

Series of death-1

Marlot tightened his jacket as he followed the rat. The weather was turning cold earlier than expected and his breath was already fogging up.

The rat wasn't his first pick; he wasn't a fan of rat, or most rodents; they tended to be more bones than meat, or the plumps one were more fat than either. Fortunately for them, fat meant wealth, which tended to come with an associated higher tax to pay.

The rat was on his Pad, oblivious to the people around him; the predators around him. Pad use among the young had been linked to a drop in survivability over the last few years among the first decade of hunting age, even young predators were falling victim to it. Tech was a tool, not something to distract yourself from your surroundings with, not if you wanted to survive.

The rat turned off the main thoroughfare without even looking up from his Pad. Marlot was the fortunate one that no one else seemed interested in the distracted rat. There wasn't enough meat in him to share, and he wasn't in the mood to fight off another predator.

He was after this rat because, after three weeks of not remembering to update his information-gathering program, he was one of three left on his list of viable prey, everyone else had been killed by another predator and the other two were further than he could afford to drive today, which was a good thing if the weather was turning for the worse.

Marlot didn't remember where he'd come across the rat. His program had him as a clerk in a downtown bank, so probably when he was putting his finances in order, in preparation for buying his and Trembor's new house.

Marlot sighed and tightened his jacket. He wondered what his lion was up to. Was he on his own hunt tonight? Did he miss him? No, that was stupid, Trembor didn't miss him. If he did, he would have unblocked him by now. He'd have reached out, explained why he'd broken up with him. Marlot shook himself and focused on his hunt. Now wasn't the time to let his broken heart run things, not if he wanted to eat this coming week.

The rat was nowhere in sight.

Marlot cursed softly and scented the air. There. He followed the scent to a side alley. He could hear the steps now, faster. The rat knew he was being hunted. Marlot had given himself away when he thought of Trembor. Probably that sigh. The lion was going to cause him to die of hunger if he didn't get that under control.

The wolf took off after the rat, he couldn't let the rat lose him in the maze of alleys, he had no interest in going hungry. The cooling air dampened the scents, but not so much Marlot couldn't stay on the rat's trail, catch up to him. It dampened the rat's fear scent. But not the sound of his running, his panting. That rat wasn't in good shape.

A few turns later and Marlot saw the tail as the rat made a turn. On the next turn, he saw the whole rat, who also caught sight of him and sped up, eyes wide and now smelling of fear, the closeness keeping the cold air from dampening it.

Marlot considered letting him widen the distance, let him think he had a chance to

escape. They had to be close to the rat's home at this point; Marlot had lost track of where they were in relation to the rat's destination. His stomach vetoed the idea, and Marlot sped up too. Going hungry was not part of his plans.

He caught up to the rat a few turns later, in a wider area of the alleys; almost a small courtyard with the back of a handful of apartment buildings blocking the rest of the city. The rat was on the other side, leaning against a wall, panting; already exhausted. That's what came of sedentary jobs and rats who didn't bother staying in shape. It was a wonder he hadn't been eaten yet.

Marlot didn't have to hurry anymore. Even if the rat bolted, he was done for. He'd make it to the next intersection, maybe, before dropping and the wolf would only have to break his neck and take the body back to his car. Marlot was disappointed he wouldn't put up a fight, but being fed took precedence over working off his maudling mood. He walked across the courtyard toward the rat.

He reached the center of the space when the creak of a door opening made Marlot pause. He looked in the direction of a rat exiting the building and growled a warning. Another door opened, a third and a fourth one; each with a rat exiting, not surprised to see a wolf growling.

The rat who'd been panting was now looking at him, smiling.

Of all the stupid mistakes to make, Marlot had let the rat lead him into an ambush. Of course he'd been on his Pad, messaging his friends. Marlot had probably given himself away to moment he started following the rat with being distracted by Trembor. That lion was going to be the death of him.

Still, they were only rats; Marlot could take on five rats, once he'd taken one or two of them down the others would flee, they were prey after all. Having to pay for two of them would put a dent in his budget, but he wouldn't have to hunt for a while, so he'd be able to balance it out.

