone, and made sure it was sharp. He couldn't imagine how his ancestors had done this back when all they had were claws and maybe sharp stones.

He turned and stopped. Marlot had pulled himself on the counter and sat cross-legged on it, looking at him expectantly. “What?” his wolf asked, then looked at where he was. “Shit, sorry, I—”

“No, it's okay,” Trembor hurried to say before Marlot dropped off. “It's more than okay.” He searched for the words. “It's right.” He smiled. “It just took me by surprised how right seeing you sitting there felt.”

“You're saying I should sit on the counter from now on?”

Trembor felt his ears heat up. “Well, when you watch me prep our food, yeah.” Marlot canted his head and Trembor's smile broadened. He was so cute like that. “It's not a ‘thing that was done to me’ thing. It's a lion thing.” He motioned to the body on the table and himself. “This is where I belong. In the kitchen, preparing the kill my mate brings me.”

“We brought it in together,” Marlot said, grinning.

“Don't interrupt. You, my mate, show me your prowesses by the quality of the kill. I, your mate, shows you my prowesses by how well I prepare it. To have you watch, judge, and appreciate what I do just makes this perfect.”

“You really take this seriously, don't you?”

Trembor's smile fell, and he hid it behind focusing on the body. He opened the jugular and began cutting the skin. “After Gorrek, it took me years to able to be intimate with another male and really enjoy it. But I could never feel myself being their mates. Definitely not with another lion. I'd sort of resigned myself to being alone when you came around.”

The blood from the cuts added to that from the jugular, flowing into the channel and into the reservoir that was the bottom of the table. “I think it was how vulnerable you seemed that let me overcome that last hurdle. You were so out of your element when you weren't focusing on finding clues to Ruxul's whereabouts that there was no way you could hurt me.” He didn't react to Marlot's mumbled.

“If only.”

He cut the skin off the muscle and rolled it up, pleased that there was barely any red on the underside of the leathery skin. "I'm as much to blame for how it happened."

"I'm the one who screwed up."

"I could have told you about what Gorrek did to me. It would have helped you understand why I reacted the way I did. I could have been more attentive to your behavior," he continued before Marlot could protest. "You putting your foot down over my desires isn't something that happened out of the blue. I saw you do it in smaller ways, pretty much from the first time I met you. I just shrugged them away as being a quirk of your personality."

"You're putting a lot of the blame on yourself."

Trembor looked at the body. He couldn't just push the overhang onto the table, the skinned part would be what hung and it would bleed on the floor. Not a lot, but enough. Adapting was what being mated was about. "Cupboard above you has the paper. You're going to have to do your part because I have to start cutting out the meat before I'm done skinning and bleeding the body."

Marlot dropped from the counter and took out the roll.

"And I was just saying we both played a part in what happened," Trembor said. "We shouldn't forget that, but we can't obsess about it." *Not with the little time we have left together.* He looked at Marlot's back, wishing he was strong enough to not need him. To have cut ties with him entirely. Hurt him once and know he'd never do so again. But he needed his wolf to be able to continue. Without him, Trembor wasn't sure what he'd do. And he couldn't tell him what he was doing. Unlike what Serene thought, Marlot would throw himself in front of whatever was coming, and Trembor couldn't even envision a second without Marlot in his life. Nikal had shown him how desperately he needed Marlot.

He could thank the hunted for that, if nothing else.

His wolf turned and smiled, then chuckled. "The meat's not going to cut itself with you gazing at me. At least probably not without taking pieces of you off at the same time."

Trembor focused on the body again, happy Marlot had misinterpreted the look, and that the scent of blood was heavy enough for him not to pick up on his mood. He cut off a meal size chunk and passed it to Marlot, who wrapped it and put it in the cooler. Each time his wolf moved behind him to reach the cooler, he paused while they touched, and Trembor soaked in the sensation. Memorizing it.

* * * * *

"What do you do with the leftovers?" Marlot asked, indicating the skin and wrapped fat.

"My parents have friends in the leather industry, we sell them the skin, the fat I drop off at a collection place near here. A charity runs it; they use the money they make selling the fat to try to break up the packs and get those cubs integrated within society." His hands clean, Trembor took two glasses and filled them halfway with blood from the spout on the table.

“Going fresh, I see,” Marlot commented as he placed them on the counter.

“Not even one drop of preserver,” Trembor replied, taking out the bottle of alcohol.

Marlot caught his hand before he poured some in the glass. “Don’t, please.” The second word felt like an afterthought.

“It’s just a bit of alcohol,” Trembor replied, more amused than offended at Marlot’s reaction.

“It’s a bit of alcohol you’ve added to your drink every time I’ve been with you.” He paused and when he spoke again, there was a hesitation to his wolf’s voice that concerned Trembor. “Do you really need it to stand being with me?”

“No, of course not. It’s just that those last weeks have been stressful, and it’s helped me relax.” Had he really added alcohol to his drinks that much? He couldn’t have. Only after those especially stressful days.

Marlot pushed the hand away from the glass. “Then let me help you relax instead of that, okay?”

Trembor hesitated, and in that recognize the forming habit. That he felt the alcohol would work better than time with Marlot told him he’d been depending on it too much.

“Sorry.” He capped the bottle and put it back in the cupboard. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like you weren’t enough.”

Marlot pulled him against him. “I know. I’m just making sure I communicate more, instead of letting the stress do the talking for me.” He nuzzled Trembor’s neck and for a full minute, he let his wolf nibble on it.

“Are you going to make me relax before or after eating?” Trembor asked with a sigh.

Marlot chuckled. “After. I’m going to need a full belly for what I plan on doing to you.”

“Oh, really? Then let’s bottle the blood, clean the kitchen, and eat. So you can impress me with your prowess.”

“I thought my hunting was how I did that.”

Trembor groped his wolf. “The male is expected to demonstrate his mating prowess too.” He gasped as Marlot returned the favor.

“Don’t think yourself too much the female in this relationship. I expect you to demonstrate your prowess just as much, if not more, than I will.”

“After eating,” Trembor said, stroking the hardening member under the wolf’s pants.

“Definitely after,” Marlot answered, unbuttoning Trembor’s pants.

* * * * *

Naked and leaning against the cabinet, Trembor sighed, feeding a piece of meat to his wolf, who had his head on his lap. They were going to have to clean the floor, since they’d jostle the table hard enough to spill some of the blood in the reservoir, but he didn’t care.

“And I can’t believe someone would do that,” Marlot said. He’d talk about the body he was investigating. How the wolf had let himself be killed just to draw attention to people taking advantage of the system. “What do you think could make someone do that?”

Trembor shrugged. Love, he thought. Duty? A desire to make sure others didn’t suffer as he did? Were they the reasons he was planning on dying the way he was? Or was his justification simpler? Anger. Anger that they’d dared put their claws in his brother, his family. That they were trying to pull the cubs into it.

“Trem?”

“Sorry,” He forced a smile. “Basking in the moment.”

“Basking in me telling you about my case?”

“In you being here, on the floor with me. In me feeding you.” He offered the wolf another piece of meat. “In us being taking by each other enough, we made a mess of my kitchen.”

“And each other.”

“That just means I get to lick you, again.”

Marlot tilted an ear. “I’m dessert?”

“You are an entire meal. One I will never get enough of.”

“Good thing you can have me as often as you want, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Keeping the smile was thought, but at least not the scents of sex were added to that of blood to distract his usually too attentive wolf.

“I think I’m going to have dessert first,” Marlot said, before turning and licked Trembor’s groin.

“There’s enough room for us to stretch out on the floor and enjoy it at the same time,” Trembor said.

By the time they were done enjoying multiple version of dessert, they had added blood to the floor by jostling the table some more.

Marlot woke to motion in the bed but didn’t move. A soft voice spoke a few seconds later, Trembor on his pad with his niece, or maybe nephew. Trembor had explained there was something resembling an order to the calls, but Marlot hadn’t managed to keep track.

He could stay in bed; Trembor would return once he was done with his calls. He might not even bother with his usual morning exercises after the evening they had. He grinned. At least they had managed to clean the kitchen, eventually. Even the blood had been bottled and stored in the cooler, although Marlot might have accidentally spilled some over his lion, that he had to lick off.

The evening had chased whatever was stressing his lion. He’d worked hard at hiding it, and the scents of the kill, the blood, and the sex had helped mask most of it, but Marlot had had his muzzle in Trembor’s fur even before they were naked. He was keeping something from him; the possibilities were too numerous for Marlot to begin guessing, from fear of his family finding out they were together again. To the trouble

with his brother, the legal case, and how many other little things Trembor might not think to tell him, or want to.

As much as Marlot wanted to demand to know, so he could remove them for his lion, it wasn't his place, or his job. If Trembor needed help, he'd ask. Until then Marlot would respect his privacy.

His pad buzzed, somewhere far—had he left his jacket in the kitchen?—the sound of a file arriving. He didn't want to think about who else was awake at this hour. Other than Trembor, but it was a reminder he couldn't spend the day in bed making love to his lion.

He found Trembor first, in the living room, doing stretching exercises, naked.

"No, that's perfectly fine, you don't have to do what your sister says, Gan. If you don't want to play with her, just be polite and tell her so."

Marlot watched him move, the muscles stretching the skin and making the short fur stand on end. He wanted to run his hands through it, push the lion down, and make him roar. He turned and headed for the kitchen to look for his pad. That was not appropriate to even think about while Trembor was talking to a cub.

He looked at his erection. Tonight, he'd made the lion roar again, then tomorrow night, and the one after that. He was going to spend every night with his lion from now on. He wasn't letting one chance pass him by.

The jacket was on the counter, with splatters of blood. He'd have to stop him and change it. He saw his pants in a corner, coated with blood.

If he was going to spend his nights here, he needed to leave a few changes of clothing.

The message was simple. *The list is ready*. And the number was that of the academy's central junction. Work was definitely calling. That was two things he needed to look into today, three if he included checking in on Hela'Han.

He dressed, the shirt being the only piece of clothing not covered in blood, somehow, and returned to the living room.

"No, Baw, your brother doesn't have to play with you. I know he's the only one there until you get to the academy, but he is his own person. You have to respect that."

Marlot bent to touch the back of the lion's neck as he lowered himself to the floor, leaning forward, legs stretched almost horizontally, much further than Marlot thought should be possible. It made resisting running a finger under the tail difficult, but he reminded himself a cub would hear everything.

"Baw, I'm going to give you a minute to really think about what you just said." Trembor reached to mute the earpiece and looked at Marlot.

The wolf motioned to the lion. "This is utterly indecent."

Trembor flicked his tail higher.

"You're talking to a cub, Trem, don't you have any shame?"

Trembor laughed. "Heading to work?"

Marlot nodded. "Yeah, I still have a body to link to its killer, and compile some sort of productivity on it for the bureau." He kissed the lion, aimed for a light peck on the

lips, ended up only breaking it once he was out of breath.

“Don’t let the bureau overwork you,” Trembor said, “you’re an RI, not that bureaucrat’s personal fetcher.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have plenty of energy when I come back tonight.”

“Marl, you don’t—”

Marlot kissed him again. “I want to. Trem, I don’t want to ever be away from you again unless it’s work dragging me away, and soon even that won’t separate us.” He turned and exited before the surprise passed and his lion could offer some sort of protest about it being too soon or something.

Once at his car, he realized he’d just stepped over Trembor’s desires again, but it was for the best, right? He took his pad out and messaged him. *‘Do you want me to come back tonight?’*

The response came back quicker than he expected. *‘I do.’*

Marlot felt much better as he drove away.

* * * * *

Marlot read the list of names, as he drank whatever this was, their years of enrollment, when they’d left, their rating when they graduated. He’d intended to kill two prey with one swipe by working on the file while watching the area where the body had been found, hoping the wolverine would walk by, but the file told him little by itself. Yes, on the whole, they all had relatively low ratings when they graduated, a probable consequence of spending their time with more in illicit activities than studying, since most also had multiple notes from teachers, advisers, and enforcers regarding where their interests lay.

He’d have to run it against the original file, then run both through his tracking program, which he couldn’t access from his pad due to it still being unsecured. Yet something else to do today, it should have been the first, since he’d gone home to change, but it had slipped his mind, as he hurried to drive to Hela’Han’s place, where Jesdan let him know she was doing better, calmer, but she wouldn’t come into work yet. That had been fine with Marlot. He’d already figured he wasn’t going to be at the office.

He put the bulky pad away and looked around. The morning crowd had lessened and he could see the other stores, eateries, and drinking shops. He was chasing a lost scent, he knew it. Nothing in the little he’d learned hinted that the wolverine even lived in the area. Hardir could have met him anywhere, except that as Marlot had noticed, the occupant of the building Hardir lived in hardly went anywhere unless they were escorted, and he doubted his death was something the wolf could have planned while his escort was around. So, this area had to be where the wolf and wolverine had met.

He went around the stores where someone had remembered the wolf, even if they hadn’t been able to give him details, and asked about a wolverine. None of them had answers for him until he asked the clerk at a drinks shop that also sold bakes sweets.

“Do you mean Kaspel?” the ferret answered when Marlot asked about a wolverine.

“Is that a customer?”

“No, he’s a coworker. He and that wolf spent time talking every so often.” She frowned. “Actually, the last few times it seems like he came here specifically to speak with Kaspel.”

“Can I speak to him?”

“He’s not in today.”

“Can I get his address then?”

She bit her lower lip. “I need to speak with my supervisor for that.”

