

The scheduled meeting time was early enough it let them miss the traffic rush that came with the start of the evening shift. Alicon owned Sharptooth Pharma, and like most of the large pharma companies was located in the middle of the city which turned the area into a zone of towering glass buildings.

The pharmas made most of the products that made everyone's lives a little easier. Alicon's company specialized in making fur care products. Marlot had been surprised to find the fur wash they'd used in the morning was made by Sharptooth pharma.

With the number of furred species just in this city alone, most of them with slightly different needs, Alicon was a very successful male. His company ranked in the top thirty in the country.

Trembor presented his ID to the guard at the underground parking's entrance and they were let through. He parked in the first spot available because Marlot insisted.

"We can walk to the elevator from here," the wolf said.

"I can find us a closer spot."

"Look around, the place is full. It's going to be faster to just walk from here than for you to find something closer."

Trembor grumbled but finally agreed.

Marlot looked at all the buttons on the panel, before pressing the one for the top floor. "Why is it that all these successful companies build tall buildings and then put the president's office at the top of it?"

"It dates back to the olden days," Trembor said as the doors closed. "King always had a tower that was built high enough they could see the whole of their kingdoms from it."

Marlot eyes the lion. "And how do you know that?"

Trembor puffed out his chest a little, without realizing it. "My ancestors were kings."

"Really? When?" Marlot's face had a trace of disbelief on it but was mostly full of curiosity.

Trembor frowned, trying to remember the details from his father's stories. "Seven of eight centuries ago, I think. Our line was almost wiped out during a revolt. We haven't held power since then."

Marlot was silent, looking at the numbers change on the display. "I think you should try to become a king again," he said suddenly. "You'd be really good at it." He turned to look at the lion, licking his lips. "After all, you rule over my body expertly."

Trembor stared at him, mouth opened. He never thought he'd hear his wolf say this kind of innuendo. He regained control of his mouth, but the doors opened before he could form a comeback.

The reception area was large. Much larger than theirs, and much nicer. The carpet was green and thick, making Marlot wish he could take off his shoes and dig his toes in it. The chairs were large and inviting. The walls were a mix of brown and dark green, while the

ceiling was light blue.

The young female coyote behind the desk smiled at them, her large ears perking up cutely. "I'm really sorry, but Mister Sharptooth has been delayed. I hope you don't mind waiting until he arrives."

"Not at all," Trembor replied and Marlot headed for one of the chairs, looking forward to sinking into one of them.

Before he reached them the other elevator doors opened and an older, lean, cheetah stepped out, holding a suitcase. "You must be the RIs Goldenmane and Blackclaw," he said in a deep voice. "I'm Alicon Sharptooth. Please accept my apology for the delay. A young wolf decided to hunt a sheep on the platform and didn't expect the other sheep to come to their friend's defense. The commotion made me miss the train." he shook both their hands before guiding them to his office.

"I must say," Alicon said, once the doors were closed. "I'm surprised to see to RIs working together. I've always thought registered investigators were quite territorial."

Trembor threw Marlot a grin. "We get that a lot." He sat in the offered seat.

Marlot sat in the other one, his tail slipping in the open slot for it, and almost moaned in delight as his body sank in the soft padding. Chuckling made him open his eyes. Alicon was the one chuckling, and Trembor was looking at him strangely.

"Sorry." Marlot's ears burned. "I have to get one of these for the office."

The lion gave Marlot another look before taking out his pad and setting it to record. he placed it on the desk. "I want to thank you for seeing us. Especially on such short notice. I hope you won't mind me saying this, but you seem rather unaffected by Aiden Spottedfur's death."

Alicon intertwined his finger and set his hands on the desk. "The relationship between Aiden and I was purely professional. Don't let the mating contract fool you. We didn't feel any affection for each other."

"The contract was for a cub, correct?" Marlot was seated very comfortably, but his face was completely serious now.

"Yes. In that, her death has affected me very much. it was difficult to find a female with a pure lineage. These days almost everyone has someone from a different genus mixed in. I don't relish having to start my search again."

"I didn't see any clause in the contract pertaining to what part she was to play in raising the cub," Trembor commented

"That's because once the cub was born, it became mine alone."

Trembor nodded. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Five days ago, for our weekly mating." Alicon's tone was matter of fact.

"How long have you been trying to get her pregnant?" Marlot asked. He hadn't read the contract and was curious as to how the time frame compared with Aiden getting pregnant.

"I contracted her four years ago."

Marlot sat up.

Trembor stared at the cheetah. "Four years and she still hadn't become pregnant?"

Marlot glanced at his partner. Seemed he hadn't thought to look at the contract's date when he read it. He looked back to Alicon before he could reply. "An acquaintance of Aiden stated that you were demanding and controlling. Is that why?"

The cheetah looked at him and took a moment before answering. "You're still young, so you probably don't know how it is. But when you reach my age, you seriously start thinking about having someone to leave your legacy to. I spent two years looking for the right female before finding Aiden. She agreed to my terms for the contract, I agreed to hers, and we met every week to mate."

