

Marlot accessed Aiden's pad with his computer. Normally the enforcers took care of extracting the information off any electronic device owned by the body, but they were low priority items.

Since he'd gone through the needed certifications, Marlot was authorized to do the extraction. He was also less busy, so he'd requested it couriered overnight. Hela'han handed it to him when he got in.

Marlot had cracked enough pads in his life to be confident he wouldn't lose anything from her pad. Back in his home town, he'd been the one everyone went to when they had problems with their electronics. What he wanted to get off it was the list of her conquest. He knew it was in there, prowlers like her always kept track of who they had used.

He got in a lot easier than he expected. As the vice president at Arcas he expected her to have better security, then the simple password he bypassed. She did have encrypted files, close to half the content of her pad.

He sent the unencrypted files to Trembor's computer to let him look through them while he worked at breaking the encryptions. They were top of the line ones. Marlot was familiar with all the basic encryption modes, as well as many of the more obscure ones, but he had to call on experts to identify Aiden's. Once he knew which one had been used, all it took was a little reading about it before he wrote a program to assemble the key to the encryption.

"You okay?" Trembor looked at him. Marlot had been fidgeting for a few minutes.

"Just thinking about Telima." Marlot stood and stretched.

"Who?"

"The doberman from Aiden's place."

"What about him?"

"I'm just thinking that once we catch Aiden's killer her history as a prowler is going to come out. He's going to be devastated when he finds out she was just using him."

Trembor rubbed the back of his neck. "You can't be sure of that."

"He's completely in love with her, and he believes she was in love with him, that's how they work. Trust me, when he finds out it's going to shatter his world."

The lion shrugged. "okay, but it isn't like you can do anything about it."

Marlot rested against his desk. "I can tell him about the cub." He nodded thoughtfully to himself.

Trembor's eyes narrowed, and he clenched his jaw in anger. hadn't he told the wolf that cubs weren't pieces of meat to be dangled in front of someone hungry?

Marlot didn't notice his reaction. He was too busy with his own thought to hear The lion's tail lashing about and hitting the side of

the chair.

Trembor waited for the anger to pass. There was no point in getting into an argument about this. "Is that smart?" he finally asked. He couldn't see any good coming from this, but maybe it was a lesson Marlot needed to learn first hand? "He's still a cub himself. How is he going to deal with learning that he lost both the female he loved and his cub?"

"It'll hurt, but at least he's going to be able to use that against those who'll say she was just using him."

"What if it's not his?"

"It is." Marlot's tone was certain. "Alicon said she'd been on anti-pregnancy medication until five months ago. It would have taken a while for her system to clear them out, and then Telima got her pregnant before Alicon." He looked in the lion's eyes. "I know that kind of female. She wasn't going to risk what she had by having sex with another male."

Trembor stared back and focused on keeping his tone neutral. he didn't want an argument. "You know how I feel about using a cub that way."

"This isn't like yesterday. You don't know what it's like to be used by a female like her and then just thrown away. I'm not going to wave the cub in front of him and take it away. I want to use it so Telima won't have to go through that. I'm not doing it to hurt him, or to get a reaction. I want to give him a family so he'll be able to weather what's going to happen when we catch the killer."

Trembor studied his lover for a moment. "You're right. I don't know what that's like. I still think you're making a mistake, but," he paused, "just be careful when you tell him, okay?"

Marlot nodded and grabbed his jacket. "The computer's going to beep when the program's done. It isn't locked so you can go through the files then." He hurried out the door without giving Trembor time to reply.

The lion shook his head sadly as he watched the wolf vanish.

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"Sorry 'bout that," the burly bear in the security uniform said as he handed Marlot his ID back, and then gave him a visitor's badge. "We've been getting a lot of unauthorized people on campus so we've had to increase security. Just go to the administration building. advisor Shortpelt will be waiting for you."

Marlot thanked the guard and drove in, marveling at the size of the campus. He knew it covered twenty city blocks, but hadn't realized how much space that was until now. When he'd thought about the Academy, he'd imagined something closer to what he'd experienced in his hometown. Three buildings, rarely more than half full.