A minute later, Marlot showed his ID to a thin gazelle, and she gave him Kaspel’s address.

The wolverine lived three blocks away from the shop, but across an invisible rating line as the buildings were better maintained on that side of the street.

The building was for singles, the apartment being a mix of studio one and two bedrooms. The wolverine lived on the seventh floor, a two-bedroom, the manager told him.

Marlot buzzed the door, and a wolverine opened the door. The scents were primarily of paint, and the brown fur had splotched of orange, purple, and green. He looked Marlot over, had a flash of defiance, then deflated.

“I knew it was just a question of time.” He stepped out of the way. “Come in.”

Marlot stepped into a living room cluttered with canvases with colors on them. Some resembled people, or buildings, maybe trees.

“Just ignore them. They do nothing for my rating, but I can’t stop trying.”

“You’re not surprised to see me.”

The wolverine shrugged. “Hardir was sure you’d never work it out, but you guys are known for getting the killers. Since his plan required leaving his body to be found, even without the mink showing up, I figured you’d be at my doorstep, eventually. It’s probably for the best, anyway. As little as they eat, I can’t keep feeding them on my salary.” The wolverine opened a door on the other side of the living room.

“Then you know I need to take you—what do you mean feed them?” Marlot looked in the room. More canvases, some without painting on them, others with. In a corner, a silver female wolf had made a nest with blankets, and she looked at him, terrified. In her arms, a cub shared her silver coloring mixed with a familiar brindled pattern.

“Who are they?” Marlot asked, not surprised when Kaspel said.

“Hardir’s cub and its mother.”

“And what are they doing here?”

“Hiding.”

“From?”

The wolverine shrugged. “The same people Hardir wants exposed.”

Marlot leaned against the living room wall. He’d been asking himself why Hardir would do all of this. Now he had his answer.

“Do they know about the cub?”

“I don’t know. Hardir didn’t tell me much about them, other than to hide them

until it was over. I know they met a few years ago as part of the work they did for them. Hardir didn't know the cub was on its way until recently."

Marlot banged his head against the wall. He didn't need this kind of complication. He was an RI. He found the killers and handed them over to the bureau for them to figure out how they would repay the tax.

"You okay?" the wolverine asked.

"I take it neither have an ID?"

"She doesn't, I don't see how her cub would, she didn't give birth in a medical center."

Was there even a system in place for this kind of situation? How did you bring someone back to life?

Marlot straightened. He didn't. He brought them into the city from somewhere else. Somewhere that had a system in place when someone without an ID wanted to join society.

"I need you to keep hiding them for a few more days," he said. He was going to have to hack his way into the commune; fortunately, it wasn't like they were on top of their network security. Working out how a predator was without ID even in a commune would be a little more difficult, but maybe he could simply start the process as them being sheep and cause a fault that would change the species to wolf? He didn't have that kind of skill. Could he talk Afirna into doing it? She had the skill, she had the desire to fix injustices, which this was big time, but it would go against the contract ensuring she remained free.

The wolverine shook him. "Answer me."

"Thinking."

"Well think after you tell me what do you mean, keep hiding them? You found me, they're your responsibility."

Marlot shook his head. "I report them, and the people Hardir wants exposed will find out. I doubt they're doing to be happy about it."

"Exactly why you need to take them away from here."

"I can't, not until I've either worked out how to create new identities for them, or brought the entire organization crashing down, and I'm not holding much hope of that one happening."

"Create new identities?" the wolverine asked after getting over the surprise. "Isn't that like illegal?"

Marlot shrugged. "The legal thing get her killed, and the cub... I don't even want to think of what happens to a cub born into serfdom. I doubt it's good." Fuck, they couldn't be the first. Relationships happened no matter what else was taking place. The smart ones would be sure no cub happened, but—he glanced in the room. By all accounts, Hardir had been on the smarter side, and that still happened.

Marlot let out a breath. "I need a few days. In payment, I'm going to make sure you aren't the one who killed Hardir."

The wolverine narrowed his eyes. "That isn't legal. I killed him, you know it I—"

“Are you confessing?” Marlot took his pad out, showed it was turned off. “I’m not recording anything right now. If you want to confess, I’ll turn it on.”

Kaspel looked at the pad, searched Marlot’s face. “Can you actually do that?”

Marlot snorted. “That’s basically what my first years as an RI amounted to. I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but that’s my problem, not yours.” Worse came to worst, he could just keep the body in his freezer and take the productivity hit, he could afford it more than Kaspel could afford paying for the body.

The wolverine looked into the room. “Okay, I’ll do it, but if it’s going to be more than a few days, I don’t know what I’m going to do for food. I work in a drink shop.”

Marlot did not suggest the male stop buying paints. It would be like him not contemplating upgrading his computer. “If it takes longer, I’ll figure something out. Now, one warning. Don’t speak with strangers. I’m not the only one looking into Hardir’s death.”

“I know. He warned me about that part.”

“Good.” Marlot added causing a distraction large enough the organization wouldn’t have the time to look into Kaspel to his ever-growing list of tasks. But first, he needed to go visit Afirna.

Trembor felt... He considered how he felt as he finished cleaning the kitchen. Last night’s cleaning had suffered constant interruptions, and some of them led to more blood being spilled. He needed to look over the seals once he cleaned the prep table’s reservoir. Nothing short of tipping the table over should have produced this level of spillage.

He felt settled; he decided. Calm. The night with Marlot hadn’t caused him to doubt what he was doing, as he’d feared. Instead, it had increased his resolve. His action would cause pain, but in the long run, his family, Marlot, would get to live free of criminal interference because of them. He needed to write letters to his parents and to Marlot explaining his actions, his reasons for not telling them, especially Marlot.

He’d have to write one for the cubs. He’d have to be more circumspect, but they, more than the adults, would have difficulty understanding why he wouldn’t survive this, the way heroes of stories always did.

His pad buzzed, and he headed to his office, a message from Derimak. *We need to talk, don’t move, I’m heading over.*

So things were moving forward already. He placed the pad back on the charging pad as it rang. His father calling.

He sat. “Hi, dad.”

Torim didn’t reply immediately. “Hello, son.”

“She told you.” It wasn’t that difficult to imagine. Serene wouldn’t keep it to herself.

Torim laughed. “Son, unlike what you and your sibling seem to think, I do know about the net and I do spend time watching the videos on there. Serene didn’t tell me, she tied me to my chair and took away my pad so I couldn’t scream at you when I first saw

the recording of you and Bo screaming at each other.”

“I’m sorry, dad.”

“Trem, I thought I taught you and your brother better than to scream at one another.”

Trembor chuckled. “Let’s remember you started the trend of screaming at Bo.”

“Ah, yes. I did.”

“About Marlot. I can explain.”

“Son, I don’t care about Marlot, I mean I care about him being in your life, but if you and him are working things out, then I have no business stepping into that. You were clear with Serene you didn’t want us involved.”

“I don’t want her, or you, to get in the way, that’s not the same as not being involved.”

“Alright. Does this mean he’ll be coming to the next family dinner? You’ll want to warn your sibling so they don’t tear him apart trying to protect you.”

Trembor chuckled. “The cubs are who he’ll need to be careful around. He hurt their favorite uncle, I’m not sure how someone goes around making amends for that.” The humor left him. If Marlot was at the next dinner, it would be without him. He’d have to make sure his letter to them explained what he was doing had nothing to do with Marlot. He didn’t want them to hold him responsible.

“You and your brother aside, things looked to be heading well, Barany contacted me to let me know the paperwork was all filed and just waits for the judge’s signature.”

“Which could take months, the way the courts run,” Trembor replied, trying to make his tone jovial. The court case no longer mattered. Soon he’d have someone to question and find out everything he needed to know about the crime family so he could start taking them apart, and somewhere in there, he’d die.

The finality felt good. No more wondering what to do. No more uncertainty. It would end with him acting, not just waiting for it to happen.

His father was still talking. Going on about how the court wasn’t as slow as it seemed and that the delays served a purpose. Trembor had heard about all that over his youth. His father had never been one to keep quiet about the legal system at home. Trembor suspected that if he was pushed, he could pass himself as a lawyer with some success.

Still, couldn’t let Torim keep him on the pad all day, which he was able to do. The buzz of the door gave him the excuse he needed.

“Dad, I need to go. I have things to handle, and she just arrived.” He headed for the entrance.

“Alright, son. You take care, and if you need help with anything, pad me.”

“I will, dad.” He disconnected the call as he opened the door, surprised at those standing on the other side.

Marlot’s day did not progress as he’d expected, he thought, as the four males escorted him along the sidewalk.

First, Afirna had offered no protests about hacking the ID system to help Hardir's cub and its mother. When he'd pointed out the trouble she could get into doing this, she waved it aside with an "if they're going to punish me for saving a cub from serfdom, I'm not interested in working for them."

From her system, he contacted his home computer, only to find out that someone had tried to get into it. Without going home he couldn't be certain his security had stopped them and he didn't have the time. Before he was done with that, Harik had contacted him with the information he'd compiled based on the information the academy had provided.

A large number of them had surprisingly high productivity ratings based on how low it was when they left the academy; firmly in the high-middle productivity rating. For a handful of them to take control of their lives when confronted with the realities outside the academy was normal. For most of them on the list, to do it?

When Harik provided recent pictures, Marlot recognized a few of them as the people who escorted the walking dead to their 'jobs'. The ID system had each of them working as drivers for the same company, and Ukely was looking for links between it and the other companies they'd already linked to the criminal cartel.

From Afirna's Marlot headed to the house where the walking dead assembled before being escorted to their day job and instead of keeping watch on one of the walking dead, he followed the escort, hoping they would lead him to someone new, or higher in the organization he could then use to link to more pieces.

Which was when Marlot found himself with an escort of his own. Again he was annoyed at himself for not noticing them until they were on top of him. A buffalo, a tiger, and two bears. Even without the injuries the elephant had given him during the hunt, he wouldn't have been able to take them on.

So he let them escort him to a restaurant. One specializing in accommodating special feeding needs, according to the sign by the door. Inside it wasn't too busy, but with a few exceptions, the people there were frogs and reptiles.

The table his escort led him to was one of the exceptions. A mole worked on her pad, with a wolverine and bull standing behind her. Marlot looked the wolverine over. If he could get his information, it might be easy to set him up as Hardir's killer. He dismissed the idea, too many unknown, starting with what they wanted with him.

The mole looked up at him and indicated the chair facing her. "Mister Blackclaw, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, please have a seat."

"And you are?" He asked, sitting.

"Maoma Burrows, As you might have guessed, I'm in charge of the operations you have been sniffing around."

Marlot looked around. His escort had taken position around the table, and a row of empty ones created a buffer between them and the other customers, if that was what they were. Most of the lizards were on the small size, but a number of them had bright and colorful skin, meaning they were poisonous. It might not be their bites that were dangerous, but he had no way to know and no desire to test it. Maoma was studying him

when he returned his attention to her.

“I have to compliment you,” she said, “it has been a long time someone has put me in a position where I can’t simply threaten them to get them to do what I want. Where did you get the file?”

Marlot smiled. “An informant.”

She nodded. “And where is the file now?”

“Around.” Marlot motioned to the air around them.

“Normally this is where I would threaten you, your family, your friends.” The mole said flatly. “But you have very few of each, and those you do have would make my life even more difficult.”

“I prefer quality over quantity,” Marlot said smugly.

“I can still destroy them,” she said severely. Marlot didn’t comment, she wasn’t someone to be goaded. Still, he would love to see them try to take on Trembor. His lion would tear them apart without a second thought. “But, I’m hoping we can come to a different arrangement.”

Not a chance, Marlot thought. “I’m listening.”

“My experts have gone over what your hard drive contained, and—”

“Tried to,” Marlot corrected. She narrowed her beady eyes. “They tried to go over the content of my drive. By the time they broke through my security, they found there was nothing left for them to examine.”

“Scraps of code,” she admitted, “which speaks to your skill. I could use someone with that skill.”

“I already have a job, program’s just a hobby.”

She tilted an ear. “A job that doesn’t earn you anywhere near what your skill at programming could.”

Marlot shrugged, then fixed his gaze on her. “I like making sure the system works the way it was intended.”

“Even if you’ll soon have to make some hard decisions regarding how you do that work?” she asked, her tone too innocent for Marlot’s liking. “My understanding is that you’re running low on funds, trying to maintain your office and employee. What will happen to her when you have to let her go?”

“That won’t happen. My current financial situation will be resolving itself soon.”

“Will it? How certain are you of that, Mister Blackclaw?”

“Very.”

The knowing smile she responded with made Marlot uncomfortable. What did she know he didn’t?

“Let me save us time, Mister Blackclaw. I am offering you a choice position within my organization. You will not have to sacrifice your work for the revenue bureau to do it, and I will not even ask you to compromise it.” That knowing smile again. “Your skills as a programmer will be sufficient to justify what I will pay you. It means you will be able to keep your office and employee regardless of what difficulties your day job might bring.”

Marlot nodded. "I appreciated that you're being clear with what you want. It makes my answer simpler to give. No thank you."

"Mister Blackclaw, I don't believe you understand who I am."

Marlot smiled. "I have a fairly comprehensive file that says differently. And unlike what people in your position are used to. I'm not interested in using it to blackmail you."

She sighed. "I'd hoped that you would prove to be more reasonable than your mate, but it seems your flexibility with the law didn't come with as flexible a sense of morality as I'd hoped."

Marlot stiffened, and she smiled.

"Oh yes, I am well aware of who your mate is. In fact, I have been conducting similar business with him."

