

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.

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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 staring 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.