

Chapter 50

“Were you followed?” Harik asked as he closed the door behind Marlot.

Marlot shook the snow off himself as he walked further in. “Oh, someone definitely followed me.” He didn’t know until he was in the computer room with the others.

“Ukely, you’re on defense,” Harik ordered. “If they know where I live, they’re going to try to get in through my net securities. They’re going to want to know what we’re up to.”

“I don’t expect it’ll be an organized attack, not in the little time they’ve had.” Marlot put his jacket on the back of a free chair and sat before a terminal.

“I’m putting the names I was working on back in the pool,” Ukely replied.

“Send that my way,” Marlot told the zebra, activating the terminal. “I’ll take over those searches. Is everything in place?” he asked the raccoon.

“Yes,” Afirma replied. “Every piece of evidence has been altered to show that someone went in and did a sloppy job of hiding you are actually the person behind everything and that Trembor is a false scent.”

“I even got my grubby little clawed on that evidence those amateurs your mate hired,” Joren said, grinning madly, “and rearrange everything so that now, instead of them doing the hack for your lion, they tried to cover up your work.”

“The money trail?” Marlot asked, alphabetizing the list on his screen.

“I had to keep it thin,” the hare answered. “Your lion was smart enough he paid with physical currency, so I made it that they tried to cover that up too, but once he admits to covering for you they’re going to have to take a second look at everything, and they’ll find a bad camera angle of one of the kiosks used and they will see the truth I want them to see.”

“Your lion is going to blame you, right?” Harik asked darkly as he set to typing. “This only works if he—”

“He will,” Marlot stated. He had to. Trembor had to understand this was the best, the only way to resolve this. If his lion was stubborn and sacrificed himself, Marlot was breaking into whatever caging complex he was held in and giving him a solid piece of his mind. He calmed the mounting panic. Trembor would play his part. They trusted each other.

He found the first person on his list’s employment, security guard at the airport, and tabbed into the pool to add the information and was confronted with a familiar program.

“Harik,” he asked cautiously, “Why is 3.0 running on your system?”

“You left a drive,” Harik answered without looking up. “So I plugged it in. I had to add processor, but we’re up to seven copies running concurrently and barely a drop in speed.”

“Harik,” Marlot looked at the mouse in disbelief, “it’s—”

“A good idea?” Harik snapped. “Smart thinking? Exactly what you would have told me to do if you hadn’t been in such a rush?”

“Not finished,” Marlot said.

The typing stopped, and the three of them looked at him.

“You’re telling me,” Ukely said, typing again, “that the program that’s been saving us half our search time is incomplete? What are you expecting it to exactly?”

“How do you even have it running?” Marlot asked, bringing up the code. “It kept

crashing on me anytime I ran it.”

“That because you programmed a predator and a prey in there and expected them to be nice to one another,” Afirna answered. “I added some buffer code, so they’d stop raking each other apart.” Marlot found it, not exactly caging the two aspects of his program, but limiting how they communicated. He should have thought of that, instead of trying to get them to act as one.

“As useful as it is,” Harik said, “I’m not sure I can let you keep this once we’re done. The way those two parts are working together is uncovering links between people none of us would have thought about. I’m not comfortable with how easily you can use that to lay bare anyone’s life.”

“That isn’t why I did it,” Marlot replied, defensively. “It started as something to try to work out how a prey hunter did what he did, then I needed to figure out how a lion did his hunting sexually instead of for meat, but my home system couldn’t handle that.”

“The upgrades you asked me to get you,” Harik said.

“Yeah, I was just going to play with it in my spare time, but then I got the body and had to figure out who he was, how he’d survived while officially being dead. Not that it helped. When it did run, it returned mainly junk, so I kept adding to it, hoping it would eventually give me something I could use.”

Afirna looked at him over her screen. “Did you, at anytime, bother putting in an ID number?”

Marlot shook his head. “Hardir was eaten five years ago, I didn’t have an ID to work with.”

“Not even as a test?” she asked in disbelief.

“I was too busy with the case, patching up with Trem.”

“Marl,” she said, “even before I patched it. The instant I gave it an ID, it brought up a lot of information before the predator part devoured the prey aspect. It’s like you’ve programmed it to sniff out the best hiding spots, and gave it the claws to tear anything in the way apart. I’m with Harik. It’s making our work here easier, but I’m not sure how I feel knowing you are working on this.”

“Then I’ll stop working on it once we’re done here.” Marlot watched as 3.0 populated the fields for a Kellan Longears. Had it just added a field? Marlot was pretty sure the one for “Preferred eating location” hadn’t been there when he brought it up.

“Right,” Joren said derisively, “and paint stripes on me and call me a tiger. Unless we destroy that drive, you won’t be able to stop yourself from tinkering with it. And let’s be honest here. As uncomfortable as we are with it, we’re all curious as to what you can get that 3.0 program to do. Just don’t be surprised if one of us appears in your system to delete code. This is a scary program you’re building.”