The rat he'd hunted was the first to run at him and Marlot waited, fist closed in the combat gloves. Like all prey, the rat swings were wild, but he was attacking with open hands and claws out. Marlot blocked, but pain erupted in his side before he could punch back.

One of the other rats had taken advantage of the distraction and clawed him. It was shallow, infection was probably his biggest worry, but that was another distraction that another rat made use of and Marlot barely stepped back in time to avoid the punch to his head.

A jab got a rat to back away, muzzle bleeding, but another one took her place, claws coming for Marlot's face. He kicked her before they connected. Something collided with the back of his knees as he placed his foot down and Marlot toppled forward, kicking at the rat trying to wrap his arms around his legs. The rat let go and Marlot was back on his feet, ready for the next attack.

But not three of them coming at him at the same time. They were uncoordinated, but he could only block two, the third slashing at his stomach. His jacket took the brunt of the small claws, but Marlot still felt the sting of cuts. He grabbed a rat's arm and threw

him at another, but left himself open and ground his teeth as claws dug in his thigh.

He kicked that rat away and received a punch in the small of his back, then it was a kick in the calf that almost dropped him. Someone bit his forearm and with a growl, Marlot threw him against a wall, that was rewarded with a punch in his stomach, then one in the face, and the few seconds of dizziness cost him his standing position. He barely put his hands down before his head hit the hard ground.

A kick to the face as he tried to stand sent him on his side. He kicked one and punched another, trying to give himself breathing space, but others took their places, kicking, clawing and punching him.

He'd lost.

He'd been stupid. Let his broken heart distract him. Now he'd pay by either going hungry this week or spending more than he could afford on that horrible artificial stuff. Maybe he could buy meat pastries off Ezekiel instead. It would cost him more, but at least the money would go to people, instead of a corporation. And it would be edible.

The kicking slowed. Someone spat on him. They jeered, and he deserved it. Oh, how the mighty hunter had fallen, outsmarted by rats, of all people. He listened to them walk away, laughing and groaning. At least Marlot had given them something to remember him by. He was certainly going to remember them.

He waited a few minutes once he couldn't hear their steps before sitting up. He was sore everywhere, but the bleeding was minor. All he needed to do was get home, shower and he'd be fine. He groaned as he got to his feet and slowly limped out of the alleys.

Once back among the pedestrian crowd, he received sympathetic smiles and nods from other predators. He wasn't the first to lose a hunt, and Marlot took comfort in the knowledge he couldn't be the last.

It didn't make it hurt any less, though.

Series of death-2

Trembor entered his parents' house to his father screaming.

"How can you do that?"

"Because it's my own fu—"

"Don't you swear in this house, Bolifen Goldenmane. I won't have it."

"Of course you don't!" Bo yelled back. "You won't let me do anything! I don't even live here anymore and you're still trying to run my life!"

Trembor hurried to the living room, Cerek shaking his head from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm trying to keep you from ruining it!" Torim yelled. "You have a son to look after you shouldn't be wasting time and money on that!"

"Don't you—"

Trembor forced himself between the two as Bo raised a hand. "Okay, why don't your two take a breath and step away from each other." As gently as he could, he pushed each further apart. His brother was growling at him. "I know this is the family dinner, but

I was under the impression we were eating what the females were bringing back, not each other.”

Neither even smiled at his joke.

“Any idea when they’ll be back?” Trembor asked his father.

Torim shook his head. “They left an hour and a half ago.” He went back to glaring at his son.

“Bo, why don’t you come with me?” Trembor asked, pulling on his brother’s arm. “So dad can get back to his reading until the females are back.”

His brother resisted, baring teeth at their father before giving in.

“What was that?” Trembor hissed as they entered the kitchen. “Baring your teeth at dad?” Cerek and Juress were washing dishes. “Are you a cub again or something?”

“I might as well be for the way that old male treats me.”

“What happened?” Trembor asked, noting the other two males’ folded back ears.

“He just went off on me for no reason!”

Trembor fixed his gaze on his brother. “Bo, dad never ‘goes off’ for no reason.”

“He blew up at me because I went to a gambling house a few days ago.”

Cerek cringed.

