Chapter 48

The door cracked open long after Marlot buzzed it. The cougar looked at him, then furtively around. "Yes?"

"I'm RI Marlot Blackclaw," he said, showing his ID, wondering why the cougar was so nervous. "I was here a few days ago when I returned Gorrek Shiningpelt's ID."

"I know who you are," the cougar snapped, vehemence dripping. "Gorrek isn't here. I thought he was with you."

"He left after we ate."

The cougar snorted. "And was he to your liking?" he said, glaring.

"What?"

"Did he taste good? Or was he the one to eat you?" the anger in the voice was ratcheting up.

Marlot rubbed his temple. "We didn't have sex." He remembered Gorrek's comment about letting some of the males think they were in an exclusive relationship. It was clear this male had thought that, until very recently.

The cougar seemed surprised, then was back to being suspicious. "Right, he's still in that 'respecting you' phase. Don't get used to it, it's going to be gone quickly enough."

What was the male going on about? "Can I come in? We need to talk."

The cougar stiffened. "Gorrek left strict instructions I am never to let anyone in again without is express permission."

You are in for a long wait then. Marlot thought. "This is about Gorrek."

"I'm still not letting you in. If this about how you want him for yourself, have fun with that. That male will tell you anything so long as—"

"Gorrek's dead." Marlot stated. He understood the lion had lied to the cougar, but he wasn't here to be the one taking the screaming. He had questions and he wasn't playing counselor to a heartbroken male while getting them.

The cougar stared at him. He staggered back as if struck. Marlot slipped in and closed the door behind him. The cougar was leaning against the wall, one hand over his muzzle, the other arm in a sling. His eyes were brimming with tears and Marlot thought he needed whiplashed insurance if this male went from being pissed at the situation the lion put him in to crying at his death.

"Are you sure?" the cougar asked, fear in his eyes.

"When I left him, the medical examiner was taking the body away. By now I expect he's on a table being dissected to confirm how he died. So yes, I'm certain he's dead."

The cougar lunged at him, and before Marlot could react, he had his arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Thank you," he whispered. "It's finally over."

Marlot didn't move, too busy trying to make sense of the cougar's behavior to work out what he might need or want right now. The cougar cried against him for close to a minute before pulling away. As he dried his eyes, Marlot noticed two of the fingers on his hand were crooked; broken and badly set. They still moved but it couldn't be

comfortable.

"You probably think I'm crazy, being happy he's dead and all that."

Marlot hadn't even processed what had happened enough to make any kind of assessment, he realized. He was still shocked at the switch, although realizing the crying was out of happiness did explain things a little.

"I'm more curious. I thought you and he were mates. I get you aren't happy about him seeing other males, but still..." Marlot trailed off. He lost his mate, he knew how that felt, and it didn't resemble that.

The cougar snorted. "Mate? Oh, he definitely had me believing that for a while. Gorrek doesn't do mates, he gets playthings." He straightened and studied Marlot.

"I need to know if you—"

"Come on," the cougar said, turning and limping away. "I need to show you something. Get you to appreciate what you just avoided getting yourself into."

"I'm just here to get information on Gorrek's last few days." The cougar didn't reply or slow, so Marlot followed him. He slowed walking by the living room, looking at all the pictures; all the males Gorrek had been involved in at one time or another. He searched for Trembor before remembering it was on the wall the entry was in.

"Come on!" the cougar called, waiting deeper in the house.

Marlot paused by the kitchen, looking into it. It was large, with an impressive preparation table as its centerpiece. He'd almost started walking again when it registered the table was pristine; not just clean, but without any indication it had been used.

Marlot had never used one of them. In his home town, everyone got their meat already prepped by the store, and once he'd moved here and began hunting his own meat, he brought the bodies to a prep store for them to do the work, but he'd see one such table at Trembor's parents' house. It was stone, like this one, but unlike here, theirs was scratched and chipped with age and many a person learning to prepare a body for eating on it.

"That's thing's never been used," the cougar said, at his side. "Gorrek is all about appearance, but not the work, unless you count making someone else do it, but not in the kitchen. If you cann't bake to his impossible standards, it was safer to spend the money on ordering in."

"He ate what I baked," Marlot replied, trying to reconcile what the cougar said with what he'd experienced. He knew Gorrek had expensive tastes in food, but the cougar made it sound like the lion despised anything else. "It was just reheated meat," he added in case the cougar thought he was a master baker.

