

Chapter 46

The late morning call finally pulled Marlot out of his thoughts of Gorrek; of feeling like he was betraying Trembor, his annoyance at the lion for intruding where he had no business being anymore, and at that of the burning desire to have the golden-furred male talk to him.

He was such a mess he tried calling Trembor; he was still blocked. So he recorded yet another message to the lion he'd never hear.

He forced himself into a working mindset as he stepped out of the car. He could have walked here if he'd been home instead of at his office. The neighborhood abutted his, having mainly lower to middle productivity families. This was the closest body to his house to date.

A few of the cars were new, many of the houses had fresh coats of paint. He wondered if the rating was going up, or they were just hoping looking productive would get the job done.

He walked through the crowd pressing against the cordon, a lot of herbivores, and he caught himself looking back at the houses with badly maintained lawns. He stopped the question before he accidentally voiced it. He wasn't speciesist. Like everyone else, herbivores didn't have to be experts at keeping grass trimmed.

It was Gorrek and Trembor distracting him that made him fall back to his hometown's way of thinking. He showed his ID as he stepped under the tape. "What do we have?"

"A body," the ermine answered, watching the crowd.

"Hilarious," Marlot replied. "Any details?"

"I've been stuck out here, freezing my tail off. The call came in an hour ago. The scene's been secured. Someone mentioned that other than the body, there's nothing suspicious in the house; and that the body's in pretty back shape."

He reached the door as an enforcer exited.

"Anyone else inside?" he asked.

"I'm the last," the doe answered. "The first sweep came back clean of blood, or anything else."

"How about fur?"

"Not even the bodies," she said.

"Reptile?"

She shook her head as she kept walking.

He stepped inside and closed the door. No blood could mean Al'garinam, except this wasn't Gorrek's house. He shook his head. Killing without blood wasn't a rare thing. Predator did it to ensure they had plenty of blood to drink. Even in a fight, many fought with their hands closed out of reflex.

He breathed in the air in the entryway. Clean. Extremely clean. Someone ran the air circulation system hard in the last hours for there not to be scents of the body. Looking in the living room and kitchen, the table was clear, no preparation table in sight. It could be a prey's home. The couch was older. Smelling it, it was musty. Maybe the

house had been unoccupied.

He called dispatch and had them transfer him to the ermine watching the crowd. “I need you to ask around for who lives here. It’ll be faster than having to search through the registry.” He disconnected.

The small shower smelled of recent use, the humidity was gone, but the scent of cleanser clung to the walls. The killer had washed, then removed any trace they’d been here. He checked the drain and that too had been cleaned. This hadn’t been an unplanned act, he decided.

Was this someone Al’garinam killed and Marlot would get the card in a few days? Today’s mail hadn’t come in when he left, it could be waiting for him there. The first bedroom was empty, without even a bed.

He’d convinced himself to stop seeing the hare behind every kill as he entered the second bedroom and froze.

“Fuck.” Gorrek was sprawled on the floor by the bed, still wearing the clothes he’d had on when he left Marlot’s house.

Why had the lion come here? He looked for evidence the bedroom had been used, but the bed didn’t have sheets or pillows. Marlot couldn’t imagine the lion roughing it even in a house. And he had other males to satisfy. He would have gone home after their dinner, or to one of the others; the dinner hadn’t been that long. The lion would have wanted to use that pent-up energy on someone.

Marlot put on gloves and crouched by the body, then took out his pad. It was just his luck, he thought, that the one male who’d been interested in him had gotten himself killed. He pushed his emotions down and got on with his work.

“The body is a male lion, named Gorrek Shiningpelt, forty-seven. Cause of death is probably a broken neck, but the number of other injuries might have caused internal bleeding. The medical examiner will determine. The extent of the visual injuries are: both arms, broken in multiple places, the left leg, broken at the femur, and the neck, which was twisted. There are possible impact impressions on the chest, again the examiner will determine the extent.”

He looked through the lion’s pockets and pulled out his pad, powered, but locked. The wallet had a few bills in it, which surprised Marlot. What did Gorrek need physical money for? Not finding his ID, he looked for a second wallet. Not finding that, he immediately thought about Al’garinam.

“Stop it,” he whispered. “Not every body is his work.” He looked at the recorder and made a note to edit that out. “The ID isn’t on the body, so if we’re lucky, it’s going to be paid before I’m done going over it and it’ll just be a question of finding out what the killer wants to do with it.”

He looked out of the room. A scrubbed shower, every scent cleaned out, every surface cleared of any evidence. A missing ID.

No, whoever had done this wasn’t planning on paying for the lion.

Al’garinam came to him again, except none of this matched his pattern.

What would have to happen for the hare to break his process? Hunter had a

process, the research said so, and they stuck to it hard. Ruxul had been almost caught when he hadn't been able to stop posing a kill as enforcers headed for him. But when he was finally killed, they'd come at him so hard on learning of where he was taking the body that Ruxul had to abandon her in his car. He'd been pissed about that, Marlot remembered that much.

So something would have to push the hare hard. Anger or someone closing in on him. Marlot couldn't see it being someone else, since as far as he knew, only he was aware the hunter existed. What did Al'garinam have to be angry about when it came to the lion? That Marlot was getting close to him? That made no sense. Why would the hare care when he was planning on killing Gorrek?

It couldn't be the hare. This just didn't fit. The lion had just had the bad luck of getting himself killed hours after being with Marlot.