He drove slowly, both to make sure not to hit any of the students to cross the road without checking if there was an oncoming car, and to watch the students themselves. He hadn't expected the

species to mix as much as what he saw. Back home, it was expected for prey species to see to the education of their own cubs. After all, as long as they knew how to farm the land, they'd be fine.

Here, predators and preys intermingled. They laughed and played together. It was the advantage of spending their days in the largest No Predation Zone in the city. It was also why the academy needed the guards. A lot of vagrant, and others with low productivity rating, tried to get on campus for protection.

There were lawful ways to gain access, mainly by taking courses, but those were expensive. So, almost by virtue of where they stood in the food chain, a lot of those who needed the protection the campus afforded, couldn't afford to take the courses.

Schooling was free for cubs. They spent ten years here, learning the basics to function in society, as well as a trade of their choice. By the time they reached predation age, it was expected they had learned everything they needed to have productive lives.

Those who wanted to pursue more studies had to find a way to pay for them. The wealthier families could afford to have cubs continue to higher studies, but for anyone else, it was the companies that paid for them.

They scoured through the students, looking for the ones with the best grades, and offered to pay for the higher studies in exchange for a work contract once they were done.

The companies looked everywhere, even in his home town, with its low population. They never wrote anywhere off in their hunt for the best employees.

Marlot hadn't needed them. He'd known early on he was going to be a registered investigator. He'd been the only one in the town to take that course. There wasn't much call for them in smaller towns.

He studied hard and graduated in the top ten percent in the country. This ensured his productivity rating started high, and it gave him time to build a reputation. Within two years his territory included half a dozen other towns who didn't have their own RIs.

The road led to the administration building. It was one of the smaller ones within the grounds. The direct road ensured no one had a reason to wander off before explaining the reason for the visit. He parked in the half-full lot and entered the building.

"Can I help you?" the yak seated behind the reception desk asked.

"RI Blackclaw, I'm here to see advisor Shortpelt."

"Just a moment." She made a call.

She didn't show any of the usual nervous signs prey showed around predators they didn't know. It was probably because she spent so much time inside a no predation zone. Marlot made a mental note of her name, to add to his list of potential meals. Her lack of nervousness could mean she was careless when she was outside the campus. If only for that it would be worth the research time to find

out what range her rating fell in.

"investigator Blackclaw?" A small equine walked down the hallway. She extended her hand to him. "I'm Sterin Shortpelt, what do you want with Telima?"

Marlot shook it, and she too was unusually calm around him. He didn't bother making note of her name. As an academy advisor, there was no way he could afford her.

"How is he doing?"

"I'm not aware of anything being wrong with him." She led him to her office. "Should I be?"

It was a small space, barely large enough for her desk and the two chairs. "I'm investigating the unclaimed death of someone he was close to." He sat in the chair before her desk.

"The female he's seeing?"

Marlot nodded.

"I'd wondered why he came back here on his rest day. When he started seeing her, he rearranged his schedule so his rest days were consecutive, and he always spent them away from academy grounds. I'm guessing at her place."

"Did you know her?"

"No, but I know of her. She's a prowler. Every year she comes to the academy under the pretense of looking for potential recruits for her company, but she spends all her time in the gym. She's ruined a lot of student's lives, so when I found out Telima was seeing her, I kept an eye on him, tried to make sure he didn't sacrifice his future for her."

"has anyone tried to stop her from prowling here?"

"Not that I'm aware of, at least not since I've started working here. What she's doing isn't illegal, technically."

"I know, it's just highly immoral." Marlot barely kept the growl out of his voice. "Do know you if anyone kept a list of the cubs she prowled upon?"

Sterin searched through the system. "It doesn't look like they did, sorry."

"It's alright. Do you have any objection if I go see Telima?"

"No." She asked for his badge and inserted it in the slot on her keyboard. a few keystrokes and she returned it. "He's in the history class right now. I've given you access to that building, and that class. Connect your pad to the academy's network and you'll be able to access the map. If your pad is one of the newer models, the network can track it and give you directions."

Marlot thanks her. As she suggested he connected to the network, and it guided him. the building was close by so he walked there. The network provided him with information on the buildings he walked by on his way there, their use, as well as their history.