"And he praised you for it, right? As if it was something amazing to eat basic food and no one but you and him understood it's appeal, right?" He walked down the hall again.

Marlot tried to remember the dinner. Gorrek hadn't been that complimentary, but he had indicated a base was a good thing to have.

"Gorrek will do and say anything to make you feel like you are the most amazing male in the world at first," the cougar said as he entered a room. Marlot followed him

into a large office. A massive dark wood desk with shelves and cabinets along the wall. Unlike the prep table in the kitchen, the desk had a clear sense of being used, a old computer and papers spread about.

The cougar pulled a drawer open from a cabinet and took a stack of papers, cursing as they slipped through his fingers, then yelping as he reflexively tried to grab them with his injured arm.

Marlot picked them up.

"Thanks." The cougar panted and motioned for the desk when Marlot handed them to him. "The thing that does surprise me," he said as he looked through them, "is that you two haven't fucked. Gorrek is insatiable."

"He wanted to." I wanted to also, Marlot reminded himself, if not for his own lion getting in the way. "But I'm not ready." He paused, hoping it would be enough, but the surprised look on the cougar's face prompted him to expand. "I had a bad breakup." He nodded to the sling. "What happened?"

"Gorrek," the cougar replied flatly, going back to looking through the papers and pulling a few out. "When he doesn't like something you do, he lets you know." He handed them to Marlot. Medical reports, with bills attached. There was a long list of injures throughout them.

The cougar pointed to an entry. "That happened a few months in our 'relationship'." It was for work on a broken hand, he read. "I happened to mention how good of a hunter I was. A few days later, he 'accidentally' slammed a door on my hand, breaking the fingers. He didn't even act like it was his fault, I was the klutz for not moving my hand in time. Of course, I didn't know any better then and when he offered to look after me I was touched. After a full week of that, he gave up and took me to the hospital, but by then, there was little they could do about these two fingers."

A quick look at the entries had broken leg, arms, ribs, muzzle, and the cougar was setting more pages aside. Marlot placed the papers back on the desk. "I don't get this."

"Gorrek did all of them to me," the cougar snapped.

"I understand that." Marlot had gotten a sense the lion liked to get his way, if not the extreme he'd go to to get it. "I'm not sure why you're showing this to me, unless you're setting up a defense of some sort." He didn't think the cougar did it. Even removing Al'garinam from the equation, he was in no state to take down Gorrek.

The cougar was at a momentary loss. "I don't know," he finally said. "Maybe I need you to understand how lucky you are. Maybe I just need to tell someone now that he isn't here to threaten me if I say anything." The cougar handed him another page. Instead of a list of more injuries, this one was for medication.

"Mange?" Marlot asked on reading that one, the date was only a few month back.

"If your fur isn't just perfect, there has to be something wrong with you. So Gorrek forced me to take that, regardless of the side effects. Or the pain killer medication I'm already on because of my injuries."

Marlot glanced at the sling again. The cougar hadn't had one the last time he was over.

"I have you to thank for that," the cougar said, "I'm just lucky you were enough of an impression on him he didn't go all the way to breaking it. Just gave me a bad twist."

The list had a lot of medication, mostly pain killers, and some were the kind of things Marlot knew about because of the newsies articles on how easy they were to abuse and get addicted to them.

He remembered Gorrek's touch, his whispers. Looked at the cougar's condition and the dissonance between the two version of the lion made him sick. "How long as this been going on?"

"I've been with him for closed to a year and a half now."

Marlot stared at the cougar. "Why did you stay?" How could anyone have this happen to them and not run off, if he wasn't to rip the person doing that apart?

"Where the fuck was I going to go?" the lion indicated his leg, then the crooked fingers. "When I finally realized the kind of male he was, I could barely walk, let along hunt. I've had this limp ever since. Anytime I showed a hint of thinking for myself, he broke something."

"What about your family? Couldn't they help?"

The cougar snorted. "Them? They loved Gorrek more than me. His convinced them he was this perfect male taking care of their klutz of a son. If I told them anything of what that lion did to me, they'd never believe me, and then Gorrek would punish me for talking. Maybe he should have waited to died so you could experience some of what he put me through."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Fuck off. You see me and you think I'm this weak male unable to take care of himself for letting someone hurt me and not lashing out. I did lash out, and I was fucking punished for it. You have no idea who I used to be, before Gorrek turned me into this terrified mouse."

The cougar sat and put his head in his hands.

Marlot watched him, angry, and still smelling afraid. The lion was dead, but the cougar didn't seem free. The offering of the documentation felt like he was trying to justify his situation, justify why he hadn't left.

