

## Chapter 25

Marlot watched the house from his car, still feeling the urge to walk there and demand to see the package Mirden Mixcoat had called him about. He'd had a foot out the door when the thought struck him this might be another case of him barging in to get what he wanted.

Unsure what to do, he'd called Trembor for his opinion but had gotten his message center. So he sat there, trying to decide how to proceed. She's said the package had been sent by Hardir, her twice-dead mate, so the link to his case was clear, but they'd just lost their mother. He needed a second opinion on what to do.

What did it say about his relationship with his lion, he thought bitterly, that for the years he'd known him, Marlot had basically ignored his advice anytime he said not to barge into other people's lives just because he wanted to do something?

"That I'm a self-centered asshole," he voiced, resting his head back. He took calming breaths, then exited the car. He could do this. All he needed to do was remember he was dealing with cubs feeling loss. They weren't used to it yet, and he'd have to go slow, maybe even back off and come back another day.

Maybe he should do that. Come back tomorrow after he had a good night's sleep, instead of being fueled by energy drinks.

"No. You're attempting this today. If it doesn't work out, then you come back tomorrow." Her son was there, he'd be level-headed. That's who he'd deal with anyway, not the cubs.

He buzzed the door and tried to formulate a proper opening. The way she'd spoken about him, her son wasn't the most responsible male, but he couldn't start with that belief. If he did, Marlot would just dismiss him as—

"Yes?" a female wolf demanded as she opened the door. She was in her mid to late twenties, red fur with only hints of brown. Her appearance was so unexpected that Marlot stood, frozen. "Look," she said, annoyance under tight control. "If you're here looking for my mother, she died yesterday. Whatever she promised you, there's nothing I can do about it." She looked over her shoulder, and in the silence, Marlot heard quiet crying.

"I'm sorry," Marlot stammered out, fumbling with his ID. "You're her daughter, the eldest. I'm Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw."

"I am," she replied, studying the ID. "Are there irregularities with my mother's death?"

"No, that's not why I'm here, it's about your—" he closed his muzzle. How much should he say? She'd lost her mother. How would she feel about her father abandoning them instead of dying? Would telling her help, or was it just dumping everything on her because that was what would get him what he wanted? He hated this indecision.

"Your mother called me yesterday; before she died. I'd spoken with her about a case I'm investigating she could have something to do with, and she said she'd received a package in regard to that."

"The dad lookalike!" a male yelled from the living room. "I told you about the Jar." Jar? Marlot fought with his tired brain to pull out the information. Mirden had told

him what her daughter's name was. Jareth.

She rubbed her temple. "Alright, so she called you. I've already said there's nothing I can do about whatever she said."

"Maybe you know where the package is?" he asked tentatively.

She glared at him. "Are you kidding?" She pointed behind her. "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 I've been doing for the last eight hours is trying to calm them while explaining their mother isn't ever coming back."

"I helped," the male said.

"Barely," she grumbled in a whisper.

"How about I just go through the house?" he said. "I won't even—" her glare stopped him and he reminded himself he was going to walk away if this became a problem for them. It was definitely a problem, but he needed that package. She could understand that, couldn't she? He opened his muzzle, but she cut him off.

"Look, I don't have the time and I don't care about what you're dealing with right now. You are definitely not rummaging through my mother's house while we're dealing with this."

He bit back his reply. He was an RI, he could do whatever he damned well wanted. No, he reminded himself, he couldn't. His authority was over the enforcers. If he wanted to push this, that's who he should talk with, who he should bully.

It was interesting those he never felt a need to bully, not that Bahamel would let him get away with it, RI or not. It was the people he had no authority over he kept bullying. Something to bring up in his next appointment with Dohrma.

He would walk away. "Can I send you my information?" he asked instead. "Just in case you come across it while you're here?"

She looked ready to slam the door in his face, but let out a breath. "Fine." She took out her pad, and he sent his contact information. She closed the door before he could remind her it was important she look for it.

At least she hadn't slammed it, he told himself, as he walked to his car.

He leaned against the door and looked at the house, before forcing himself to look up and let the sun warm his face. What could he do without it? Nothing, was the obvious answer. He still had two days to go before he got the DNA results, not that those would help all that much.

How had she known it was from her husband? He would have had to have written his name on it. That wasn't something the system did, even if an ID was used to send it. If he'd written his name, he might have written his address too, some of the older folks in Low Valley always added that because before the automated system was in place, it was the only way to ensure a package could be returned if it ended up at the wrong place.

He sighed. That didn't help him. He didn't have the package to look at. He cursed, that was why he preferred dealing with the automated system. At least with it, he could always hack his way in and find out where it had come from.

He groaned.

He needed sleep or more energy drink.

It didn't matter how old-style Hardir might be, he'd still sent the package through the automated system.

He looked up the number and called the mail office.

"I'm RI Blackclaw," he said the instant the representative finished his greeting, then gave his ID number. "I need to find out where a package originated from."

"What's the transit number?" the male asked, sounding bored now.

"I don't have it."

"I'm sorry, without a transit number I can't—"

"Look," Marlot cut him off, not in a mood to deal with the usual run around. "I know you can. If I was home, I'd hack my way into your system and find it just from the destination address and when it got there. And you're sitting in from of the system that's made to find that information just by filling a few lines so you're going to do that."

"Sir," the male said, sounding stern instead of tired. "Without the transit—"

Marlot sighed loudly enough the male stopped talking. "Alright, we're going to do this that way." He smiled. He'd tried to be nice about it. Now, he was going to bully his way into getting that male to do his job and he could go complain afterward. "You have two choices because I'm no longer going home to do this myself. You can either do the search right now, then give me the information I want or, you can wait until I hunt down your cubicle and have you do it in person. Once you've done it, you're going to fill my cooler because your department can definitely use someone better sitting where you are."

"Sir, you can't just threaten me like this."

"I'm not threatening you. I'm explaining your options to you. And before you complain more, I'm an RI, you're a government employee. I could have you strip and dance on your desk if I wanted." Justifying that as part of his investigation would be interesting, but the sight of this young male gyrating in nothing but his fur brought a smile to his face.

"Ah, so, what do you need me to look for?" the male asked, his voice shaking.

The fear in the voice broadened the smile into a grind. Some days, it was good to have that kind of power.