Trembor sighed. “You told him? Knowing his history with those places?”

“I didn’t tell him, okay? He said something about how horrible those places are and I said something to the effect that they aren’t that bad, so he asked how I’d know, and I told him. Then there was no reasoning with him.”

“For a good reason,” Cerek Grumbled.

“Oh, you’re going to get into this too?” Bo took a step toward their brother, but Trembor caught his arm.

“He’s not getting into it, and you know it,” Trembor said. “And you know he’s right. If it wasn’t for Serene, we wouldn’t have this house anymore because of dad’s gambling problem. She got my mom and yours to take him down and forced him to stop. You know how sensitive he is about the subject, so maybe, you could be careful?”

“He started it!”

Trembor couldn’t keep the smile from forming. “What are you, four?”

Bo’s ears folded back in embarrassment, almost vanishing in his mane. “He just...” Bo let out a breath. “I get he had a problem, but I’m not him. I just go once in a while, drop a bit of money on a few games to relax.” He shrugged. “It’s fun.”

“And it is harmless,” Juress said. “There’s been research on it, the adrenaline rush players get from it is a bit like stalking prey.”

“Jur,” Cerek said, “Don’t bring that up around my dad.”

“But it’s true, there’s no indication that—”

“Jur,” Cerek warned. “Our father almost lost everything to gambling. It doesn’t matter how much scientific research has been done. That’s still the evidence he’ll go by. And that’s why I know Bo’s being careful with it, if not his talking about it.”

“Can I count on you two to keep Bo and dad to eat each other?” Trembor asked. “I’m going to head upstairs and keep the cubs company.”

“We’re going to keep my brother in the kitchen.” Cerek indicated the stone table in the center of the room. “We’ll tie him to the prep table if we have to.”

“If you do that, hide the knives, it might tempt dad to prepare Bo for the meal,” Trembor said, leaving the room.

In the attic he found the cubs running around, except for Isenson and Cialin, who severely watched them. Isenson seemed to have decided to take Herelix’s place as the watcher now that his brother was no longer considered a cub and was off learning how to hunt while Cialin always acted much older than her age. Eleven now and with an expression that could match Serene with its severity.

“Uncle Trembor!” Dayra yelled, running and climbing up his legs before he could pick her up. “Did you bring me a treat?” He carried her to the old couch and sat.

“Not today,” he replied just before she pulled his lips up and studied his teeth.

Trembor was back to the first time he’d brought Marlot to his family’s dinner, his arm still in a cast. The wolf had sat on the couch, frozen in place, terrified of the cubs as Dayra climbs on his lap and pulled his lips up, commented on dental hygiene. He had had no idea what to do with them. Trembor had watched him from the doorway, had loved him so much for sitting there and letting the cubs bombard him with questions, pick and prod at him.

“Is Uncle Marlot coming this time?” Miril asked. She’d taken a liking to Marlot, loving his back fur.

Trembor swallowed. “No, he isn’t. He won’t anymore.”

“Oh.” The nine-year-old’s face fell. “Who ate him?”

“What? No, no. No one ate him. We just…” Trembor tried to figure out a way to say it that would be easy for the cubs to understand and had to settle for the unmitigated truth. “It didn’t work out between us.”

“But you love him, don’t you?” Ronik asked.

Trembor’s smile was sad. “I did, but sometimes that isn’t enough.”

“Then you need to talk with him,” Cialin stated. “You need to sit down and work you what the problem is.”

You didn’t leave me any choice. Marlot said, looking and sounding saddened by having hacked Trembor’s pad.

You didn’t leave me any choice. The other male had said, years before, standing over Trembor who’s muzzled was bleeding. His blood on the other lion’s knuckles.

Trembor shook the memories away and swallowed the lump away. “It doesn’t always work that way.”

“Sarene said that when you have a problem, you sit down and you talk it over until it’s resolved,” the young and far too serious female stated.

Trembor narrows his eyes. “Sarene said that?”

Cialin nodded.

Trembor couldn’t imagine the easiest to anger of his mothers advocating sitting down and talking. He’d heard the argument between her and his father. Even as a teen he’d sometimes wondered if they actually loved each other, but unless they disagreed,

they were the definition of love.