Marlot wouldn't have been like the cougar. The moment Gorrek had shown a hint of being violent, he'd have gutted him.

The cougar chuckled. "Do you know what he told me, after you left?" He motioned to the arm in the sling. "After that. He said that maybe it was time he got himself someone new to break-in. That maybe he should set me free to fend for myself instead of depending on him for every little thing. He could just add me to his wall and be done. Never think of me again."

"His wall?"

"You've see it, well them. This trophies. His memento of every male he's been in a relationship with."

"All of those are like you?"

"I figure so, If he was going to add me to them."

How could so many males fall victim to someone like Gorrek? A few he could understand, there were predators who were emotionally weak. Marlot didn't think of it as a flaw, just something they needed to keep in mind throughout their lives.

And Trembor was on that wall! Trembor didn't have one weak bone in him. He was the strongest male Marlot had ever known. He would never let someone treat him like the cougar had been.

He was back in Low Valley, looking at his lion over the car's roof trying to understand the expression of betrayal on his face. All he'd done was take advantage of an exploit on his pad to keep him from placing the call. There had been no reason for that kind of reaction.

Unless.

No.

Trembor would never fall victim to someone like this.

"Do—" His mind fought against the question. He didn't want to confirm his fear, but he had to know. "What do you know of the males in those pictures?"

"Nothing. Other than Gorrek was really proud of himself, of how he treated them. Since he planned on adding my picture, I can just imagine what that means."

Marlot ran out of the house, he had to put distance between himself and anything that had to do with Gorrek and his involvement with his lion. It couldn't have happened.

He remembered Gorrek mentioning Trembor walking away, abandoning him too.

Marlot refused to think anything he had done might have echoed how Trembor had been treated at this lion's hands. He wasn't like that. He hadn't done anything wrong.

He slammed the car door shut., Panting, his fogging breath quickly rendered his windshield opaque.

He couldn't stop seeing the betrayal in his lion's eyes.

Marlot hadn't done anything wrong! He told himself. Trembor had overreacted. All Marlot had done was...force his will onto his lion's. Taken away his options.

And his lion had walked away.

Trembor had done exactly what he'd basically accused the cougar of not doing.

Marlot fumbled with his pad. He had to tell Trembor he was sorry, that he finally understood what he'd done wrong. He could fix it and they could go back to the way things were.

He had the pad to his ear as the message informing him he was blocked played. Of course he was blocked.

There was no anger this time. Just pain at knowing he deserved to be blocked. Trembor had done the right thing in walking away, and that made the act more painful. Marlot couldn't blame the lion for being irrational anymore.

"I didn't mean to," he told the pad, looking at the display as the call autoterminated. Maybe he should record another message.

The pad buzzed and Marlot nearly dropped it in his hurry to answer. Maybe

Trembor had known it was him calling to appo—

"Marlot," Jaxca said. "I have the preliminary report, and I think you're going to want to hear it."

Marlot wiped at his eyes. "Hey Jaxca." He steadied his voice. "What do you have?"

"Even you could tell he'd received a beating, but the precision of the blows, the damage that was visible once I shaved him. Marlot, this lion wasn't just killed. He was tortured. He was kept alive for hours as injuries after injuries were inflicted. I don't think the lion ever even had the chance to fight back."

Marlot found he was smiling. If Gorrek had suffered it was even better. A male that had hurt his lion deserved to pay for it with pain of his own. Gorrek was lucky Al'garinam had gotten to him first, otherwise, Marlot would have seen to it the lion suffered more than whatever the hare had inflicted.

"Marlot?" Jaxca asked.

"Sorry." He had to fight down the violent fantasy. He had to focus on what Jaxca told him. The reasons for why or how Gorrek died didn't matter. He had an unpaid body he needed to investigate. He had a hunter he needed to stop.

"I was saying that I confirmed that Ofpal's body died in the same way. The breaks in his neck are close enough I'm confident in saying they were broken by the same person. Marlot, it might be a little early to say this, but I think there's a hunter in the city."

Marlot closed his eyes. Not it wasn't too soon at all. "Have you told that to anyone else?"

"No, it's your body so I figured you should know. I've contacted my colleagues to have them do x-rays of the broken necks and send me the results. Once I've confirmed that this epidemic of broken necks has a common source, I'm going to make an official report and the other RIs will be informed."

"How long with it take them to have the results?"

"A few hours at most."