"What kind of business?" Marlot asked, calculating his chances of killing her before the six bodyguards got to him. It wasn't good, and he forced his vision to remain clear. He couldn't lose it now.

"He intervened in my operations, caused the loss of some of my people, so I offered for him to repay their death by working for me, but he proved as difficult as you, although not as direct with his refusal. For a moment I actually believed we had reached an agreement. But his actions have made his decision clear. So I have taken steps to ensure he will not be a problem; that those steps also ensure your cooperation is simply an added bonus."

Marlot forced his breathing to remain calm. The stress his lion had been under, the things he wasn't telling him. Now it made sense. He wanted to be angry, but he understood why Trembor hadn't told him. The idiot knew Marlot would go directly for the mole and rip her apart. The urge to do that right now was strong enough his claws were digging into his palm. The only thing keeping him from jumping over the table was the futility of the act. They were expecting him to attack now, maybe that was the reason for this, force him to lose control.

"What have you done to him?"

Her smile became a nasty thing. "Nothing permanent, yet. Let's simply say that this little conflict between him and his brother has escalated to a point where your mate's financial trouble might become insurmountable."

He was still alive. Good. The wording meant they'd pinned an unpaid death on him. The family aspect had to mean Bo. That his brother was dead would affect Trembor, but Bo's tax had to be high, Marlot didn't know what he did, but he was successful.

He stood. "I'm leaving."

"Mister Blackclaw, I don't think you understand."

"You have just told me my mate is about to be ruined, and that you're the cause," he growled. "If I stay here, one of us dies. If I die, there is nothing you can do to keep Trembor from coming for you. He was willing to take on a hunter to protect me." *And you clearly have no idea what I'm willing to do to protect him.*

She watched him, then nodded. "I advise you against doing something stupid."

He gave her a toothy smile. “You don’t have to worry. You’ve made sure being stupid is the furthest thing from my mind right now.”

Trembor looked at his hands. They were clean; he knew that. He hadn’t done what he was accused of, but it was still his fault, so somehow he felt there should be blood on his hands, under his claws.

* * * * *

“Trembor Goldenmane, you are under arrest for the unclaimed death of Bolifen Goldenmane.”

* * * * *

This was a setup.

The simple fact he was in a precinct instead of the Revenue Bureau processing center told him that. Maoma had wanted him to work for her in part because she didn’t have any RI.

Bo was still dead.

He raised his head, looked at the bars of the cage he sat in.

“I’m sorry,” Derimak said, sitting in the cage opposite his. “I thought he was going to cooperate, then they slap me with conspiracy to defraud the system as your accomplice.”

Trembor nodded. He’d been an idiot to think he could take them on. He should have ended his life the moment they’d made their offer. Removed any incentive for them to hurt his family. Or at least ensure he wouldn’t be around to see it happen.

“Are you okay?”

“My brother’s dead, Derimak.” Trembor couldn’t keep the harshness out of his voice. Death happened. But they were lions, as high in the food chain as it got. On some level, he believed death was something that happened to others, to prey. Not to his brother.

She didn’t reply.

The door to the section opened and closed, then boots on the tiled floor. A jackal in enforcer uniform came into view, stopped, and leaned against Derimak’s cage, looking at Trembor.

“The great Goldenmane, finally brought down to our level.”

Trembor studied the male, looking for anything that would indicate who he was. “Do I know you?”

“No, but I know of you. Trembor Goldenmane, the male who was too good for us. Who left us to work for the government.”

Trembor leaned to the side to look at the hyena in the other cage. “What is he talking about?”

She shrugged. “The ease you had at making friends and getting suspects to talk made you something of a star among us. You know how Captain Fugera tried to have you stay with the enforcers. The stories of your exploits didn’t diminish after you left.”

“Okay, and what does that have to do with his animosity?”

“Do you know what it’s like to always be compared to you?” the jackal snarled. “Goldenmane could have gotten him to talk five minutes sooner. Goldenmane would have convinced her to surrender without having to lay a hand on her. Goldenmane would have thrown a better party!”

“Sure,” Derimak said in derision, “blame Trembor for working for criminals.”

The jackal snorted. “That had nothing to do with him, I needed the money, they offered. No, making sure the golden lion ended up in a cage, that was just an unforeseen benefit.”

“It won’t stick,” Trembor said. “Unclaimed deaths fall under the purview of the revenue bureau. I shouldn’t even be in here. The fact enforcers arrested me instead of an RI will not help you.”

“Oh, I guess they didn’t tell you. This isn’t an unclaimed death. We have three witnesses ready to testify that this is only the most recent death in a string you committed.”

“Making me a hunter still doesn’t allow you to arrest me. It’s still unclaimed deaths, it’s still the revenue bureau’s job.”

The jackal grinned. “Not unless we can show those deaths were targeted to open positions within certain organizations so you could place your people there.”

Trembor frowned, then growled. “You’re going to make me take the blame for things the people you work for did?”

“The crimes are there and you’ve made yourself an easy target, with killing your brother. Why wouldn’t they take advantage of it and shift the focus off them? You’ve made it clear you aren’t going to work with them, so this lets them remove you, and make their lives easier at the same time. Win-win.”

“You’re being rather free with the information,” Derimak said, and the jackal jumped with a scream, revealing she’d snuck up behind him until she was at the bars.

“How do you move so silently?” the jackal demanded.

She gave him a toothy grin. “Hyenas have to sneak around to steal other people’s food. We’re born sneakers.”

“Well, don’t do it again, it’s freaky.”

Trembor chuckled. “She’s right. The cages are monitored. Aren’t you worried about something listening in on you admitting this is all a setup?”

The jackal shrugged and tried to regain his composure. “Do you think I’m the only one in this precinct who works for them? A friend of mine is on monitor duty. It’s making sure this isn’t recorded.”

Trembor looked at Derimak, who let her arms hand out the bars casually. She nodded to the jackal. “He’s the only one who was sloppy enough I knew about, but I figured there would be others. Once I’m out of here, I’ll find out who’s on monitor duty and get them to talk.”

“You think you’re getting out of this?” the jackal asked, sounding amused.

“You’re his accomplice.”

“And accomplices can betray their boss to get on the good side of the enforcers, everyone knows that.” She smiled at Trembor. “You’re not going to hold it against me are you, boss?”

Trembor shrugged, amused at how worried the jackal was growing. “Of course not. Everyone knows hyenas can’t be trusted. It’s my own fault for thinking you’d be different. You do what you need to do to get out of this and make sure no one can hurt people I care about.” He bared his teeth at the jackal. “You think about that when you rejoice at me being sent to a caging complex or the rest of my life.”

The jackal looked from Trembor to Derimak and hurried out.

Trembor sighed and slumped back. “Do you know what happened? He told me more about it than anyone else, and it’s not really useful.”

She shook her head. “I’d heard your brother was found dead, but before I could do anything I was put in here. They confiscated my pad before I could warn you.”

“So you have no idea what’s happening with Bo’s sons?”

“They weren’t mentioned in anything I heard, but standard procedures will be for child services to be called and arrangements to be made. If your family gets pulled into this, I don’t know what’s going to happen to them.”

Trembor ground his teeth. That was one thing he needed to keep in mind, those criminals could still make his family’s lives impossible. He cursed.

“I’m sorry,” Derimak said.

“This isn’t your fault. I brought this on myself. I’m just pissed that the blood’s doing to splash on others now.”

“It’s not over, you have friends in the enforcers, they won’t let this happen.”

Trembor nodded. Except that all those criminals needed to do was let Flattooth back on the case and there was nothing anyone could be done. She’d see that as final justification, and Trembor suspected that she wouldn’t be interested in looking for evidence this was a setup.

Marlot bought a cheap pad on the way to his car and, uncaring if his followers could hear him, called Harik.

“I need you to look into what’s going with Trembor, now.”

The answer took interminable seconds to come back, enough Marlot was about to tell him to answer. “This isn’t your usual number,” he said, hesitatingly.

“We still haven’t made the time to clean it, I just bought this off an electronic shop. It’s as secure as it gets for now.”

“Why do you want me to check into your mate’s troubles?”

“I just had a conversation with a Maoma Burrows, she’s part of the criminal organization behind what you’re looking into for me, and it turns out they were also going after Trembor. I want to know how and why, it probably has something to do with Bo. And if you have the time, can you check if he’s still alive?”

“His tax hasn’t been paid,” Harik said. “For the rest, I will have something by the time you arrive.”

“I’m not going to your place, I’m heading to wherever Trem is being held. Call me back as soon as you have information.” He disconnected. In movies, they’d throw the pad away, but Marlot didn’t have the kind of finances that let him do that; and it wasn’t like a pad could be hacked into that easily without getting their hands on it or connecting it to something infected.

Once in his car, he called Bahamel with his pad. This call he didn’t care if Maoma’s people listened in.

“Ba, find out where Trem’s being held,” he said as a greeting.

“And hello to you too, wolf,” she replied. “How do you know he’d being held anywhere?”

“He’s my mate, I know when something wrong,” he replied, trying to come up with something that wouldn’t tip her to his conversation with Maoma Burrows. Not yet. Not until he had a plan to get Trembor out of this. Then... Then he’d need Bahamel’s help in destroying that mole.

“That’s crap and you know it, but you aren’t wrong.” She gave him a precinct number, and Marlot thought it was the one Trembor used to be at before he became an RI.

“I thought this was an unclaimed death. What’s he doing at a precinct? Never mind. I’m heading there.”

“Marlot, it’s best if you don’t go. Until the preliminary work is done, you don’t want to step into this and do something stupid.”

Marlot snorted. “This isn’t going to be stupid, I promise you that.” He disconnected. She called him back, but he ignores her. Let her scream at his message center.

The new pad buzzed when he was halfway to the precinct.

“What have you got?”

“And hello to you too,” Afirna replied. “What we have is that your mate is in deep trouble. He was arrested on the unclaimed death of his brother, Bolifen, but there are witness testimonies being logged indicating that’s the tip of a very long claw. It’s still incomplete, but from what I’m seeing there’s mounting evidence he’s behind a lot of deaths over the last decade, people in powerful positions, who were replaced with others who have what Joren calls questionable loyalties.”

“Are those deaths real, or is this stuff they’re making up to scare Trem?”

“They’re real and paid for.”

“That’s going to undercut their case, if there’s a money trail, there’s little they can do to Trem.”

“They’re not going for the financial aspect,” Ukely said. “It’s looking like they want to turn him into some sort of mastermind behind a secret pack trying to take over the city.” He mused over something. “You know, when this is done, you two can sell the rights to the story and become rich off the movie deals.”

“You might need that to pay for his attorney because Prosecutor Flattooth is back on your mate’s case,” Afirna said. “And with the evidence they’re creating now, it’s

going to make her previous case even stronger.”

“Wait, I thought that was dealt with. Trem said they were just waiting for a judge to sign it.”

“They were, but it isn’t signed yet, so she’s trying very hard to make sure it doesn’t get signed.”

“But she can’t do anything once the paperwork is in the queue, right?”

“It’s the law,” Harik said, “they will do whatever they want to make the meat fall on their side. You should know that, working for them.”

“Harik’s Paranoia aside,” Afirna said, “if she can demonstrate that case is linked to what’s going on now, the judge might decide in her favor.”

Marlot cursed, then straightened the car back in its lane. Now was not the time to get in an accident, or even attract the attention of an enforcer on traffic duty. Trembor had been so sure that side of it was done. Why had the case been almost canceled if—not the time. What he needed to do was save Trembor; afterward, he could work out the hows of everything.

So how did he take all of Trembor’s legal problems and make them vanish?

“Marl, are you still there?” Afirna asked.

“Yeah, just trying to come up with something to get Trem out of this.”

“Short of shifting the blame to someone more deserving,” Harik said, “I’m not sure how you’re going to do that.”

Marlot smiled. “Harik, as always, you are a genius.”

* * * * *

He almost made it into the precinct’s bullpen, but he had to stop as the form of a brown bear stepped in front of him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Bahamel demanded.

“To talk with Trembor.”

“No.”

“Ba, I have to talk with him.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Not without a damned good explanation this time.”

He glared at her. “Last time even that didn’t get me to see him.”

“Last time, you didn’t even close to a good explanation.”

“This time you’ll just have to take my word that I have a good reason.”

She grinned, baring her teeth. “Wolf, I don’t have to take a damned thing. I’ve given you a lot of leeway over the years, but—”

“Please, Ba,” Marlot pleaded. “I need to talk with him. You’ve seen what he’s being accused of. Do you think anyone will let me even look at him once the lawyers get here? He’s my mate. We finally are working out our troubles and now this. Don’t I deserve a chance to talk with him? Even if it’s just to say goodbye?”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “You’re planning something stupid, aren’t you?”

He smiled. “Nope.”

She growled. “I swear, wolf. Sometimes I think you’re worse than the criminals

we cage.”

He beamed. “You mean I am so much better.”

“Don’t push your luck. And don’t move from this spot while I see what I can do.”

A minute after she left him alone, under the supervision of every officer in the precinct, the pad in his pocket buzzed with a file.

You were right. Was the message that accompanied it. Reading the file gave him a list of names and positions they occupied within the city, positions that had been made vacant when their previous occupants had been eaten. They had linked the half a dozen names that Trembor was accused to have eaten, and Marlot suspected Maoma would try to get Trembor to take the blame for each and every one of them. It might lead to her losing some people, but he was certain she’d have more ready to take their place, and it would mean she wouldn’t have to worry about enforcer investigations into them for a few years even if she was sloppy.