He'd hoped he and Marlot would have had that. *You didn't leave me any choice.* But he knew the patterns, had learned them the hard way, and he wouldn't let himself fall into them again.

The lump was back in his throat and took multiple swallows before it went away. His eyes stung, but he didn't cry. He wouldn't cry. The wolf didn't deserve that, not after tricking him like he had.

The cubs sensed his discomfort with the subject and the rest of the questions stirred away from Marlot. He answered them, listened to the adventures they'd been through since the last dinner. And watched them play. With him there, even Cialin and Isenson allowed themselves to act their age, goofing around with the other cubs.

When the sound of the door closing and female voices reached up to them, the cubs all rang downstairs and Trembor followed them. There he hugged his mothers and sisters. Herelex was bloody, but he proudly carried his own kill, a small antelope.

With the greetings done, the kills were carried to the kitchen. Trembor noticed Cerek and Bo arguing away from the crowd and headed for them, horse body over his shoulders.

"But I'm usually with you guys preparing the kills," Bo pleaded.

"Yeah, but with you and dad, it's not a good idea right now," Cerek replied. "You're going to say something, you know it. And then you two are going to be arguing again."

"But it's tradition. We're the oldest, we prepare the kills. What is it going to look like if I'm not there?"

"It's going to look like you're doing the smart thing," Cerek replied.

"Why don't you cede your place to Herelex?" Trembor said before Bo commented. "He's your son, and I'm sure dad would love to see what you've been teaching him."

Bo pushed the mane out of his face with both hands. "Alright, but just this one time. I'm not going to let dad chase me out of the kitchen." He left to find his son.

"How long has he been going to the gambling house?" Cerek asked.

Trembor shrugged. "First I've heard of it."

"Yeah, me too." His brother shook himself. "Come on, let's get to the kitchen before someone else decides we need replacing too."

* * * * *

"Don't be too shy with it," Torim said to Herelex, "it's dead, it's not going to complain."

The young lion had taken three times as long and the more experienced ones to skin his kill, but he had done a perfect job of it. He was clearly still nervous, even if everyone else was only looking at him work discreetly.

"Are you up on the Survivor show, Dad?" Cerek asked.

The older lion shook his head. "I lost interest after last season. It's just been more of the same for the last three. I think the show's run its course."

“They’re on what of the volcanic islands in the middle of the Fartern Ocean,” Trembor said. “The scenery is worth watching, even if I agree with you the show’s become predictable. That close to the equator the trees are something to see, there’s also some native tribe living there, so maybe that’ll make things different.”

“That’s fake,” Cerek said. “There’s no way they’d be allowed to film there if actual primitives lived on the island, let alone put them at risk.”

“The Fartern Ocean is outside every jurisdiction,” Torim said. “Unless one of the conservationist groups mounts an offensive to protect them, no one will protest. And that was recorded last year, so we’d have heard by now if anything of the sort had happened.”

“Do you and Marlot watch the show together?” Herelex asked.

Trembor cursed quietly as the knife slid sideways and cut his finger.

“Herelex,” Torim said, “that isn’t a subject we talk about in this house.”

“It’s okay dad,” Trembor said, pulling a drawer open and taking disinfectant and bandages from it. “I already had to explain to the cubs me and Marl aren’t together anymore. So it’s fine. Me and him found out we have different points of view about things that make having a relationship impossible,” he said, cleaning the cut.

“Sorry,” Herelex said, shoulder slumped and tail between his legs.

“Like I said, it’s okay. It happens.”

“I liked him,” the young lion said quietly.

Trembor closed his eyes. The lump was back. If only liking, loving someone was enough, but he’d had broken bones to prove that one-way love wasn’t a good thing. *You didn’t leave me any choice.*

He shook himself, bandaged the cut, and went back to his kill. This was about him and his family, and Marlot was no longer part of that.

And that was for the best.

Series of death-3

The Watering Hole was louder than usual, or at least than the last time Marlot had been here, but it was still enjoyable. A group of predators were celebrating something in the far corner and being seen to by the brown bear who worked with L’nard.