He sighed. "And I was hoping to see where this would go, you know?" He told the dead lion.

"Where what would go where?" Someone asked.

Marlot jumped, nearly tripping over the body as he turned. Jaxca chucked from the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Marlot demanded.

"Weren't you going to call me?"

"Yes, but I haven't yet."

"I got a call from dispatch telling me there was a body in your territory. I had no client, so I can over. If you need more one-on-one time with the body, I'll be happy to come back later."

Marlot shook his head. Just like it was common knowledge he and Trembor shared, had shared, territories. He used Jaxca exclusively as his examiner. Whoever at dispatch took the call could have wanted to proactive. "I've already recorded my observations."

"And those include professing something to the body?" He looked the lion over. "I will say that for a relationship with a body; there's going to be a lot less arguing."

"I'm not—I wasn't—" He sighed. More to edit out of the recording.

"None of my business," the frog said, grinning, before schooling his face into something more serious. "Anything else you need to do before I can take him?"

Marlot stepped out of the way, and Jaxca reached back to pull a gurney in the bedroom. How had he not hear that thing rolling?

He helped the frog place the body on it, then Jaxca did a cursory look-over. "Another broken neck. It's like everyone's leaving those lying around now."

"What do you mean?"

The frog shrugged. "Just talk among colleagues. Everyone's gotten a broken neck as an unclaimed body recently."

The hackles along Marlot's neck rose. "Did they say anything that matched this body?"

Jaxca looked at the lion. "Well, nothing with this level of anger directed at them."

A broken neck, each one of them. Clean and precise.” Jaxca frowned and looked at the lion’s neck. Felt along it, then the other side.

“What is it?”

“It’s probably nothing.”

“You’re too attentive for you to think that.”

“The way the neck’s broken, it feels a lot like an unclaimed body I looked at not too long ago.”

“One of Trem’s?” Marlot asked hopefully. Maybe this was the in he needed to have a reason to speak with him in a context the lion couldn’t just kick him out of.

“No, one of Ofpal.”

“That’s the jaguar, right?”

“Cheetah, he had a body a while back. Bobcat, female.” The frog looked up. “Body was on the kitchen floor, broken neck.”

“Do you remember the name?” Marlot asked, unsure if he wanted Jaxca to say the name he expected or not.

“Shortfur. I don’t remember the first name, but I can get it if you want to compare notes with Ofpal.”

“It should be okay. This should be enough for him to know who I mean.” He remembered her. Delmer Shortfur. He remembered her because Al’garinam had called him right after killing her, while Marlot was watching the house. He’d asked all those questions about him and Trembor, their relationships. He’d been so curious about them it had been creepy.

Marlot stared at Gorrek’s body.

The hare had asked him if he wanted to fix things.

Marlot had said yes. Of course, he’d said yes. He loved Trembor.

But he’d gotten close to Gorrek. Much too close if he loved someone else.

It couldn’t be.

Al’garinam was a hunter. They were insane. They didn’t kill someone because they were leading Marlot to cheat on Trembor. No, it was a coincidence. The hare wasn’t about making sure Marlot stayed faithful to the lion, Marlot had had nothing to do with any of the other bodies, and he wouldn’t even have known about Gorrek if the hare hadn’t sent him his ID.

“Marlot?”

He startled again, backing away, looking for an exit. He had to run.

“Marlot, are you okay?”

He shook himself. There were no threats here. It was in his head, his imagination was running away from him. He chuckled. The damned thing had just tried to kidnap him and take it to Loony-Ville.

“Marlot, you look like you have some predator on your scent.”

“I’m okay. Just...” He trailed off. He rubbed his face. If somehow all this was about him and Trembor, Marlot had to look at every death again.

“Alright,” the frog said, not looking convinced. “In that case, I’m doing to take

the body to my clinic and do the examination.”

Marlot nodded, looking around the room, looking for any clue that could tell him he was wrong.

“Jaxca,” he called as the frog vanished in the hall. The red head poked in. “Can you do me a favor and ask around if any other broken necks are like this one or Shortfur’s?”

“Why? You think there’s someone going around breaking necks and leaving the bodies lying around?”

“What? No, of course not.” He rubbed his face. “Never mind. It’s just my imagination chasing scents.”

The frog studied him, then disappeared into the hall.

He looked the room over. There had to be something here, even someone like Al’garinam couldn’t remove all traces he’d been here.

He exited the house, closing and locking the door. He headed for the ermine.

“RI Blackclaw, the neighbors confirmed someone lives here, but they don’t know who?”

“Species?”

The enforcer shook his head. “No one’s seen them. Just the lights coming on and off, shadows moving in the windows.”

“How about scent?” he demanded of the crowd. One of them had to have picked up something. “Really? Can you at least tell it they’re a predator or one of you?”

The closest prey stepped back, and the predators in the crowd glared at him.

“Forget it.” He pushed his way through them, heading for his car. He’d get the property records. That would tell him who lived here. In the meantime, he still had to do Gorrek’s investigation so the survivor benefits could be paid.

He stopped, door partially opened, and laughed as the thought hit him. Had the lion put each of the males he was seeing as a beneficiary? He had trouble stopping, then worried he was getting hysterical, and clamped down on it.

Who got the benefits wasn’t his problem.

His problem was digging out as much as he could about every body so he could prove to himself he and Trembor were *not* the cause of all these deaths.