He typed a reply. *Do it.* And hesitated in sending it. No matter how this went. It would hurt. If he was extremely lucky, it would only hurt him, but anything that hurt him would also hurt Trembor. He had to hope his lion would understand, since he needed to play his part with barely any information.

Once this was over, the two of them could talk about the benefit of proper communications, since that would have kept things from going this far, but that was in the past. He sent the message to Afirna as Bahamel returned.

“You have maybe half an hour before the lawyers get here,” she told him, eyeing the pad as he put it away.

“I shouldn’t need that long, but I also need a slight favor.”

She growled. “What?”

He gave her the most innocent smile he could manage. “I need you to turn the camera off while I speak with him.”

“What are you talking about, you don’t know anything about it?” Trembor sat in an interrogation room, speaking on his pad while supervised by an officer. He wasn’t the jackal, thankfully, a bull Trembor somewhat remembered from when he was an enforcer.

“I’m sorry sir, but there’s no mention in the system of anyone going there,” the female replied.

Trembor forced himself to exhale slowly. “The academy contacted me when they couldn’t reach their father. Someone from Cub Care Services came and picked up Herelex and Isenson Goldenmane. I want to know where they are and have their Grandparents been contacted.”

Trembor shouldn’t have been told about this, it was against procedures for him to have his pad while being held, but someone in holding had heard his pad buzz and read the displayed message. Then Trembor had been moved to an interrogation room and handed him his pad. The only concession to the rules was the bull watching over him, and Trembor was certain that if he asked, he’d leave.

“And as I’ve said, we don’t have any records of anyone at Cub Care, doing that. We keep meticulous records of which Cub we interact with, sir. If they are not in our system, I can promise you that Cub Care didn’t pick them up.”

“But they had proper identification,” he said in desperation. “The right forms, everything.”

“Ah, that’s good. Do you happen to have the ID number of the agents who took the cubs?”

“No, I didn’t think to ask the academy.” He looked at the bull, who shook his head. He wouldn’t get to call them a second time. “Just contact the academy, they’ll be able to tell you everything you need.”

“I will to that immediately, have a good day mister Goldenmane.” Her tone was too bubbly for his liking.

“Is anyone out looking for them?” He asked the bull.

“Not officially. Until they’re reported as missing by the academy or the CCS there’s nothing that can be done. The word’s being passed around, but you remember how it is. We can’t let that interfere with our other duties.”

“But they’re cubs,” Trembor whispered. How could anyone just take cubs like that and—he couldn’t think of what might be happening. Herelex was strong, but Isenson hadn’t been handling any of this well. Had they even been told of their father’s death? “Fuck.” Had they been told Trembor had done it?

He looked at the door. He had to get out of here and go look for them. He had to go to Maoma and do whatever he had to so she’d let them go.

“Don’t even think about it,” the bear said, moving to stand in front of the door. “I will stop you.”

Trembor stood. “Get out of the way. I don’t want to hurt you, but they are my nephews, and I have to go—” the door opened.

“Rakit? Why are you blocking the door?” a female asked.

The bull moved to reveal an Ibex. She looked at Trembor and didn’t seem happy. He didn’t know her, but she’d been part of the group that had arranged for him to be in this room, with his pad.

“You have a visitor, Mister Goldenmane. I’m going to have to take your pad now.”

Rakit took it off the table before Trembor even thought of reacting. “I didn’t think he was allowed visitors.”

“Mister Goldenmane has friends who seem to be able to bend the rules for him.” She looked at the bull. “You should know that. You can exit, they’ll be supervised via the camera.”

The bull nodded and exited as instructed.

“You have until his lawyers arrive,” she told someone Trembor couldn’t see. “And I advise you not to wait that long before leaving. My understanding is that lawyers aren’t as lenient as we are in matters like this.”

The wolf entered and Trembor couldn’t reconcile what he was seeing. He couldn’t

be here. He couldn't know he'd been arrested, not this time since he hadn't been present. "Marl." He couldn't say more. How could he explain to him how he'd gotten himself in this so deep.

Marlot stood straight on the other side of the table, his expression unreadable as the door closed. Was he angry? Disgusted? His wolf's belief that Trembor was just and lawful was so strong, what was it doing to him to see Trembor in this room, accused of killing his own bother.

Marlot looked away and up. He mouthed something that looked like 'please', and Trembor turned to look at what his wolf looked at in time to see the indicate the camera was on turn off. He looked back to Marlot in time to be grabbed by the neck and kissed. The surprise didn't last long, then he kissed his wolf back.

"Marlot, what are you doing here?" He asked, pushing the wolf away.

"Sit down," Marlot ordered as he took the opposite seat. "We don't have that long. I know a mole called Maoma Burrows had her claws in you. So here's what you're going to do so I can get you out of this mess."

The tone broke Trembor out of his stupor and he tensed without meaning to, the dread was returning. This was just too much, on top of everything, he couldn't handle being—

"Fuck," Marlot cursed and put his head in his hands. "I'm doing it again."

Trembor thought he might end up with a broken neck from the whiplash.

Marlot looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I can see on your face how painful it is when I start snapping orders at you. I just..." he let out a strangled cry. "We so don't have the time. I know how all this revolves around that Burrows criminal cartel."

Trembor's legs gave out and he sat. "How? I was so careful."

Marlot fixed him with his gaze and this time he saw hints of anger in the eyes.

"When this is over, we are going to have a talk about what it means for us to be mated, Trem. You had no right to keep this from me."

"I wanted to protect you."

"And that's what pisses me off." He stopped took a long and slow breath. "You are lucky we don't have the time right now." He forced a smile. "You need to let me help you, Trem. You have to let me be your mate and take on some of this problem for you."

"Marl, you're going to get yourself killed taking them on. I can't let you do that."

His wolf's smile became genuine. "That one's out of your hands because even without you, I'm involved. Turns out my case also deals with them. I'd say it's too much of a coincidence to be credible, but they are one of the three largest cartels in the city. My body probably didn't have anything to do with Burrows herself and they just let her handle this because she was handling you and we're mated. Anyway. No time."

Trembor nodded, not entirely understanding what Marlot meant, or how he knew so much about this crime cartel. "Alright, what do we do?"

"You are going to shift the blame for all of this onto me."

"No!" Trembor stood and his chair clattered against the wall. "Absolutely not! I'm willing to work with you to fix this, but I will not allow you to destroy yourself for

me.”

“So the destroying yourself for someone else thing is a Trembor exclusive thing?” Marlot replied wryly. “You’re a lot of things, Trem, but I didn’t think you were a hypocrite.”

“Marl, you don’t even know what I’m being accused of, it’s gone beyond an unclaimed death, or even tampering with evidence, they—”

“Are setting you up for taking over the city’s power structure.”

Trembor stared. “How?”

Marlot smiled. “I’m a tech-head, remember? So are most of my friends. Very little happens these days without at least touching the network.”

“So you know this won’t end with paying a few people’s taxes. Marl, if I let you do this, you’re going to end up caged.”

“Will you come visit?”

“Of course I will! But that’s not the point! You don’t deserve to be caged!”

“And you do?”

“I broke the law!”

Marlot’s gaze was even. “Do you want me to start listing the numbers of times I’ve broken the law? If I keep it to only today, I should be under a dozen. Of the two of us, I deserve to be caged, not you. But it won’t happen, I have prime meat hidden somewhere Burrows can’t get to and she wants it bad. It gives me leverage, but it’s not as effective if she can control you.”

Trembor straightened his chair and sat. “You’re going to lose your license, Marl.”

“Trem, stop drawing the predators to yourself, will you? If it’s not me, it’s you who loses his license. What are you going to do if you’re not an RI? If you can’t go back to being an enforcer?”

“What are you going to do?” Trembor replied angrily.

Marlot grinned. “Trust me, they don’t want me as an enforcer.”

“Be serious.”

“You first.” Marlot let out another breath. “I have other skills I can fall back on to maintain my productivity. Just with my programming, I’ll be able to maintain my rating, with my friends’ help I can probably increase it.”

“But you love being an RI.”

Marlot rubbed his face. “I love you more, Trem. And you love being an RI as much as I do, so don’t use that. One of us had to give it up. I can survive it, you can’t. It’s that simple.”

“It isn’t. What do you think it’ll do to me to see you miserable?”

“So you want me to sure watching you be miserable? Why can’t you believe me when I tell you I can be happy without being an RI if I have you in my life?”

Trembor didn’t have an answer. As much as he could imagine Marlot having fun with his programs, that was always only as a hobby. Was there a life in programming for his wolf? He couldn’t imagine agreeing to this and risking any chances Marlot would be unhappy. He cared too much. His wolf meant too much.

Marlot looked expectantly for an answer, so Trembor changed the subject.

“When you leave, I need you to look for Herelex and Isenson. They’re missing. The CCS showed up at the academy to pick them up, but their central bureau claims they never sent anyone. That means Maoma has them.”

Marlot let out a sigh filled with cursing then smiled. “Okay, this might not be as bad as it looks, not for us at least.”

“Marl, they have my nephews, how is that not bad?”

“It means they’re in a place where they can’t be hurt by accident. Burrows knows what they mean to you, so she has to keep them intact physically as well as emotionally. The only damage they can suffer is the intentional kind, and I can control that to a certain point. So long as—”

The door’s handle turned.

“Trem, you have to shift the blame to me, promise me.”

Trembor could only look back at his mate in silence as the door opened and a large bear entered. How could Marlot ask that of him?

“I’m sorry, RI Blackclaw,” Bahamel said, “but you just found out there’s a problem with the camera in this room. If you still need to talk with the suspect, it’s going to have to be in the room next door.”

“It’s okay, I think I’m done here,” Marlot answered, his pleading eyes on Trembor.

Trembor couldn’t answer, not with words not with a look. He couldn’t do this to his wolf. It wasn’t his place to suffer. Not after everything he’d endured.

Bahamel took Trembor by the arms as the Ibex motioned for Marlot to leave. He stood as she indicated and the bear leaned in close.

“Don’t be an idiot, Lion,” she whispered. “Trust your wolf.”

“Were you followed?” Harik asked as he let Marlot in.

Marlot shook the snow off himself. “Oh I can guarantee someone followed me.” He didn’t slow until he was in the computer room with the others.

“Ukely, you’re on defense,” Harik ordered. “If they know where I live, they’re going to try to get in to figure out what we’re doing.”

“I doubt they’re going to have much time to organize an attack,” Marlot said putting his jacket on the back of the chair and sitting.

“I’m putting the names I was working on back in the pool,” Ukely said.

Marlot motioned to the zebra. “Send them to me, I’ll take over your searches. Were you able to put everything in place?”

“Yeah,” Afirma replied. “Every piece of evidence has been altered to show you’re actually the one behind it.”

“I even got my claws on the evidence from those amateurs your mate hired,” Joren said, “and now, instead of them doing the hack, it looks like they covered up yours.”

“The money trail?” Marlot asked, putting the list in alphabetical order.

“I had to create a thin on. Your lion’s smart enough to have payed them with physical currency, but I created a withdrawal for the full amount, with a nearby camera catching him at the kiosk. The moment he admits to having done everything to cover up your work, they’re going to have to take a second look and they will see the truth we want them to see.”

“Your lion is going to blame you, right?” Harik asked darkly as he set to work. “If he doesn’t, none of this means—”

“He will,” Marlot stated. He had to. Trembor had to understand this was the best, the only way to resolve this. If he remained stubborn and sacrificed himself, Marlot was going to break into whatever caging complex he was help into and give him a solid piece of his mind. He will play his part, Marlot told himself before setting into the search for who the names were and what their connections were to the cartel.

Once he had the first one’s employment, a security agent at the airport, he tabbed into the pool to add that information, and along with the list of names he saw a familiar program running.

“Harik, why is my tracking program running on your computer?”

The mouse didn’t look up as he answered. “While you were gone I went into you home computer and found it there. It’s been a time safer, we can run seven copies before the server slows.”

“Harik, it’s—”

“A good idea?” the mouse cut him off. “Smart thinking? Exactly what you would have told me to do if you’d been here?”

“Not finished.”

The typing stopped and the three of them look at Marlot.

Ukely went back to typing. “You’re telling us that the program that’s cut out search time in half is incomplete? Just what do you want it to do?”

“I don’t know if I can let you keep this,” Harik said. “As it is, it’s uncovering links between people none of us would have come up with. It’s not going to take much more for you to have a work of code that’s going to lay bare anyone’s life.”

“That’s not why I did it. I just needed something to help me work out Hardir’s life so I could figure out how he died. It wasn’t really helpful.”

“Because he didn’t have an ID number,” Afirna said. “The moment we put an ID in here we get a lot of information some of which I’m not even sure how your program gets. I’m with Harik, I’m not comfortable knowing you’re planning for it to do more.”

“Then I won’t do more with it,” Marlot said, watching a copy of his program pull IDs and movement for a Kellan Longears.

“That’s crap and we all know it,” Joren said. “You won’t be able to stop yourself from adding to it. Getting it to do more. We’re just going to have to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t abuse the power this is going to give you.”

“Anyone has the list of the names his lion’s accused of having put in place within the city’s infrastructure?”

Marlot shook himself and found the list they'd built from the information they hacked out of the judicial system. "I have it."

"I'm sending you an name, tell me if it's in there."

It was an easy search, Trembor was only accused of putting twenty-six people in positions of power throughout the city. "Not in here, why?"