“It would be more enjoyable with Trem,” he grumbled to himself, downing what was left of his drink. He winced as the motion stretched his injured side. Definitely no hunting for a few days.

He motioned to the lion behind the bar with his glass. The lion brought him a new drink and took the empty glass.

“I take it you haven’t managed to talk with Trembor,” L’nard said.

“What makes you think that?” Marlot replied, dejected.

“It’s the first time you’ve asked for a third heater.”

He looked into the clear liquid. “Have you seen him?”

“He hasn’t been by since the last time you two were here.”

“How about at family functions, your guys are tight, right?”

L’nard chuckled. “We’re close to our immediate family, mostly, but there’s so

many of us it's difficult to really be close. The last time there was a large family gathering was... I think I was five."

Marlot nodded and took a sip from his drink.

"Don't drink too fast," L'nard said, putting a bowl of nuts before the wolf before moving on to another customer.

Marlot eyed the nuts before grabbing a handful. He didn't normally like them, they were too close to vegetation, but they were protein, and he hadn't eaten today. He was hoping to stretch what he had left in the cooler until he was healed up and not spend his food budget on more expensive prepared meals, or the artificial stuff, even if the prices were coming down on it.

"You," someone said, sitting next to him, "you look like you've had a bad day," Marlot eyed the nervous-looking hare in a suit, who swallowed under the stare. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, you just look like you could use some company."

"I'm mated," Trembor replied and winced internally. Sure he had the contract, and it was still valid, so there was hope, but it had only taken a few days for Trembor to walk out on him. Trembor had wanted it, wanted them to acknowledge how they felt for one another. Why had he just left him like that?

"Oh, no, no, not like that." The hare laughed nervously. "I simply mean someone to talk with, I know I'm just prey, but—"

"You're not just prey," Marlot said. "You're a person who happens to be prey." Marlot looked him over more carefully. The suit was practical, but well made, tailored to him, so not cheap. His claws were trimmed, neat. He took care of himself, had a job that wasn't manual labor. "You look like you're outside most predators' range, so you can relax. You're definitely outside of mine."

"That's kind of you to say, but being careful is how I've stayed alive long enough to be this successful." He ordered something from the tap from L'nard. "So, bad day?"

Marlot shrugged and winced.

"Ah, I see," the hare said, taking the foamy glass and paying. He made a face at the sip and put the glass down. "Failed hunt."

"You have an eye for it?"

The hare smiled. "Survival instinct. In the right context, injured predators are safer to be around. You don't look famished, so you probably won't go after the first nervous hare that runs from you. Especially if you're outside your usual hunting ground."

Marlot nodded, the hare's reasoning was sound. "Yeah, miscalculated, my meal had buddies ready and waiting for me. They made me pay for my mistake." He stretched his arm, endured the pain. "Just bruising and small cuts."

"You're going to make them pay once you're healed?"

Marlot stared at the hare. "Is that how you think we work? Hold grudges?" the hare shrugged and took another sip, making another face at the taste. "Letting a prey best me get personal is the best way for me to go hungry. I lost this one. There'll be others. I'll be more careful about my next meal, do better research."

"Don't you hunt with your mate?"

Marlot grimaced and took a long swallow from his drink. “We’re taking time apart.”

“Oh.” The hare looked truly surprised but recovered. “I didn’t think predators had those kinds of relationship problems,” he said lamely.

Marlot snorted. “Everyone does.” He simply didn’t think he’d be one of those ‘everyone’. He thought back over the conversation that led to Trembor walking away. Trembor had been unreasonable about calling the enforcers on Marlot’s source, even after he’d promised him immunity in exchange for the information.

Marlot had locked Trembor out of his pad so they could talk about it, so he could explain why and get his lion to see reason. Instead, Trembor had just exploded and walked away without listening to one thing Marlot said.

“I suppose that’s true,” the hare said. “I never had a family, bring prey I felt it was unfair to make someone else suffer if I was eaten, then I gave myself over to my work.”

“There’s still time,” Marlot said. “You’re successful now, safer than the average prey. You can still find yourself a female, have cubs, make a large family.” Marlot trailed off. He’d experience that, and as scary as the lion cubs had been, he’d been hoping to spend time with them again.