Alicon smiled, his gaze distant for a moment before focusing on them again. "As I said, it was business. That's not to say we didn't enjoy ourselves. Aiden was very talented, and I like to think my years of experience taught me a thing or two.

"When I found out she'd been using anti-pregnancy medication, I was hurt, and yes, angry. I confronted her," he hesitated, "in the moment of anger I hit her. Yes, I made demands on her at that point. I forced her to get weekly tests to ensure she was off the medication. I took out some of my anger on her during our next sessions, but she didn't press charges."

"How long ago was that?" Marlot asked.

The cheetah consulted his pad. "Five months ago."

Trembor looked at Alicon. "Didn't you think it was strange that she hadn't become pregnant during all that time?"

"I did, but she brought me her health reports every six months. They showed everything was fine, so I figured we simply didn't have any luck with the timing. It's only by accident I found out they were falsified reports. I'd misplaced the last report she gave me so I contacted the medical offices directly to get another copy, only to find out she'd never been there."

"Did you know about Telima?" Marlot asked.

Alicon frowned.

"Dobberman, well built, still at the academy."

"Oh, you mean her toy. Yes, I knew about him. It was part of her side of the contract that she could have them."

Marlot nodded. "Did you know she'd gotten pregnant?" he said casually.

The cheetah stared at Marlot. "What do you mean pregnant?"

Marlot ignored the glare Trembor threw at him. "There aren't many things I can mean by that."

Alicon's face lit up. "She was pregnant," he whispered, then looked at him with a wide smile. "We finally did it! how's the cub?"

Trembor growled at Marlot, who looked back at him, unimpressed.

Alicon looked from one to the other and lost his smile. "What?"

Trembor tore his gaze away from the wolf. His face softened as he looked at the cheetah. "The cub didn't survive. I'm sorry."

"What? how?"

"She'd been dead for three days before the enforcers were contacted."

Alicon buried his face in his hands. His body shook as he sobbed. Trembor threw an accusatory glare at Marlot.

"What about the killer?" Alicon asked through clenched teeth. His eyes were still wet, but they were hard and cold.

"We're doing everything we can to find him," Marlot answered.

The cheetah glared at him. "What can I do to help?"

Trembor took his pad and stood. "We appreciate your offer, but we have this." The look he gave the wolf, as well as the nod toward the door made it clear Marlot was the head that way now.

Alicon stood and shook the lion's hand with both his. he looked him in the eyes. "I want to know what you've caught him. I'm going to want a piece of him."

"I'll make sure you're informed," Trembor replied, and the cheetah released his hand.

As he passed the wolf waiting for him by the door, he grabbed his arm and pulled him to the elevator. He almost threw him in when the doors opened.

"That was pretty callous," Trembor growled in anger once the doors closed. he kept his back to Marlot as he pressed the button for the parking.

"We needed to know if he knew about the cub," the wolf replied in a firm tone. "it was the only way to find out ID he was involved or not."

"well, you smelled the surprise and shock off him, so now you know," the lion snapped and then was sullen.

Marlot didn't say anything, unsure how to react to the anger in the tone.

When Trembor spoke again his tone was soft, even a little sad. "Families are precious, Marl. You can't just dangle that hope in front of a male trying to build one and then yank it away."

Marlot was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt him." He hesitantly put a hand on the lion's back. "Or you. I didn't realize you wanted a family."

Trembor looked over his shoulder, giving him a small smile, and then turned to face him. "I have my family. I have you, my father and mothers, my brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces. But you have to understand. Cubs are precious, they aren't tools for you to use to get a reaction out of a suspect. \*they\* are what makes families."

"I know." Marlot looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, I understand."

Trembor cupped his muzzle with a hand and kissed his forehead. "Thank you for saying that even if you don't understand." He hugs Marlot tightly just as the doors opened.

The wolf squirmed in the lion's arms. "Someone might see," he pleaded.

Trembor moved a foot to prevent the doors from closing. "Tough. This is your penance for what you did upstairs." He kept hugging him for a long minute, and as soon as he released him Marlot was quick to straighten himself out, but he was smiling.

"So, where do we look for suspects?" Trembor asked as they walked to his car.

Marlot's shoulders slumped as he thought about it. "We're going to have to go through her list of old lovers," he said, dejected.

Trembor stopped and turned to him. "Something wrong?"

Marlot sighed. "not really, but it won't be pretty. Aiden was a prowler."

Trembor frowned. "What's that?"

"Prowlers are people who go for young ones. Most of them are females going after males who are just about to become fertile. They use them until they get bored and then throw them away. Females like her tend to leave a trail of broken males behind them."

"The Doberman told you that?"

Marlot sighed again. "No, he doesn't know what she was. I recognized the signs from what he said."

Trembor looked at him, a strange expression on his face. "You've seen that kind of stuff done before we met?"

Marlot looked away. "Only once." He started walking again. "to me."

Trembor stood there, stunned.