"They're from that list you had, people the cartel groomed. They are on the city council."

Curses sounded around the computers.

"It's not that bad," Joren said. "There's thirteen people on the council, including city leader Shaphorns. One person doesn't give them a way to control what's going on."

"I have two more," Harik said. The names appeared on Marlot's screen and he confirmed they weren't on the list. Under half an hour, they had seven of the council members.

"Fuck," Joren said. "How is it that we're not living under a criminal empire is they have the majority already?"

"They aren't stupid," Afirna answered. "If they push too hard, they'll be noticed. It's the same reason they've made sure not to include any of them among the ones they used to build the case against Marlot's mate. Anyone liked to that will be removed. They have to use them selectively, only make scratches on the most important of decisions."

"Okay, so what do we do with the information?" Ukely asked. "With what your program found, we can destroy them, right?"

"I'm not talking part in blackmail," Afirna stated.

"I'm not saying—"

"Yes you were," Joren replied.

"They're criminals, so who cares?"

"You're not doing that in my house," Harik said.

Marlot listened to them, the words mixing in with the typing. He hadn't expected this to go so far up as to be around city leader Shaphorns. As far as he was concerned, there was only one course of action possible, a backup plan in case things didn't work out.

"Ukely, what's the firewall situation?" he assembled the names along with all the connections his program had made reinforcing their involvement with the cartel.

"People have been scrapping claws against it, but it's holding, with my help."

Harik snorted.

"Harik, I need to put a file in a secure location on the net without the pack surrounding us noticing. What are my options?"

The mouse left the room and returned a few minutes later with a pad made of dozen disparate parts. He placed next to the computer Marlot used and connected it. "It's never been used, so they won't know it's from here. The screen will give you a thirty-two digit encryption key, you're going to have to give it to whoever needs to access that file."

"Can I use it to place a call?" Marlot asked tentatively, unsure how he'd do that with it.

“Not while it’s connecting you to the net,” Harik answered in his ‘are you an idiot’ voice as he went back to typing.

Marlot accessed the net using the modified pad, and wondered how the mouse had his tracker program contact the net without being traced, then realized it might not matter, his program used raw data and without it, even if it was intercepted, the information would be meaningless. At best, the listeners would work out they were accessing ID information.

With the file on an anonymous server, Marlot wrote down the address, then the encryption key and disconnected.

Letting out a breath he placed the call, the pad poking uncomfortably at his head.

“City leader’s office, my name a Kranin, how can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw, I need to speak with city leader Sharphorns, please.”

“I’m afraid mister Sharphorns doesn’t take unsolicited calls, if you tell me the issue, I’ll direct you to the department best suited to help you resolve it.”

Marlot could just imagine the odds of that department having someone from the cartel in it. “I’m afraid this needs to go to city leader directly.”

“As I said, mister Sharphorns doesn’t—”

“Tell him I’m calling in my favor.”

That silenced her.

Marlot expected there weren’t a lot of people who the city leader owed favors to. A man in his position couldn’t afford to have other people’s claws into him. The silence was replaced by a soothing music with the sounds of water in the background. If he had visuals, he expected he’d be looking at a creek or a river. Instead he was looking at the surprised expression of the three other hackers. He’d never told them of his conversation with the city leader months ago. It felt like a full lifetime ago now.

“Hello, and who am I speaking with?” The voice was deep and confident.

“This is Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw.” He gave his ID number.

“I hope you understand that this isn’t enough, considering why you’ve implied you’re calling. I’d like to see who I’m talking with.”

Visual? He mouthed to Harik, who shook his head.

“I’m afraid the pad I’m using isn’t capable of visuals. It’s been modified to be more secure and I can’t risk my security right now, there’s too much at risk.”

“Then I’m not certain what you expect from this call.”

“I’m going to work under the assumption you didn’t give details about our last conversation, and hope you understand I wouldn’t have divulge anything about it myself considering it’s the only proof I can offer to call in my favor. You twisted my arm to I would go to Lowvalley, you did that under threat of a vegetable shortage by counselor Arlion Tuff. You said that if I’d go there you’d consider it a personal favor, and that if I didn’t you’d feel the need to make my life difficult.”

The silence stretched. When the city leader spoke there was a hint of embarrassment in his voice. “In my defense, it had been a rather hard quarter when this

happened, I probably shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay, I don't hold you responsible for the mess that turned into, but I do need your help now."

"I am listening."

"First, how confident are you no one is listening in on this call from your side?"

"As confident as I can be. I have a security company do regular scans of the office and all the connections go through one of their monitoring stations, any irregularities and I'm informed."

"Alright, It's going to have to be enough, but I suggest that you get the file out of the node I'll give you quickly."

Typing came from the other end. "Give me the address." Marlot gave it, mildly surprised the city leader was this agile with the net. Anytime he'd had to deal with the councilors back in Low Valley it had taken longer to explain why they needed to go on the net for the information than the entire investigations at times.

"I have the file."

Marlot gave him the encryption key. "The file is a list of people on your council, with links to a criminal cartel. I'm asking that you not act on that information right now. I need time to do something on my side and if you do anything it's going to tip off the people I'm dealing with."

"How long? If they're dirty, I can't afford to leave them there."

"A few days, at most."

"Alright, I can do a few days, it'll give me the time to review this file. I do warn you that I'm not going to owe you another favor for this. I consider this you doing your civic duty."

Marlot smiled. "It's okay, I think that when you hear how I'm calling in the favor you already owe me, you'll have to add this to it."

"I am listening."

"There's a male being held by the enforcers, Trembor Goldenmane, he..." Marlot faltered.

"RI Blackclaw, I can't step into the judicial system. I'm sure you feel he isn't being treated correctly, but he wouldn't be there is there wasn't real evidence against him."

Marlot wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. If only the judicial system was that clean. "No, I'm not asking you to step in now. I'm working on resolving the issue myself, but there's a chance it won't go the way I want. If it does, I need you to go see him, I need you to tell him that I didn't plan for it to end this way. And I need you to transfer the favor you owe me to him. I can already tell you he's going to ask for you to protect his family, it's not even going to occur to him to ask you to get him out of the trouble he's in."

The silence stretched again. "Protecting an entire family from some unknown danger is a little more than I expected when I said I would owe you."

"I know. Like I said, you'll have to add the file to make this worthwhile."

“Alright, how will I know if it’s time to go see him?”

Marlot laughed. “I will have died in a rather spectacular way. If this screws up I’m still taking as many of the people behind it as I can.”

Trembor looked across to the other cage. Derimak was no longer in it. She’d been moved with comments of ‘why are the two of them able to talk?’ There had been apologies, and uncomfortable looks to her and him, but she’d been moved to a different section so they couldn’t coordinate their story.

He could have used her company, not that he could have talked with her; the cages were monitored. Now he had no one to distract him from what Marlot had told him. What he’d asked him to do. How could his wolf ask to risk losing him? He wanted to scream. He wanted to get out, find Marlot and shake sense into him.

The door to the section opened a bull, Rakit, stepped to his cage and unlocked the door. “Your lawyer’s here with that hippo for the prosecutor’s office. There were delays, that’s why they took longer getting here.”

Longer? Trembor didn’t even know they were coming. As he entered the interrogation room Prosecutor Flattooth smiled at him.

“I’m guessing you thought you were going to get away with it, didn’t you? Well, the judge saw things my way and the previous deal’s been erased.”

“Don’t say anything,” Barany replied.

Trembor sat in the seat beside the armadillo. Rakit stepped into the corner, under the camera.

The hippopotamus turned in her seat to glare at the bull. “I want you out of here.”

“Sorry, my instructions are to stay and make sure nothing happens.” He smiled at her. “Something about threats against you having been made.” She fumed, but faced Trembor and Barany again.

Trembor kept his ears from folding in puzzlement as he noticed Rakit had his pad in his breast pocket, and that it was on. That was completely against procedures. If someone called him during the interrogation, he could lose his job.

The bull caught him looking and gave him a small smile.

The pad wasn’t an accident. The camera wouldn’t have caught him as he walked from the door to under it. Why? The camera recorded the interrogation. Who could want their own records of it? Or to listen in? Marlot? But why? He couldn’t be watching over him to make sure he did what he asked. Even if that was his style, he wouldn’t be able to do anything about what happened here.

He sighed. Why had Marlot gotten himself involved in his problem?

“Finally understanding the futility of your situation, I see,” Flattooth said with a grin.

“Don’t answer that.”

“It was a statement, not a question.”

“Which you’d have been happy to twist into my client’s admission of guilt,” Barany replied.

“Oh, I don’t need him to admit anything. So much has come to light in these last few days that all I’ll have to do is present it to the judge and your client will disappear within the caging system for the rest of time.”

The armadillo snorted. “All you have allegations, as far as I know, nothing’s been corroborated.”

“I have witnesses.”

“Yeah, and those are so reliable, not to say that they can end up someone’s meal before the case is over.”

“Are you threatening my witnesses?” she demanded.

“I’m stating a fact. Something like seventy percent of cases relying purely on witnesses are dropped because they end up eaten. So unless you have them under protection, you’re not setting yourself to win.”

She smiled. “Oh, don’t worry yourself over this; before your client ends up in court, I will have evidence aplenty. I’m here to make his life easier, I’m certain he doesn’t want his family’s name to be dragged into the mud with him.”

Barany replied something and Trembor folded his ears back as he put his head in his hand in an attempt to block their argument. Could he do this? Could he risk Marlot? Could he even pull this off? He wasn’t much of an actor. He’d always depended on being straightforward to get things done. Marlot was the one adept at subterfuge, and Trembor chastised him often for it.

He sighed. He missed his wolf so much. He realized the room had grown silent and that he needed to make his decision.

He shook his head. “I can’t do this anymore.” The exhaustion in his voice wasn’t even an act. He was tired. Tired of everything.

“Don’t say anything,” Barany said, as the hippopotamus said.

“So you’re ready to admit to everything?”

“I—” Trembor’s voice broke as he raised his head. He rubbed his face. “I covered up for him.”

“What?” Flattooth asked, confused

“Trembor, I’m advising you to remain silent.”

“This is too much, Barany. You didn’t sign up for this. Fuck, I didn’t sign up for this.”

“What are you talking about?” Flattooth demanded.

“His name is Marlot Blackclaw.” Trembor swallowed and looked away. He was doing what Marlot had asked, so why did this feel like he was betraying him? “He is who tampered with the evidence in my brother’s case.”

The hippopotamus was silent for a few seconds, then looked at her pad. “You expect me to believe that some random person tampered with your brother’s case, when everything points to you?”

“Not random. He’s my mate.” Trembor swallowed. “He’s my everything.”

“And you’re just doing to betray him?” She asked, her tone mocking.

“I didn’t know how far this went,” Trembor snapped and surprised himself at the

anger in his voice. The anger that everything had gone so far off the trail. All he'd wanted was to protect Bo, and now he was dead.

"Do you take me for an idiot? You never mentioned this Blackclaw before. You're just trying to—"

"Have you ever loved someone?" Trembor asked, swallowed hard. "Loved him or her so much that you forgive him their flaws Excuse the things they do? Even when they mistreat you, you tell yourself 'they didn't mean it, it was an accident, they won't do it again.'"

Barany and Flattooth looked at him.

"I knew Marlot wasn't the most law-abiding male. But he always bent the rules to help us close our cases. As far as I know, he never falsified anything about our investigation. When I found out what he did for Bo, I didn't hesitate to cover for him. I thought he'd done it because he cared for me, for my family. Now..."

Fuck, how the fuck was he going to say this?

"Now I don't know. He came to see me earlier. He was pissed that I'd somehow gotten involved in the rest of his affairs. Even then I didn't know how deep it went. I'd just noticed something odd about a few of his kills, so I thought I'd change the trail's scent a little. I didn't think it would fall back on me so quickly. But I can't cover for him, not for all the deaths he's caused, not if what I've been told about how he's been slowly replacing people in positions of power is true." He swallowed. "I can't be with someone who disregards the law like that." He put his head in his hands again and fought not to throw up.

The silence broke under Flattooth's laughter. "This has got to be the biggest pile of shit I've ever been asked to sit in, and trust me, I've dragged some pretty shitty people into court."

Trembor looked at her in horror. She hadn't bought it. This was going to fall apart before it even started.

She smiled. "Oh, don't worry, I'm going to look into that Blackclaw character if he's even real."

"He was here," Trembor said, "look at the recording." Only then remembering the camera had been turned off.

"Good, then you have nothing to worry about." She canted her head. "So why do you look worried? Could it be the recording isn't going to show what you want me to believe? Sucks not being in a position to create the evidence to back up your stories, doesn't it? What happened, your palls within the precinct no longer want to go along with your schemes? They've seen me drag you in here, are watching me tear you apart and they're thinking it's them they hunt with me?"

"I wouldn't stretch my neck too far if I were you," Barany said, reading his pad. "I just received a report from one of my firm's network investigators and they've uncovered some anomalies within your offices."

"What are you talking about?" Flattooth asked.

"We don't have all the details yet, but seems someone received a large amount of

money over the last few weeks.” He looked up. “Interestingly enough, those weeks you were away.”

“Are you accusing me of being dirty?” the hippopotamus demanded. “You’re making that up to save your client.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m telling you there are irregularities within your offices, irregularities that might have had an impact on how my client has been treated. As for making this up, feel free to contact our expert, her name is Afirna Grabs. She works for the network security division of the enforcers and freelances for us from time to time.”

Trembor frowned, why did the name sound familiar?