“No, it’s too late. My work’s everything to me, I don’t remember what it’s like to spend time with someone for more than a night of relief.”

“It’s never too late to relearn.”

The hare looked in his glass. “Maybe for others.” He made a face again as he sipped it.

Was he trying to prove something by having a drink he didn’t like? Maybe he wasn’t as wealthy as he looked? Social camouflage was a thing, Marlot knew, spending money to appear to be in a higher tax range and keep predators at bay. It was one of the reasons he depended on his programs to get details about his targets, work past any social camouflage.

Maybe he should find out more about the hare? Get him in his system, see if he—
“You’re looking at me like I’m your next meal,” the hare said nervously.

Marlot shook himself. That was his hunger speaking. L’nard’s clientele was higher middle tax range, not outside what Marlot was willing to pay, but he’d want more meat than the hare afforded for that price.

“What caused you and your mate to separate?” Marlot narrowed his eyes at the hare who shrank back. “Sorry, I guess that’s too personal of a question.”

“It kind of is,” Marlot replied.

The hare forced a smile. “Then I’ll wish you luck in getting back together. I need to get going, I have work to do.”

Marlot glanced at the clock. It was way outside work hours, but that was probably a predator thing. Prey had to be more careful about maintaining their tax. He considered leaving with the hare, the no predation zone did end at the Watering Hole’s entrance, so once outside the hare was fair game.

Not enough meat on him, Marlot reminded himself. And with his injuries, there

was a chance the hare would escape. He wasn't worth the hassle. In a few days he'd have more people in his programs, he'd be able to get a better price to meat ratio and he wouldn't let Trembor distract him. Trembor had walked out on him, so he should just put him out of his mind and go on with his life.

He looked around for the wolf and coyote. They were regulars, friends of L'nard, he'd gathered. Maybe their absence was a sign he and Trembor weren't meant to be. No other lovers seemed to be in today. Tables of prey and tables of predators, enjoying the company of their peers. Only one table of a mix, comfortable enough it was more than work friends.

His glass was empty, so he motioned to L'nard for a refill.

The lion took the glass but didn't put a new one down. "I think you've had enough."

"That's only my third," Marlot protested.

"Except you're a two-drink male, wanting a fourth while depressed makes me think your on a slide I don't want to be a part of."

"I can just go elsewhere," Marlot said threateningly.

"You can," L'nard answered calmly. "There's plenty of bars out there who don't care about you enough to keep you from making a mistake. I'm not one of them. I like you Marlot, and I've seen too many people drink themselves into stupidity, then death. I'd like you to stick around long enough so you and Trembor can work things out."

"You think there's hope for us?"

"I'm proof there's hope for anyone, so yeah, I think there's hope for you two. You just need to talk, work it out."

"He won't talk to me. Blocked me across the board," Marlot said angrily. "I don't even know what I did, he just walked out on me while I was trying to explain he was being unreasonable."

"Then he probably needs more time to cool down. You need to stay around until that happens if you want a chance."

Marlot nodded. "Where is your female?"

L'nard smiled. "Tiff's traveling, she and Drezz are doing promotions for her latest movie, she'll be back in ten to fifteen days."

"I don't know how you do it. I can't stand not having Trem with me."

"I pined after her for years, waited longer, she picked me, she'll come back. I know it. We talk every night."

"I wish I could do that."

"So do it."

"He blocked me." Marlot glared at the lion.

"You have a recording app on your pad, record what you want to tell him, get it you of your system. Save it so you can send it to him when he unblocks you if you still feel it's needed at that point. At least it's out there, not stuck inside you."

"I guess."

L'nard chuckled. "I've dispensed the bartender advice you paid for in drinks. Now

I need to move on to other customers. Go home, Marlot, record what you want to tell Trembor, sleep. Move on. You still have to live in spite of what happened. That means heal up, hunt, and feed yourself.”

Marlot nodded and stood. “Thanks. I’m still pissed at you for cutting me off at three drinks, but thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Marlot headed outside, the cold wind chasing some of the fog the alcohol had put in his mind away. He sat in his car, he needed to let some of the alcohol burn itself out of his system before he drove.