It guided him through corridors, where he had to dodge running cubs of various ages until he came to the door indicated. His badge

unlocked it, and he entered.

It was a large room, a half amphitheater with a dozen rows of desks, half of which were filled. The instructor was a rabbit, and she was seated at the desk on a raised dais. The cubs were bent over their pads, either reading or writing, he couldn't tell. The rabbit glanced at her pad, then up at him.

He leaned against the wall while he waited for the class to end. This was so different from the classroom he'd learned in. It had been a small room with no more than fifteen desks. He'd spent his ten years in the same classroom, with the same eight cubs.

The rabbit stood and moved in front of her desk. "Alright, you can finish the rest when you're home." The cubs looked around, in obvious surprise, but put their pads away. A few of them looked at the clock in the center of the wall, above the instructor.

"I'm going to throw a few questions out to you," she said. "This isn't for points, think of it as an impromptu practice for the upcoming test. Now, who can tell me when the Productivity Tax was first introduced." Hands went up. "Dakruk."

The badger she indicated looked around nervously. "Well, do you mean the rating tax? or the initial documented case of a tax being paid?"

"That's very good. What's the difference?"

"That caught the badger unprepared. Well, the rating tax system was a result of the computerized census. The initial case was." He hesitated. "Well, it was the first time we know someone paid money for having eaten someone."

"Very good Dakruk, when did that happen?"

"In five hundred and three."

"Correct. Now, who can tell me who decided what that amount was, and why he required it be paid?"

More hands went up

"Jelafin."

An antelope stood. "It was King Arshimed the fifth, and he had to ask for money because it was the peace envoy who ate his favorite valet. Normally he'd just have eaten the person responsible, but that would have started away he was trying to avoid, so he asked for money instead."

"Correct, do you know how much he asked for?"

Marlot had to think back on his own history classes. He thought it had been two hundred gold shling.

"It was two hundred and twenty claws," the rabbit answered herself after the silence went on. "It's the first documented case of a value being applied to a worker. Before that time protection was provided by the employer. As far as we know, that incident is what led to the creation of the system we now call the Productivity Rating System, which calculates how much each and everyone of us is worth to society, therefore how much needs to be paid as a tax if we're

killed."

She looked the class over. "The reason I bought this up, is that we have a registered investigator with us today."

The class had a gasp of surprise, which amused Marlot, then they looked around and over their shoulder at him. Only then did it register she meant him. He straightened and smoothed down his jacket under the gaze of the students.

"Investigator Blackclaw, would you come done here please?"

He thought about declining, but everyone was looking at him expectantly. He swallowed and eyed the door for a moment, before walking down the steps to join the instructor.

He looked at the students once he was next to her, and his tail hugged his leg.

"Can you tell the class what it is exactly that you do?"

He looked at her, and for a moment he thought he had an idea what prey felt like the moment it realized a predator had his sight set on it. "err, well, I investigate unclaimed death."

She smiled warmly at him, and that didn't make him feel any better. "Maybe you can go in some more details, maybe tell us how you came to become an investigator?"

The desire to flee reared itself. he looked the class over and swallowed again. "I'm sorry, I'm not very good at this." He noticed Telima in the fourth row who was looking at him with some apprehension. he focused on him. He could talk to him.

He took a few breaths and remembered what he'd learned during his RI classes. "The position which is called Registered Investigator used to be done by the enforcers. They would investigate anyone who disappeared to find out if they'd been eaten. Until the census and rating system was set in place forty years ago or so, it was difficult to ensure the PRT was paid. there was no easy way to keep track of who had died and who had just moved away.

"Once both systems were in place, it became easier to keep track of that and therefore enforce the paying of the tax. The first department to be separated from the enforcers was the Missing Persons Bureau, who looks into people who disappear without leaving a body. When the census was first started, it's estimated that only thirty to forty percent of the people killing prey paid the tax. Twenty years later we were up to ninety percent.

"At that point, the government decided it wasn't worth having the enforcers do it anymore, they have more important matters to deal with, so they outsourced the position, which is what RIs now do. These days, the payment rate is above ninety-nine percent.

"I took my RI courses at the academy, well, the one back home. I'm from a farming town a few hours away. But anyone can apply to become an RI. if you pass the qualification tests, you go on a waiting list, and when a territory becomes available, you get it."