“I have nothing to do with whatever she uncovered,” Flattooth stated.

“I have no doubt,” Barany said, “but I think it’s enough for us to pause the questioning for now; until you’ve cleaned up house. I’ll also have my firm’s investigators look into what my client has said about his mate’s actions.”

“Don’t tell me you believe that crap.”

The armadillo canted his head. “Maybe you should check the records. Trembor Goldenmane is mated to a Marlot Blackclaw as of close to six months now. Before any of this happened. I think we owe it to the judicial system to check this new information, don’t you think?”

“You’re only saying that because it could get your client out from under this mess,” she replied angrily.

“I’m saying it because if my client is innocent, then you’re abusing your position in this very public vendetta against the enforcers you’ve been on for these last few years.” He looked at the bull. “Please take my client back to his cell. This interview is over.”

Marlot looked at the large house, pad to his ear. “Are you sure about this?”

“Shouldn’t that be my questions to you? You’re the one seated across the street from someone much higher than that mole in the cartel.”

“We are not going to get the kind of information we need just dealing with an underling like her, no matter how much power she wields. So you confirmed the scent?”

“I really hate how predators make that saying sound so creepy, but yeah; who owes the house his hidden behind too many net identities it’ll take longer to get you that, but we’ve traced enough of the money movement to accounts linked to that house that whoever lives there is someone making a lot of the decisions.”

Marlot stepped out of the car. “Then here I go.”

“You have it with you?”

Marlot patted his pocket and felt the device. “I do. How close to have I have to get it?”

“Ideally, next to a computer, if you can’t make that happen so long as it’s inside the house’s network, we’ll be able to chip away at any security and get the information we need.”

“It’ll just take longer,” Marlot finished, looking up. The skies were gray again, like his mood. “So it’s going to be a question of if you’ll be able to get anything useful before it’s too late.”

“Again, get it close to a computer and it takes care of that.”

“Okay, if I don’t contact you in two hours, release everything and hunker down.”

“Don’t get yourself killed,” Joren replied. “I need to keep one friend who’s a predator for the day I piss off one I can’t outrun.”

Marlot chuckled. “Tell Trembor it was my last wish that he protect you.”

“I don’t think your mate will feel any desire to protect me considering the part I’m playing in this, so don’t get eaten.”

“I’ll do my best.” He disconnected and put away the pad. Hopefully, soon he’d be able to stop worrying about what pad to use so he could have a private conversation. As he’d noticed before, the low gate was only decorative. If it didn’t open, he could have jumped over it easily. It might serve as an early warning someone was coming, but no more.

At the door, he pressed the buzzer and let his breath out. If he wasn’t careful, this would be the last house he ever stepped into. It opened and a slim Jackal in a suit eyed him neutrally.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Marlot took a guess this wasn’t the owner by the stiff stance she held. “Can you tell the owner of the house that Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw is here to see them regarding business with a mole using the name Maoma Burrows?”

She stepped out of the way, opening the door further. “Please come in.”

He did, and something beeped. Looking around for it as she closed the door, there was a red flashing light on the door frame. Marlot noted she locked it.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Do you have anything metal?”

The question baffled him for a few seconds. “The buckle of my belt is metal,” he finally answered. “I don’t think there’s anything else.”

“No metal claws?”

He frowned. “Why would I have one of those?” he showed her his claws, hand facing down, the least threatening way he could hold it. “Mine work fine.”

She nodded and stepped away. “Please remain here.”

Marlot looked around. He didn’t like this. Who had a metal detector in their house door? Marlot knew some species without claws bought metal them for protection, but those were all prey species and it wasn’t like they knew how to wield them. The owner was somewhat paranoid. He might have good reasons, but if he was paranoid about someone walking in with a metal claw, what else might he be paranoid about?

The entryway was large, with white marble walls and floor, dark wood trim. On each wall by the door was a table with small potted plants on them and a mirror hanging behind them. He stepped up to one and adjusted his suit jacket, making sure his reflections showed him someone professional. When he was done, he took the tube out

of his pocket and pushed it down in the soil of the plant. They were going to have to be happy with this because Marlot didn't think he was going to be allowed anywhere near a computer.

Steps sounded and Marlot turned in time to watch a male walk down the stairs. It wasn't until the male reached the bottom that Marlot's mind started working again, getting over the surprise of what he saw. The male was a tiger, wearing a black loose shirt, with black pants and a gold chain around his neck, but it wasn't the expensive clothing or the regal bearing. There was no color in his fur other than the black stripes.

Marlot had heard stories of white tigers, but he'd never seen one. Let alone known one lived in the city.

"Borkas," the tiger said in a deep voice, his blue eyes fixed on Marlot, "scan him."

A hyena stepped in Marlot's field of view and got him to spread his arms as he ran a wand over him. It emitted a screech, and he reached into Marlot's pocket, taking out the pad. The male took Marlot's wallet out, looked through it, and put it back.

He handed the pad to the tiger as he rejoined him.

The tiger turned it over in his hands, looking at it. It was a generic model. Harik had given it to him before he'd left to go see Trembor.

"How attached to this are you?" the tiger asked.

"I'm going to need it to call my friends when I leave."

The male canted an ear, smiling. "The pad in your car won't do?"

"I haven't had the time to remove the program your people managed to insert in it yet. It's been a busy few weeks."

"So I've been told." He handed the pad back to the hyena. "Remove the battery. Don't do anything else to it. Let's give RI Blackclaw some level of privacy."

"Thank you, sir?" Marlot asked.

The tiger shook his head. "I also like my privacy. Call me Mister White. Now, why are you here? I thought I'd arranged things so you and Miss Burrows could resolve the situation without having to involve me."

"With all due respect to Miss Burrows," Marlot said keep how he said her name neutral through effort. "She doesn't have the authority to agree to my proposal." He paused. "I also don't trust her to keep to the agreement. Have you been made aware of what's in my possession?"

"I have."

"Then you know how much damage to your organization its release can do, even if it won't hurt you directly." Marlot watched the male for any sign of anger. He'd done his best to say it without making it sound like a threat, but there was only so far you could go with 'I have the bomb that can blow your group wide open' and not have it sound like a threat.

"I do, and if your goal was to expose us, we wouldn't be speaking."

"That's right. It's also why I don't want to deal with the mole. I have... anger issues when someone threatens my mate, which she's done multiple times."

“The lion, Registered Investigator Goldenmane.”

Marlot nodded. “I’m not going to bother justifying why he did what he did, I don’t—”

“Don’t you mean, what you did?”

The comment confused Marlot.

The white tiger’s smile broadened. “Isn’t that the new story? He covered for you because of how much he loves you?”

Marlot narrowed his eyes. He’d just told Trembor to say that yesterday, and there hadn’t been anyone there and no recording. It sounded like he’d played along, but for this male to know about it already... well, they knew he had people place within the prosecutor’s office, so he shouldn’t be surprised.

“I’m obsessed with protecting him, he’s obsessed with protecting me. It’s a bad habit we have.”

The tiger nodded.

“Anyway, the mole threatened him, she threatened his family. Which means that you have Trembor and me on the scent to destroy her and you indirectly you.”

“And yet, you are here, without any protection.”

“I have protection,” Marlot said, “in the form of the information I’m holding. I’m not overconfident enough to believe it’s going to keep you from eating me if you decide to do that, but I think it’s enough to let his conversation reach its conclusion first.”

“Then I suggest you get to the point. The more my patience is stretched, the least likely that protection you think you have will protect you.”

“Alright. What I’m offering you is that I and Trembor will work for you. I can keep him under control,” he added to the white tiger’s tilted ear. “I hand you back the originals, I keep a copy for my protection. You return the cubs unharmed. You pay Bo’s tax, since it’s your organization that killed him.”

“It seems to me that I don’t come out ahead of this deal,” the tiger said. “But first, what cubs?”

“Burrows had Trembor’s nephews taken, Bo’s sons. I’m not sure what she thought she was doing, but if they’ve been harmed, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep Trembor from destroying her and everything around her.”

He leaned to whisper something in the hyena’s ears. “You understand I can’t vouch for what has been done to them before now,” the tiger said as the hyena walked away.

“Then, you need to be will to lose her. If she harmed them, Trembor will have to kill someone, family is everything to him.”

“Let’s first see what you seemed to think I’ll gain.”

“Trembor had more contacts within the enforcers than you have people. Once all this had settled, he’ll be able to get you deep into the working of the law within the city.”

“My understanding is that was what Maoma has attempted to do already, with a noted lack of success.”

“That’s because she doesn’t know how to go about it. As I said, I can control

Trembor.”

“And is that what you bring? Controlling the lion?”

Marlot released his breath. “I bring a program that will allow you to find out just about anything on anyone you want.”

“There is no such thing.”

Marlot smiled. “How do you think I found you?”

“You didn’t know about me, your reaction made that clear.”

“But I knew you were here. You’re right, I didn’t know about you specifically, but taking what the files I received had and putting that into my program led me here. It told me whoever lived in this house was positioned quite high in this organization. And the program isn’t even finished. It’s just a hobby of mine and having to deal with what’s happened to Trembor, and untangling that file didn’t leave me much time to work on it.”

Marlot smiled and watched the curiosity blossom in the tiger’s eyes, then the greed. The male didn’t need to know that only half of what he’d said was true. His program had given them a lot of the information, but it was Harik, Ukely, Joren, and Afirna that had made sense of what they’d obtained.

“And you would give me that program?”

“No, I would let you tell me who you want information on, and I’ll use the program for you. You can ask Burrows, the security I have around my program is top-notch. I’ll happily do other net security work for you if you want me to. And of course, I won’t start doing any of that until I’m confident your side has respected the agreement.”

“We back off the lion’s family and pay the brother’s tax.”

“And make this conspiracy thing disappear, you don’t need it since we’ll be working for you.”

The tiger nodded. “I can have that done, but the initial case against the lion, regarding the evidence tampering is out of my control. If you want me to deal with that, I will need more from you.”

“Don’t worry about that one, I’ve got it covered.”

The tiger studied Marlot for a full minute. “You understand that if this is some ploy for you to get within my organization and gather information over the years to finally attempt to take us down, I will find out, and when I do, I will destroy your lion, his extended family as well as that commune you called home.”

Marlot fixed his gaze on the tiger. “Sir, I’m not an idiot. I’m here because I value my and my mate’s survival above everything. I will do whatever it takes to ensure we live, and I mean whatever it takes.”

The tiger nodded. “I suppose I do have the time to mire you into compromising positions over the year, even if this is a ploy. Very well, your side of the agreement is that you keep your lion in check and get him to do work for us. You will provide me whatever information I want when I want it on anyone I want. In return, I let you, your lion, and his extended family live. You have information that will make my life slightly difficult if I break my word, and if you break yours, I’ll have all your lives. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Marlot answered.

“In that case, Miss Burrows will contact you to do the exchange, the files for the cubs. If anything has been done to them, you have my blessing for your lion to eat her. I’ll pay her tax.”

A cheetah returned with Marlot’s pad, the back cover off and battery out. He took it, walked outside, and did not relax until he was driving away. Part one had gone off splendidly, he told himself bitterly. If part two didn’t work, things would simply be so much worse than they had been before the conversation.

No big deal.

Now he needed to make sure Trembor wasn’t going to kill him for doing this.

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.

"Let me do the talking," the nervous-looking squirrel in the ill-fitting suit sitting next to him said. "Whatever she says, however she tries to get you angry, don't say anything."

Marlot nodded to his lawyer, the two of them sitting in the interrogation room. He hadn't wanted one. As far as he was concerned, this was clear cut. But by law, he had to have representation, and one was assigned to him. They were just waiting for the prosecutor to arrive. Marlot expected she wouldn't be long. Anger, if nothing else, would propel her.

"Look, you have to prepare yourself, from what I sniffed out, you're getting the top female handling your case. She's ruthless; my guess is that she's going to tear you apart because she was wrong about the person previously accused of this." He hurriedly scrolled through his pad.

"Trembor Goldenmane," Marlot volunteered.

The squirrel found what he was looking for and looked at him. "Yes, how did you know?" Marlot smiled and shrugged. "Anyway. Like I said, I do the talking. If you

want to say anything, and this is vital, write it down and hand it to me. If I don't think it's going to hurt your case, I'll tell her on your behalf. I know you think the law is here to protect you, but it isn't. It's to maintain order, and the law doesn't care who gets trampled under its desires."

Marlot nodded and before his lawyer could start up on whatever other warnings he had to give, the door opened and a hippopotamus in a pale green suit worth at least ten times that of his lawyer entered. She fixed her glare on Marlot as she walked to the other side of the table and sat.

He kept his expression neutral as the two lawyers exchanged terse greetings. As angry as she was, antagonizing her further wouldn't help. Right now he was the target of anger due to the situation, something which, in theory, was outside both their control. If he actively angered her, she might decide to throw reason out the door and do as his lawyer warned.

"Mister Blackclaw," she said, the effort not to grind her teeth visible. "I'm—" "I'm the one who tampered with the evidence in the case against Bolifen Goldenmane," Marlot stated.

She startled and his lawyer stared at him, looking like he wanted to bold. How had such a nervous male managed to rise high enough to be assigned to defense cases? Or was his firm hoping they would toughen him up? The alternative, as Marlot saw it, was for the squirrel to drop of fright.

The hippopotamus was quicker to recover. "Do you expect me to believe that you got into the enforcer databases, found the reports, and altered them? You're an RI."