He took out his pad and looked at the recording app.

“Trem,” he said, once he started recording, then found he had no idea what to say. “I thought you loved me.” He stared at the seconds rolling away on the display. Thought about shutting it down. “Why? Damn it, how could you just walk away like that? How can you be so unreasonable that you won’t even give me a chance to explain how you were wrong? The world’s not fucking dry or wet. It’s not that clear cut, something it’s just humid and you have to make deals with people you’d rather not to, to get justice for those who deserve it.”

And the law be damned.

He didn’t say that. Not while making it sound like an accusation. Trembor had been an enforcer, the law was a big thing for him, but he had to see there were times when the law only got in the way.

“I just need to know why, Trem. If that one act of not following the law was enough to break us up, I need to know why you kept me around for almost four years, you’ve seen me make deals, you know that’s why I insist on always have physical currency on me. You knew that about me, so what is it about this one time that broke your claws? Tell me that Trem, and I’ll be able to move on. I’ll be able to pick up the pieces and make something out of them. Tell me that, Trem, please.”

He shut down the recorder and wiped the tears away.

Series of death-4

Trembor’s office was small, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t need much space; just enough for his desk, computer, and cooler. He used the heater in the lunchroom to reheat his meals.

“Yes, I need you to look through your records to see if you had any tigress living there four years ago.”

“I don’t know,” the male said, “I don’t think I can tell you that.”

“You can and you have to. I’ve given you my RI identification, this is part of an investigation into an unclaimed body.”

“But four years ago?”

“There’s no statute for unclaimed bodies. New information came up about one that was found in your area, so I’m checking all lodging buildings. By law, you’re required to

keep your records for ten years. So you need to go through them and let me know what you find.”

“Oh, alright. I don’t know how long that’ll take.”

“That’s fine, if you don’t get back to me with the information this week, I’ll drop by to help you look for it.”

The male croaked out an unintelligible reply before disconnecting. A prey of some sort, Trembor guessed, or his records weren’t in good order. Either would make him nervous. He’d call in a few days to remind him. He filed another one under waiting for information and went through the list of people he’d contacted for his two cold cases and the two current ones.

He picked up his pad and noticed it was low on power. He’d forgotten to put it on the charging plate again. Marlot would rip him for—he shut down the thought. He was done thinking of the wolf. He looked through the desk’s drawers. He knew there was a charging plate somewhere in the office, he’d seen it when he took it.

He found it on a shelf, under papers the previous occupant had left, and plugged it in. With his pad on it, he returned to work. His most recent body had been in a construction site, and one set of tire tracks hadn’t matched any of the construction vehicles there. The enforcer’s tracking department was still working on it, it was now fifty-eighth in the queue. Was this one worth throwing his RI weight around to move it up?

There was a knock on the door and it opened, letting in the noise of the enforcers working and moving around the precinct. “Trembor,” a hyena in enforcer uniform said, “the drug squad just got back, the department pitched in and paid the tax on the suppliers they caught, we’re going to the medical wing to cut off the meat you in?”

“I have lunch in the cooler,” Trembor replied, “I still have work to do, I’ll eat later.”

He felt her gaze on him. “You can’t spend your days in here, come on, join us. I’ll spot you the meat.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

She let out a sigh and Trembor looked up. She shook her head and turned. Someone broke up in laughter, an argument erupted, over what? Trembor couldn’t hear. Conversation accompanied those sounds. Sounds of life. Of people.

“Derimak, wait.” The meat in the cooler would keep until tomorrow. He couldn’t stop living because of what the wolf had done to him, that was handing him the victory. “I’ll—” his pad buzzed as he stood. And address species, time of death. “I have to pass, a body has just been reported in my territory.” He pocketed his pad and put on his suit jacket. “Sorry.”

* * * * *

The precinct was mostly empty when Trembor returned. The body had been a middle-aged bull. Witness report said it was an argument gone out of hand. The killer probably hadn’t intended to do it, but he had, and he’d fled. When Trembor caught him, he’d have to pay. Whatever that it was on purpose or not, that was the law.