Marlot shrugged. He was impressed with what it did, now that it stopped eating itself, but he didn’t see what they were scared of. 3.0 was only accessing public databases. Yes, it was making interesting leaps in correlation, but that was just because of the processing power Harik’s system gave it.

“Who has the list of names Trembor’s accused of having put in place within the city’s

infrastructure?” Joren asked, “I saw it fly by, but I’m busy pulling something.”

“I have it,” Marlot answered, bringing it up. A name appeared on his screen.

“Tell me if she’s in there.”

It was a quick search. There were only over two dozen names. “She isn’t, why?”

“She’s from that list of near-failures the academy gave you,” the hare replied. “She’s on the city council.” Cursing ran around the room. “Don’t panic,” Joren said, “it’s only one name. The council has thirteen people on it, including City Leader Sharphorns. One person with criminal claws in them isn’t going to give anyone control of—”

“I have two more,” Harik said.

“How? I checked everyone, and she’s the only one there.”

“I hacked into the academy and went back further,” the mouse replied. “They only ‘officially’ keep ten years of archives, but nothing gets deleted unless they run out of space and their servers are among the largest in the city.”

With more cursing, the hare went back to typing, and within half an hour he and Harik had uncovered three other names, giving them six council members who could work for one of the criminal cartels.

“How is it that we’re not living in a criminal empire if they nearly have the majority?” Joren asked.

“They aren’t stupid,” Afirna answered. “If they push too hard in a direction that goes against the good of the city, they’ll be noticed. It’s the same reason they made sure not to include them in the case against Trembor.”

“And they probably don’t all work for the same cartel,” Ukely said. “No one’s testing the gates yet. The cartels are notorious for not working well together. They’re more careful than the packs in their altercations because the fallout is larger, but all it takes is for one of them to own one or two of those counselors, and little will change for the rest of us.”

“How do you know so much?” Joren asked, “and why aren’t including rival counselors then? It would be a great way to free a spot for someone this cartel owns.”

“My mom was on a task force investigating them,” the zebra answered. “I loved her, but she was never great with securing her computer. A bored kid needs something to do.”

“And if they target a rival counselor,” Marlot said, “that cartel will retaliate.”

“So, what are we going to do with this information?” Ukely asked. “If we put those IDs in your program, Marl, the stuff it’s going to give us could be extremely damaging to those people, right? I mean, just threatening to expose them as being owned by criminals would give us power over them.”

“I’m not taking part in blackmail,” Afirna stated, glaring at the zebra.

“I’m not—”

“Yes, you are,” Joren replied.

Ukely sighed. “They’re basically criminals too, so who cares?”

“Not in my house,” Harik replied.

Marlot listened to the discussion, the words mixing with the typing. He hadn’t expected this to reach so high, certainly not as close to City Leader Sharphorns as this. As far as he was concerned, there was only one course of action open to him. More of a backup

plan in case things didn't work out.

"Ukely, what's the firewall situation?" Marlot assembled the names, along with all the connections 3.0 had made to the cartel.

"No one's been—belay that. Someone's scratching at it. Let me reinforce it and we'll be fine."

The mouse snorted.

"Harik, I need to secure a file on the net without those scratchers noticing, what are my options?"

The mouse left and returned a few minutes later with a pad that looked to have been hurriedly put together out of a dozen others. He placed it next to Marlot's terminal, and it asked to connect to it. "This had never been used, and it's been wiped multiple times to remove any traces of manufacturer trackers. Yes, that's a thing, I'm not paranoid about that." He placed a parking access card. "When you move the files onto this, it will encrypt it. Put the key on this card. Don't bother trying to memorize it, it used the latest in multi-processor encryption. That card is going to be the only way someone will be able to access the file afterward. You can then connect to the net with it here or wait until later. It won't matter, it has a dedicated connection no one's ever seen so they won't be looking for it."

"Can I use it to call someone?" Marlot asked, turning it over in his hand, trying to figure out how this monstrous contraption might manage it.

"Not while it's carrying your file," Harik answered in his "are you an idiot" voice.

Marlot transferred the file to the pad and had to look for how to get it to send information to the card. Once done, he connected the pad to an anonymous server he'd never used before.

While it transferred, he wondered how Harik had 3.0 connected to the network without anyone intercepting the data. Then he realized it didn't matter if someone was looking at that. 3.0 used raw data, the assembly happened here, which was why it was so processor intensive. Anyone seeing the transfer wouldn't be able to make out what it was about unless they had his program, and at best, Maoma had remnants of 1.0 with maybe hints of 2.0.

He disconnected the pad from the net and place the call, having to angle it uncomfortable to have the microphone near his mouth and the speaker by his ear. Maybe he should ask for an earpiece.