"Okay. I'm going to go around and talk to the RIs who have those bodies," Marlot said, knowing he was lying and still surprised at the ease of it. "They can call their examiners and then we can all get together. Have one meeting instead of a bunch of calls that's going to delay everything."

He'd never thought of himself as someone who lied easily, but even now, it barely registered as such. He needed more time to fix things, and that was what both gave him that and made sense in this situation. Had he ever lied like that to his lion?

He couldn't recall ever doing that, but would he have noticed he was lying now, if he hadn't been paying attention?

"I suppose that makes sense. And you are the RIs, so you're all better equipped to handle it. I'll still write the report, and then send it to you. Should I update the other examiner about the hunter situation?"

"No, you need accurate information, telling them that would skew their examination, like you said, it's early. If they think there's a hunter out there, they'll send you results that confirms that. Maybe we're lucky and it's just a coincidence."

"Alright. Hopefully I'll have that for you by the end of the day."

Marlot disconnected.

How much time had he gained? A day at the most. The lack of news about the hunter wouldn't surprise Jaxca, but as the one writing the initial report, when no one contacted him for information, extra details and clarification, he'd start asking around himself and would find out Marlot had done nothing about the information.

Well, that he hadn't contacted the other RIs as he said he would. He planned on making good use of the information if it had anything relevant.

If he didn't end this before Jaxca started calling, just how worse was he making things for himself? He was now withholding information. When the enforcers looked into the last few weeks, they'd have even more questions for him. Would they consider him an accomplice?

How pissed would Trembor be at him for this?

He rubbed his face. "I just wanted to show you I can do this the right way." He glared at his pad. Almost tried calling Trembor again to tell him just that, when what he said registered.

How long had he been lying to himself? The right way would have been to tell the Bureau the moment he'd realize he was dealing with a hunter. Bring everyone in, ensure the hunter was caught instead of looking for a way to regain Trembor.

How had he not realized he was lying to himself? And if he did that, how could he know he wasn't constantly doing it to others. To Trembor?

His pad buzzed. Property Record was displayed as the caller.

"Hello?" he answered cautiously, wondering why they'd be calling him.

"RI Blackclaw?" a woman asked.

"Speaking."

"I have the result on a property search that was initiated on your behave."

"Who asked for it?" He asked before stopping himself. Could this be Al'garinam again? Taunting him, playing with him?

"The request was routed through the Enforcer internal network, by an officer Boras Leanhunt."

He remembered asking the ermine to ask about who lived at the house. Maybe he'd put in the request when no one had had useful information. He couldn't remember the enforcer's name, but it would make sense.

"What do you have?"

"The property in question was purchased eleven months ago by a Nikal Swiftfall. All property taxes are paid and the insurance on the house is up to date."

"Any information on the buyer?"

"No, I'd have to do a deeper search for anything personal, and frankly that isn't my department. The best I can do right now is give you the name of the bank that

handled the mortgage."

Marlot wrote that information as well; it might be useful. Then ended the call.

He looked at the information. Would the owner have anything to do with what took place in the house? Did it even matter? He wondered as he entered the name and address in Stalker 1.0. What he should do was hand everything to the Bureau. He could just imagine Swiftkill's reaction when she found out he'd withheld information that could have helped her close her case in a timely manner.

He glanced at the information that came back on Nikal Swiftfall. The address was confirmed, to that was alos linked a vehicle. It was still working. He was about to shut it off when a picture appeared and any thought of driving to the Bureau were wiped away.

He looked at a hare's face.

"There is no fucking way."

Stalker 1.0 brought up a pension from the Protectors as he decided to get more information directly. Uncaring of the consequences, he used is RI authorization to access the databases and get everything that was there on the hare.

Discharged after four tours with the Protectors. There were no details on what he'd done in their service, but four tours was what, twenty four years? How did someone stay in that long? How did a prey species survive that long? At least that explained the hare's fighting skills.

Then the implications sunk in.

Al'garinam had killed Gorrek inside his own home.

He was on the road and headed to the house before the thought was finished. He didn't care how careful the hare had been, no one could live in a house and not leave traces. There was something there that would help him track the hare down and finish this once and for all.

He slowed his driving as he reminded himself the right way to do this was to let the Bureau and enforcer deal with it. Once he had whatever was in the house, he'd hand it over to them.

He was done lying to himself and others.

He was going to do this the right way and if it didn't earn him a chance to mend things with Trembor, then so be it.

Marlot would at least show he was nothing like Gorrek.