"Thank you investigator Blackclaw."

Marlot only now noticed the cubs were fidgeting. He looked over his shoulder and the clock was pulsing between red and green, indicating the class was over.

"Telima, please stay behind," she said as the student got up. "That was very textbook of you," she whispered to Marlot.

"I'm sorry, that's all I could think to say."

She smiled. "It's alright. Sorry for putting you on the spot." She took her pad, vest, and left the classroom.

Marlot and Telima were the only ones left. The doberman was still in his chair, so Marlot climbed up to the third row.

"Hi."

The worry in Telima's eyes was apparent. "Am I in trouble?"

Marlot gave him the most reassuring smile he could. "No, you're fine. I just needed to talk with you." He looked around the classroom. "Is there someplace we can talk? I expect they're going to need the room."

"We can go to my room. I don't have any other classes today." He put his pad in a pocket and stood.

Marlot followed him and wondered if he was doing the right thing. Trembor's words echoed in his mind. Did he have the right to burden Telima, who hadn't entered predation age, with the knowledge he had a cub?

He pushed the question away. he was doing this to reinforce Telima's belief Aiden had loved him. She had carried his cub, so no one would be able to convince him he had only been a toy for her.

He didn't want Telima to go through the devastation that realization brought.

Telima's room was small, a bed, dresser, a desk and barely enough space to move about. The doberman sat on his bed.

"So?" the cub asked.

Marlot hesitated, doubting the wisdom of his actions. "Aiden was carrying your cub when she died."

"Oh," was all Telima said, but Marlot smelled the shock off him. The doberman looked down at the floor and for a long time the room was silent.

The scent changed to grief, and Telima looked up, his gaze hollow. "Can I see it?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

Marlot crouched before him, and he had to force himself not to react to the smell. "It was only conceived two months ago. There isn't going to be much to see."

"Please," the doberman pleaded. "I'm... I'm the father, don't I have the right to see my cub?"

The pain in Telima's voice made Marlot cringe. "Alright. I'll make the arrangements. I'll call you when everything is ready.

Telima nodded and went back to looking at the floor.

Marlot fled to room. The smell surrounding the doberman almost made him sick. He cursed under his breath and wondered how he could

have been so stupid. There was no way the pain he'd felt after being dumped had been greater than what he's smelled coming off Telima.

He almost ran to the advisor's office, but thankfully she wasn't in. He had no idea how he could explain what he'd just done. He thought about waiting for her to come back but instead left a message with the secretary for her to check in on Telima and left.

He sat in his car for half an hour, trying to decide what to do. Part of him wanted to go back inside, find the advisor, and tell her exactly what he'd told Telima. The other wanted him to start the car as drive as fast and as far from here as possible.

He jumped when his pad beeped and fumbled for it. "Hello?" he said, barely managing to keep his voice from cracking with worry.

"Hey, it's me," Trembor said. "I've gone through the list on Aiden's pad. Are you done with the doberman?"

Marlot sighed at the sound of Trembor's deep voice. "Yeah, I'm done here. I'll head back to the office."

"You don't have to. a couple of ..." Trembor trailed off. "Are you okay?"

Marlot closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. He should have known Trembor would pick up on it. "I'm..." He tried to say he was okay, but he couldn't. "I screwed up. You were right, I shouldn't have told him."

Trembor was silent. "Do you want to postpone questioning her old lovers?" he finally asked, keeping his tone soft.

Marlot thought it over. Right now all he wanted was to curl up against his lion and have him soothe his worries away. Have him say that everything would be okay. He wanted someone else to deal with his mess, but he wasn't a cub who could go hide under his mother's tail. he was a full-grown male, and he had a job to do.

"No. The best thing all around is to get the killer and give Telima closure. I'll come pick you up." he blinked a couple of times before wiping the wetness away.

"You don't have to. I padded Cerek earlier, he's one of my brothers. He's going to bring me my car. There are enough guys to see that it's best if we split up, and some of them are close to the academy.

Marlot nodded, slightly disappointed he wouldn't get to see Trembor right now. "okay, pad me their information and I'll get started."