"City Leader's Office. My name is Kranin, how can I help you?"

"Hi, Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw. I need to speak to City Leader Sharphorns, please." The typing stopped again and three pairs of eyes looked at him, wide in disbelief.

"I'm afraid Mister Sharphorns doesn't take unsolicited calls. If you tell me the issue, I'll direct you to the department best suited to help you resolve it."

And what were the odds the cartel had people already in any of those departments? "I'm afraid this needs to go to the city leader directly."

"As I said, Mister Sharphorns doesn't—"

"Tell him, Marlot Blackclaw is calling in his favor." That silenced her. He looked at

the others and mouthed “what?” had they never seen someone call in a favor with the city leader?

Of course, Marlot doubted a male like that owed a lot of people favors. The city leader couldn’t afford to have claws into him, no matter how small. He would be the one handing out favors to be collected at a later time.

The soothing music stopped, and a deep and confident voice came on. “Who am I speaking with?”

“Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw.” He gave his ID number.

“I hope you understand that isn’t going to be enough. Anyone could claim to be who you say you are. They could have forced the person to give them their ID number, or found it through other illicit means. I need to see who I speaking with.”

Marlot looked at the mouse and mouthed “visual?” Harik shook his head.

“I’m afraid the pad I’m using isn’t capable of visual. It’s been modified to increase how secure it is.”

“Then I’m not certain what you expect from this call.”

Marlot considered it. “I’m going to work under the assumption that you didn’t give out the details of our last conversation, and hope you’ll understand that I wouldn’t divulge anything about it myself considering where it took me.” He let out a breath. “You twisted my arm so I’d go back home to Low Valley. You did that under the threat of a vegetable shortage by Counselor Arlion Tuff. You said that if I went, you’d consider it a personal favor and that if I didn’t, you’d feel the need to make my life difficult.”

The silence stretched. When the city leader spoke, there was a hint of embarrassment in his voice. “In my defense, it had been a rather hard quarter. I shouldn’t have threatened you like that.”

“It’s done and dealt with. I don’t hold you responsible for the mess that turned into, but I do need your help now.”

“I’m listening.”

“First, how confident are you that no one is listening in on this call from your side?”

“As confident as I can be. I have a security company do regular scans of my office, and all the connections go through their monitoring stations. If something irregular is noted I’m immediately informed.”

Marlot couldn’t stop the eye roll. “It’s going to have to be enough.” Six, seven ways he could use that to compromise the call? “But I advise you to get the file out of that server as soon as you can and put it on a secure slate and don’t let it out of your hand until this is all over.”

Typing on the city leader’s side. “I’m ready.” Marlot gave the address and immediately he heard typing. “I have the file.” More typing. “Moved and in my pocket.”

Marlot was surprised at the city leader’s ease with his computer. He knew the bull wasn’t exactly young, and anytime Marlot had dealt with city leaders before, in the form of the council in Low Valley, explaining why he needed them to access a file off the net took longer than the entire investigation.

“Alright. I’m not going to tell you what’s on there, only that it’s important. In a few

days, regardless of what happens to me, you'll receive a parking pass at your home. Once you have it, you can decrypt the file and do what you feel is needed with it."

"Mister Blackclaw, I'm not sure this is acceptable. I'm not some pawn in a game you are playing."

"No, sir, and I'm not treating you as such. The information relates to you. You're not holding it for me, but for yourself. I just need time to do my best to save some people. A few days, a week at the most. I wouldn't do this if I thought there was any other way."

Marlot could imagine the bull grinding his teeth in the silent breathing that followed. "Alright. You say this will help me. So I can wait. But to be clear, regardless of what is on that file, I will not consider that I owe you another favor."

"That's fine," Marlot said, smiling. "When you hear how I'm calling in the favor you owe me, you might want me to owe you a few."

"I'm listening," the bull said gravely.

"There's a male being held by the enforcers, Trembor Goldenmane. He..." Marlot faltered as his throat constricted.

"RI Blackclaw, I can't step into the judicial system. I'm sure you feel he isn't being treated justly, but he wouldn't be there if there wasn't evidence against him." Marlot wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. If only the judicial system was that clean.

"No, I'm not asking you to step in. I... I'm trying to resolve this, but it might not go my way. If that happens, I need you to tell him I didn't plan for it to end that way. I need you to transfer the favor you owe me to him, and I can already tell you what he'd going to ask for. He's going to need you to protect his family. It's not even going to occur to him to ask for you to get him out of the trouble he's in."

There was another long silence. "Protecting an entire family is a little more than I expected when I said I would owe you."

"I know, but I believe that once you see what's in the file, you'll consider it worthwhile."

"How will I know when it's time to go see him?"

Marlot laughed. "Oh, you won't be able to miss it. If this doesn't go my way I am going to take as many of them with me as they see to it I die."