"Who programs on the side." He smiled at her. "Do you want me to explain how I found the weakness in the server's firewalls? The location address within the server where I found the files pertaining to his case? How I modified them? If that's what it'll take for you to close this case quickly, I'll be happy to provide the information." All that had been done by his friends, but they'd explained things well enough that he could convince her, and he felt he did have the skills to pull it off, but he would have needed much longer.

"Why would you have done that?" she demanded. "Bolifen Goldenmane is nothing to you. As far as I can tell the two of you met twice and only in passing."

"He was Trembor's brother. You met my mate. What do you think he would have done to protect him if I hadn't acted first?"

She narrowed her eyes. "And yet he was the one initially arrested."

Marlot sighed. "I should have expected that. He feels this need to protect me. I didn't think he knew what I'd done, but—" he shrugged "—he is the better investigator of the two of us."

"I don't believe you," she said. "This is all a ploy. You're sacrificing yourself to protect your mate. Are you going to tell me you aren't the one who made all the evidence regarding the string of death he caused vanish? You know all those deaths where he inserted people he controlled in positions of authority in the major corporations?"

Marlot looked at his lawyer, tilting an ear questioningly, but the squirrel was

frozen. By his expression, it would be easy to think he was in the middle of two predators fighting over who got to eat him.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but have you met my mate? He gets heartburn at the idea of stepping close to breaking the law. And you want me to believe he was behind some conspiracy to what? Take control of the city’s corporations? I would love to see the evidence you have to support that.”

Her expression darkened. As she’d said, it had vanished. Marlot didn’t know if Mister White had had to sacrifice someone to make it happen. And he wouldn’t be able to look into this until after it was all resolved.

“I know, you’re behind this. I’m going to—”

The squirrel cleared his throat. “What you know,” he said, voice shaking, “doesn’t matter. It’s what you can prove that counts, and you just said there’s no evidence regarding that.”

“Oh, I’m going to find it.”

“That may be,” the lawyer replied, his voice growing steadier, “but until you do, this is about resolving the case of evidence tampering to which my client has admitted to.” The last part was said through gritted teeth and glaring at Marlot.

“Right,” the hippopotamus said. “Since you admitted to it and it’s recorded, I have to inform you that tampering with evidence is an offense that can result in cage time. And it will definitely result in the termination of your contract as a registered investigator with the city, as well as the suspension of your license. You can’t be an RI with a record.”

Marlot nodded. He already knew the price. He’d even started the process to get a loan to cover his bail to avoid being caged until after the sentencing was pronounced. If he was lucky everything would be over before that happened. He counted how her not being in as much of a hurry to prosecute him since she couldn’t use it to drag the entire enforcer system down with him.

“You’ll have to prove that he—” the squirrel snapped his muzzle shut under both their stares. “Sorry, force of habit. My clients don’t usually admit to committing the crime.”

“Since my admission is on the record, how long do you think it’s going to take for the sentencing? And based on your experience, how much will bail be?”

Her glare returned. “Is this a joke? You’re asking me that after the deal you and Sharphorns reached?”

Marlot stared at her. “What deal?”

“Are you telling me you didn’t leverage your mild fame for capturing that hunter years ago as well as the recent one on him to stay out of the cage until your sentence was pronounced?”

“I have no idea what this is about,” Marlot answered.

What was the city leader doing? Not that Marlot minded, owing the bull was better than any other debt it could have, but why puzzled him. If he’d wanted Marlot fully in debt to him, the best way was to make the entire case disappear. But that would

have drawn attention to his interest. Maybe this was the best he could do without alerting the other parties involved.

Flattooth studied Marlot. "I will push for the maximum sentence I can. If I can convince the judge to assign you a sentence that takes into account everything Goldenmane was accused of, I will."

"You can't do that," the squirrel stated, as Marlot's stomach dropped. What kind of crime was trying to take control of corporations? Did that fall under trying to manipulate their productivity rating? Corporate espionage? Some other crime? Marlot didn't remember how many people Trembor had been accused of placing, but he'd be looking at decades of being caged. This was not what he'd planned for.

"I can make my case to the judge," she replied. "She will decide what to do about the actual sentencing."

He had miscalculated how she'd react big time. Or possibly it was the city leader's intervention that was responsible. Now he had to hope she'd change her opinion once she received her delivery. Or at least distract her from pushing so hard to have him caged for the rest of his life.

She put her pad away. "Regardless, since your client confessed, there's no reason to continue this interrogation. I will send you the transcript for your client to sign, and should he change his mind, remind him that there's a video record too, and it will show he volunteered the information."

"I won't recant," Marlot said as she headed for the door.

She stopped and turned. "I don't know what game you're playing, Mister Blackclaw, but I will make sure it ends up being too expensive for you. The law isn't some system you can play with. It's the foundation of our society, and anyone who thinks otherwise should be put down."

Marlot smiled and couldn't help replying. "I'm sure you can afford me, so why don't you try it right now?"

She stiffened and looked like she was about to be sick at the idea. She stormed out and slammed the door.

He shouldn't have done that. He'd probably given her the idea of mentioning his name to predators she knew. Prey didn't have the kill instinct that made solving problems like this simple, but it didn't mean they couldn't pass it on to people who did.

The squirrel didn't look much better, but he still turned to face him. "What was that about? You don't just confess. I can't protect you that way."

"With all due respect, you weren't going to protect me from her. You said it, she's ruthless and no offense, but the way you're shaking, she could have eaten you. I just saved everyone time and money."

His lawyer considered it, then nodded. "Is she right? Did you engineer all of this to protect your mate?"

"We're still being recorded," Marlot pointed out, but then added. "But I'll tell you this. There is nothing I wouldn't do for my mate." With Flattooth gone, he figured that part of the record could be accidentally lost without her knowing about it. "You can ask

him the extent to which I have gone to already.”

The squirrel looked even more uncomfortable now. He stood. “Well, you’ve made sure my services won’t be needed, so I’ll take my leave.” As he reached for the door it opened and Trembor shoved him out of the way, hurrying in.

Marlot was up, cursing mentally. He couldn’t be here. If he said the wrong thing on record, there was a chance Flattooth would find out and then it would all come falling apart.

The expression on his wolf’s face would be funny, if not for him being in an interrogation room, accused of crimes they both knew he hadn’t committed. Trembor’s own expression might not be as amusing. He was doing the best he could to keep his anger under control, but he felt the tension in his muscles.

“Before either of you explode from worry,” Bahamel said from the door, “the door’s unlocked, and the camera’s turned off. Marlot, you two can leave when you want.”

Trembor reached behind him to close the door on her. Before he spoke Marlot asked.

“How are Herelex and Isenson?”

Trembor swallowed his annoyance. Considering what he’d pulled off, his wolf deserved an update. “They are with my parents. Isie pretty much shut down. Herelex is handling things better.”

“I’m sorry, I was hoping we’d get to them before—”

“Stop. You fucking save their lives, so stop with the guilt trip. What I want to know is what the fuck you think you’re doing taking the blame for that conspiracy those criminals dumped on me.”

“That’s gone,” Marlot answered. “Part of the arrangement, since it was mainly a way for them to punish you for not playing ball.”

“Yeah, and now I am, you say to it. Marl, do you—”

His wolf was before him, a finger against his lips. “Please trust me. We aren’t out of this, but the plan is also not done.”

Trembor moved the finger away none too gently, he didn’t want to accommodate his wolf not after what these last days had been like because “fine, Flattooth still has something she can use to tear you apart, do you have any idea how expensive lawyers are? You’re not going to be able to find one willing to group against her for less than top money.”

Marlot dismissed Trembor’s concern with a casual wave. “I took care of that already.”

“How?” he demanded.

“I admitted to the whole thing on the record. The only thing we’re waiting on is sentencing.”

Trembor grabbed Marlot by the shoulder. “You what? Are you insane? Didn’t you hear what I said about her? How she was coming at me with everything she got? She’s

going to see to it that you spend the rest of your life within a complex.”

His wolf's grin was infuriating. “She said something to that effect.”

“Marl!”

“Calm down. She can't actually do it, at least I'm confident she can't. With you, even before the conspiracy, as you call it, she was making you out to be the leader of an enforcer secret force running this city as your own hunting grounds. I'm not an enforcer. I have no connection to the enforcers. No judge is going to buy that I'm running them, especially since I wasn't here six years ago. And just in case I'm wrong, I've arranged for her to be busy with something she's going to be so much more interested in than me.”

Trembor stared at his wolf. How had he never noticed he was some mastermind engineering everything around him?

Marlot motioned to the door. “How about we get out of here since the door isn't locked.”

“But you're waiting for sentencing. You can't leave.”

His wolf had this grin again. “Turns out the city leader pulled his weight and I'm not being held while that's being worked on. You should have seen Flattooth's expression when she had to tell me that.”

Trembor wracked his brain to figure out why city leader Sharphorns would even hear about Marlot's situation. “That favor he owed you from when with when he forced you to go to your home town.”

“Something like that. I'm not going to ask, I'm just happy he did. I wasn't looking forward to being caged while the rest of the plan came to fruition.” He opened the door.

“This plan of yours doesn't need you to work?” He followed his wolf, who strode through the hall, uncaring of the looks he got.

“The last active role I played in it was rescuing your nephews. Everything else keeps going regardless of what I do.”

They reached the bullpen and Marlot headed for Bahamel. On the other side, the hippopotamus was in a heated argument with the jackal. She looked annoyed with him, or maybe angry. Trembor had the sense he was invading her space, but she wasn't giving off the usual scared prey body language. The jackal noticed Trembor watching them and pointed, whatever he was saying going up in anger.

She shoved him away from her in clear annoyance, only have to confront a hare who handed her an envelope before hurrying to retreat. Trembor followed him until he vanished out the doors to the lobby. He hadn't been in uniform, so a civilian; which meant he shouldn't have been on this side of the doors. How had he come in? Him being a hare made Trembor think of Nikal, but it hadn't been him. Wrong coloring, even if the body language meant nothing with how good of an actor Nikal had been.

“You're going to want to avoid her for a while,” Bahamel was saying. Trembor realized she'd been speaking for a few minutes, but to Marlot. “No prosecutors like being played, and she least of all. She likes to think of herself too smart to be caught in those games.”

“It’s always those who think they are too smart for it that fall prey to them,” Marlot replied. “But don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere near her until I’m called in for sentencing; if that even happens now.” His wolf looked at the exiting hippopotamus with a smile.

“Oh, before I forget,” the bear said, pulling an envelope out of her vest’s pocket. “A hare wanted me to give this to you.”

Marlot took it and put it away without looking. The envelope was the same tan as the one Flattooth had been handed, and also by a hare. His wolf only smiled at the narrowing of Trembor’s eyes.

“We should get out of here,” Marlot said, “there’s something we have to do before we can go home.” He headed for the lobby doors, but Trembor grabbed his arm.

“I’m parked underground, with the squad cars. You don’t want to go out the front, the newsies are foaming at the mouth to find out what’s going on with you. You might have forgotten that you’re something of a celebrity right now, but they haven’t.”

Marlot sighed. “Right, avoiding them until everything is resolved is going to be tougher.” He looked at the bear. “Any idea how long?”

“I’ve got my people where they need to be, but I can’t do anything until the others have done their part. Speak to her, if you want things to hurry along.”

“Speak to who?” Trembor asked. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Marlot shook his head. “Once it’s all done. Right now, let’s go, I’ll give you directions as you drive.”

* * * * *

Trembor looked up at the housing building as he followed Marlot into it. “What are we doing here?”

“Bringing someone back to life,” his wolf answered cryptically.

“If this is going to turn into some fiction show,” he said as they entered the elevator, “I’d rather wait in the car.”

“You’re going to like this part,” his wolf answered, leaning against him. “I’m sorry for all the secrets and the games. Right now it’s best if you can’t accidentally reveal anything.”

“You know I wouldn’t.”

“Trust me, the cartel is going to look for any evidence I’m not holding up my end of the bargain. Anyone you’ll speak with could work for them.”

“And are you holding up to your side of all this?” Trembor asked, too confused to be angry anymore.

The grin his wolf gave him as the doors opened said all he had to. “Of course I am.”

A few doors in, he knocked, and a wolverine answered the door. Looking at him then Trembor, resignation on his face.

“Trem, meet Kaspel Quickkill,” Marlot said once they were in the small apartment, “the male who definitely didn’t kill Hardir Mixcoat.” The living room space was filled with canvases in various stages of being painted.

“I wish you wouldn’t say it like that,” the wolverine said, miserably.

“Don’t worry, I’ve made arrangements for the body to be transferred to him.”

Marlot motioned to Trembor. “And he won’t pursue you about it.”

“You can do that?”

“No, he can’t,” Trembor stated.

His wolf wagged his hand. “Remember when I offered to tell you the ways I’d broken the law on that one day?” He smiled at Trembor. “It’s for a good cause, I promise.”

Trembor let out an exasperated sigh. What cause could his wolf think he’d be okay with him breaking yet another law? His wolf opened the door to a storage room with so many other canvasses Trembor initially missed the silver wolf in the nest of blankets. Terror filled her eyes, and she held a cub tighter against her body.

“Meet the reason my side of all this happened,” Marlot said.

“The body?” Trembor asked, having trouble piecing things together.

“The cub’s father. He was born out of the system, which would have doomed him to a life of serfdom. What his father had willingly given himself over to save his family. My guess is that he couldn’t bear to let his son endure what he had. So he accumulated evidence, arranged to die in my territory, with the body unclaimed so I’d have to talk with his family and they’d suspect something was off when they received a package from their long-dead father and hand it to me so I could work out everything, with help.”

“This is sounding like some bad movies scenario,” Trembor said, remembering stories his cousin told him about some of the scripts studios wanted his girlfriend to film.

“Desperation will do that.”

“So who are they?” Trembor asked. “I mean what their names.”

“Right now, they are no one. She dies years ago. And her son was born with an ID.” Marlot stepped into the room, pulling out the envelope Bahamel had given him. He crouched before her and offered it to her. “With this, she is Jarmel Silverback, who arrived in the city a few days ago from Low Valley, with her son Harrim. She used to work at the farms and decided she wanted a life in the city. She went through the process to gain a productivity rating assigned. It isn’t much, but it’s a place where she can start building a life.”

Trembor recalled Marlot telling him about a system being in place for farmers who wanted a new life, but how had he explained a predator being a farmer? He almost asked, but hope had replaced her fear as she took the envelope and clutched it to her. Marlot had probably broken yet another law. He should be mad. His wolf seemed to break them as if that was why they existed.

But he’d brought hope back to a mother. He’d made it so a son had a chance at life.

“If you want,” Marlot told her. “I can put you in touch with Hardir’s family. I don’t know how they’ll take the news, but your son is related to them, so they might help you out.”

She shook her head, and when she spoke her voice was soft. “I will make it by

myself. Hardir wouldn't want Little Jor—Harrim, to endanger his other family. It was the other thing that scared him when he did what he did.”

Marlot nodded. “Then, when you're ready. You can take your place in society.”

“I can help,” Kaspel said, “the sweets shop always needs extra hands, and it doesn't take a lot of skills to work there.”

Marlot stood. “Thank you.”

“I promised Hardir I'd look after them for as long as I could,” the wolverine said. “Helping them get on their feet is the least I can do.”

His wolf took Trembor's hand as he left the room and lead them outside. In the elevator, Trembor kissed the top of his head.

“You get a pass for this,” he whispered. “But please stop breaking laws.”

Marlot looked at him with a mischievous grin. “I'll try?” he said, before kissing him passionately.

Trembor wrapped his arms around his wolf. Kissed him back and admitted to himself he'd let him get away with just about anything so long as they stayed together.

Marlot looked at the shirt he'd just put on, gray, to go with the black pants. “Gray? Really? What are you thinking?” he took it off and looked through the pack he'd brought. He already had a blood-red shirt thrown on the bed, because he'd felt that would make everyone too hungry. The green ones, dark and light, he'd felt just didn't set to mood. He had to have brought something that wouldn't indicate how he felt right now.

“No,” he said as he pulled a light blue shirt out. “No,” at an orange one. “Definitely not,” at the purple one. Why had he even put that in there? Why did he even own it?

“Maybe we can do this in the fur?” he mused, then smiled. He could definitely go for himself and Trembor naked.

“I don't think so.”

Marlot jumped at the female's voice and turned with a snarl. “What are you doing here?” he demanded of the lioness.

Serene's ears moved forward. “Do watch your tone, Marlot. This is my house. It isn't because Trembor has forgiven you that I'm going to lower my guard.” They glared at one another. Marlot refused to back down. As scary as the lioness was, he'd walked into the den of a cartel leader and negotiated with him. She had nothing on someone like that.

As Marlot felt himself about to break eye contact, she nodded to the shirts on the bed and chairs. “And I'm here to see if you're ever going to come out of this room.” She stepped to the bed, and Marlot stepped back, stopping himself as he saw her smile. “You're the one who set today for this, so if you're going to just hide, I'll let the guests know so they can go home.”

“I'm not hiding,” he stated as she pulled more shirts out of the pack. Marlot realized the number of them around the room. Had he emptied his closet in there? He couldn't remember. He'd been running out of time and unable to decide on what to wear.

“You do know this isn’t binding, right?” She asked, looking at the shirt on the bed and taking a dark blue one on hand. “That part you took care of months ago; before you broke Trembor’s heart,” she added coldly.

Marlot swallowed. She wasn’t going to eat him, he told himself, at least not today. “That isn’t going to happen again. I see a counselor, every so often; and me and Trembor make sure to talk.”

“Like why you delayed this for nearly a month?” she fixed him with her piercing golden eyes as she approached. He swallowed. He’d needed to wait for a signal from Bahamel, not that he’d been able to tell Trembor, or his family that.

“It’s the last time, I swear.”

She draped the shirt over his shoulder. “Right, like I haven’t heard that one before.”

Marlot stiffened as she returned to the bed with the shirt. “I am not Gorrek.”

He glared at him. “No, you’re Marlot, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

“I don’t need your approval, Serene. I don’t need any of this.” He motioned around this. “This is for your and Trembor’s family. You insisted on having this.”

“And you took control of it instantly.” She took a lighter shirt and returned.

“I just said we needed to wait. I didn’t say anything about the rest.” If he’d taken control of anything else, this wouldn’t be as ostentatious as it was turning out to be. There had to be a hundred lions out there.

She placed the shirt over his shoulder, spreading the fabric. “Wear this. It suits you better.” He took the shirt and looked at it. Not so pale it would look overly bright against his black fur and not so dark it would vanish in it. “I will warn you, you hurt my Trembor as you did, and you won’t get a chance to apologize.”

Marlot nodded as he put it on. “If I do, then I deserve to be eaten. What I did before was out of ignorance. If it happens again, I will have to have done it willfully, and that will make me like that lion.”

She smiled. “I’m glad we understand each other, Marlot. Trembor deserves to be happy. He wants that with you, and you will make sure he gets it.” Her smile turned into a grin. “Or else.” She turned and left him.

* * * * *

Marlot walked through the crowd to find his lion. He had no idea how he was going to find him among all his relatives. How did each of them tell themselves apart? They greeted him, congratulated him, behaved as if they were old friends; while Marlot had no idea who they were. Maybe Trembor’s brothers and sisters had been among that group?

Seated by themselves were two dozen elephants, Hela’han, Jesdan, and their respective families. He’d warned the two of them there would be a large number of predators when he’d invited them, so they had brought protection. At the edge of their group sat Ukely, Joren, and Afirna. Harik had unilaterally refused to leave the protection of his house, so Afirna had her pad up and was streaming the courtyard to the mouse.

He saw his lion by the food tables, which still lacked meat. Hopefully, that would

arrive soon. He hurried to join them and wrapped his arms around Trembor as if he could keep him from drowning.

The lion smiled down at him. “What is this my mom’s telling me about you having agreed to take care of the meat?”

“Well, more like our friends did,” Marlot said, and he was saved from having to explain as loud voices approached from around the house. Enforcers came around the corner, carrying bodies over their shoulders. Marlot knew only one of them. Bahamel had a body on each shoulder, and he smiled as he saw one of them was a white tiger.

Trembor grabbed his arms and pulled him away; he didn’t look happy.

“You have some explaining to do,” he growled when they were away from everyone and pointed at the enforcers. “Maoma’s among them. Did you talk my friends into ruining themselves for your sake?”

Marlot tilted an ear. “You really think I did any of this for me?”

“Marl, now isn’t the time to be smart. Explain. Those people’s productivity has to be high enough that as a group there’s no way for anyone to pay for them.”

Marlot smiled as he ran a hand over the dark green jacket his lion wore. “You’re right, but there something interesting that happens when someone is charged with a crime. Their productivity takes a hit. The more changes, the more hits. It was simply a question of ensuring all the charges hit at the same time and to kill them before they could mount a defense, and bingo, really cheat food. And as a side effect, our troubles go away.”

Trembor narrowed his eyes at him. “How can you have managed to get evidence on them? Who did you... Flattooth. She got an envelope just like the one Bahamel gave you, a hare gave it to her.”

“Joren, he gave her the overview of everything we found, along with a list of people within the prosecutor’s office we knew worked for the cartel. My friends kept her updated with anything else they found from Mister White’s servers. As careful as he was, he was also overconfident in his security. I managed to sneak in a relay point into his house through which Afirna could get into his computers.”

“That’s why you were confident Flattooth would leave you alone. She’d be busy dealing with all this.”

“She got what she wanted. The biggest coup of her career. She got to clean the filth out of the enforcers, being down a cartel, and since Bahamel was in the loop, the people who would have put up the biggest defense will end up on our table.”

“But you said we’d work for them,” Trembor said, sounding confused. “You handed them the evidence you had.”

“The originals,” Marlot replied. “I have so many copies around the net there’s no way they could find them all.”

“But that was just in case they tried something. You swore to them you wouldn’t use it first.”

Marlot smiled at his lion. It was so sweet of him to think he was as rightful. “I lied.”

Trembor stared at him.

“Trem. They threatened you. That mole went out of her way to tell me just how much she could hurt you.” He smiled. “What do I do to people who threaten the male I love?”

“You eat them.”

“I eat them,” Marlot agreed, “and since I’m not interested in having indigestion, this time around I’m going to share them with everyone here.”

“So.” Trembor seemed to search for the words. “We free?”

“We are.”

Trembor hugged him so tightly Marlot worried he might break something. “I love you so much,” the lion whispered. “Even if you’re a good-for-nothing lawbreaker.” He kissed Marlot before he could protest.

“I only break the law when I’m not given any other choice,” Marlot said once he caught his breath. “The rest of the time I’m happy sticking to bending it. But I don’t think I’ll need to do that anymore. We get to have our lives back. You’re a RI, I’m going to be a security consultant. We can even share a building and sneak into each other’s office for some fun times.”

Trembor’s expression became serious. “We’re going to have to talk about rules regarding what we will and will not do in our offices.”

Marlot grinned. “Hey, I don’t mind rules. They bent as easily as laws.”

Trembor sighed, and they rejoined the others, where not long after that Marlot found himself starting at a lioness in a shimmering red dress approaching them.

“Hello,” she said, her voice smooth and musical. “I was wondering if you had the time to go over the music you want throughout the ceremony.”

“You’re Leyna,” Marlot managed to say, excitement building.

Surprised, she smiled at him. “I am.”

He pulled on his lion’s arm. “Trem, she’s Leyna!”

“I believe she said so,” Trembor replied, sounding confused.

Marlot shook her hand. “I love your movies.”

“You mean Tiff’s movies,” she said after getting over the surprise.

“You were the costar, that makes them yours as much as hers. You were both nominated for an award for two of them.” He looked at Trembor. “How did you manage to get her to sing for us?”

“L’nard asked me,” She answered.

“You know his cousin?”

She chuckled. “He and I go way back.”

Marlot lowered his voice and asked Trembor, “does he know anyone else famous I should know about?”

Trembor motioned to the bar, where the lion dressed in a white suit was making a drink. “Why don’t you go ask him?”

Marlot considered it, but caught sight of a jaguar in a black suit and wearing sunglasses standing at the back of the seating area and swallowed a curse. “If you’ll

excuse me, I'll leave you to deal with someone." He left them, feeling Trembor's worried gaze on him.

"Mister Blackclaw," the jaguar greeted him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "The deal was that you and your people would be discreet." He motioned to the male. "That isn't discreet. You could at least take the sunglasses off."

"Don't worry, no one will pay me any attention. As for what I'm doing here." He took a paper out of a pocket and handed it to Marlot. Unfolding it, only a few lines were written on it.

I really wish you'd kill me.

But at least I get to hear you two are back together.

At least one good thing will have come from my miserable life.

N.

So he was still alive. Marlot had no idea how he felt about it. "He said that you'd make him suffer."

The jaguar's smile had no warmth. "We'd never do that to such an asset. He lives in comfort when he isn't working."

"And so we're clear, I'm not one of your assets." Marlot handed the paper back.

"Of course not. You are an outside contractor. One whose program we expect much out of once you've finalized it."

"I wish I knew how you even found out about it," Marlot grumbled.

"We have ears everywhere, Mister Blackclaw."

"Marl!" Trembor called, joining them. "Come on, it's time. Hi," he said to the jaguar. "I'm Trembor, Marlot's mate." Marlot heard the edge in the voice, the warning.

The jaguar smiled. "Let me offer my congratulations. I'll sit at the back."

Marlot pulled Trembor to the front, where Torim waited.

"Who was that?" Trembor asked.

"A client."

"I thought you weren't even ready to take those."

Marlot smiled. "Didn't stop them from somehow finding out and asking me to work for them."

"Should I worry?"

"No, the contract was run through your father's old firm, it's clear about what my duties are and there aren't any hidden clauses. They're just a little pushy as to when I'll be starting to work."

"Well, I hope you told them that after this we're taking a vacation, just the two of us, without any complications."

As they reached the front, the guests settled in their seats. Trembor's immediate family had the first two rows. With the cubs sitting with their parents, except for Herelex

and Isenson, who sat between Arina and Serene. Herelex looked like a cub at the moment, all excited, while Isenson... he'd have a long way to go, Marlot thought. But he and Trembor would be there for him, for both of them. Torim had already arranged for the two of them to have a new house once they came back from their vacations. And the four of them would move in.

"Alright, everyone," Torim said, his voice carrying throughout the courtyard. "Let's get this started." He took Trembor's hand in his, and Marlot in the other. "The contract has been signed and reviewed," the family elder stated. "But today is the day this new chapter in my son and his mate's life begins."

Marlot looked into Trembor's eyes and beamed. His lion mirrored the smile as his father, their father, Torim kept reminding Marlot, spoke. Acknowledging their mating in the way the lions preferred, far too publicly for Marlot's liking, but it was such a small price to pay for the happiness he was going to build with his lion.

For the family he was gaining.