“Officer Goldenmane,” a deep voice said, “catch.”

Trembor turned in time to catch the package the tiger lobbed in his direction. “Captain?” the package was wrapped in what had been an old jacket and smelled of copper and iron. There was a good meal’s worth of meat, based on the weight.

“There were leftovers and since you were called out and couldn’t join in, we decided to wrap it for you.”

“You didn’t have to, I’m sure one of the others could have made use of it.”

The tiger smiled. “The suppliers were big, plenty of meat for everyone, and the medical staff hates it when we use their coolers to store food. That’s elk, by the way, clean too. They only killed those who didn’t sample what they sold.”

“Thanks, how much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it, think of it as a welcome back present. It is good to have you back, Goldenmane.”

Trembor smiled at the tiger who’d been a squad leader back when Trembor was an enforcer. “It’s good to be back. I shouldn’t have left.” Trembor shrugged. “Live and learn, right?”

The tiger watched him. “I guess that’s right. The offer’s still on the table, just like last time.”

Trembor shook his head. “I appreciate it, but I don’t want him dead, I got over this before, I’ll get over it again. I’m mainly angry at myself, I didn’t see any of the signs until he shut me down hard. I should have seen it.”

That was what hurt the most. No, what hurt more was that he still wanted Marlot, despite knowing what he was. He wanted to believe it had been just one thing, but that was how it had started the previous time. He knew the pattern now, he wasn’t going to fall into it again.

“They’re not all as blatant as him. Some know to lay on the charm until they have their claws deep in you. Just count yourself lucky he slipped before that. I’ll let you get back to work.”

That was the problem. There had been no laying on the charm, just what had seemed like innocence, nervousness, skittishness. Trembor has seen Marlot at that first meeting, staying away from all the other RIs, looking like he was prey surrounded by a pack, and he’d immediately wanted to protect him. Working with him during that hunt, he’d fallen for the wolf, his shy smile, his determination.

He wanted to believe that Marlot couldn’t be an abuser, not after seeing his the town he came from and how he was treated there, but abuse bred abuse, that was a fact. Wishful thinking wouldn’t change the truth. The wolf was what he was, and Trembor wasn’t having any of it.

* * * * *

The deer looked lost as Trembor brought him in. He’d been simple to find, a handful of calls after eating and he had a name and address. As Trembor suspected, the death hadn’t been intentional. A disagreement over one of the latest games of hunt, of all things. Something about one of the teams cheating. The argument turned physical, and a

punch broke the bull's neck. The deer spent the drive to financial holding pleading that he hadn't wanted to. That he couldn't afford the tax, that it would ruin him.

Trembor let him talk, reminding himself it wasn't his job to care. The facts were that he had killed the bull, so he needed to pay. His financial representative would have options for him since it hadn't been intended. Paying the tax a little at a time. One of the lending company would certainly be there in hopes of convincing the deer to borrow the money from them. Unless that was handled by the government now? There had been something about that on a tax kiosk, and Marlot had—

No. He wasn't thinking about the wolf.

He sighed the deer over to financial holding, got the case number, and added that to his report. Now it was just a question of waiting for the resolution of the payment so he could close the file.

By then it was late afternoon. The official filing of the report could wait until morning, so he headed home, stopping by a store to get a bottle of alcohol to replace the one he'd finished the night before.

He prepared a simple meal, roasting the vegetables to go with his meat. Two drinks he had blood, cut with two fingers of alcohol. He ate slowly, trying to ignore the silence, the memories of the wolf laughing as they ate, or covered in blood and looking so damned tasty himself.

By the time he was done eating and cleaning, he'd gone through three glass of blood and wandered to the living room, a fourth glass in hand. He pulled an album from the bookcase and sat in the recliner. He looked through it, smiling at the antics of his brothers and sisters, or himself, caught by their parents and immortalized. The pictures of the births of his nephews and nieces. His first kill, captured by Sarene, who had been so proud of him, even he couldn't walk without help afterward, let alone carry his kill.

Receiving his identification, proclaiming him of hunting age. The hug his father had buried him in, the utter look of horror and betrayal on Trembor's face in the picture his mother had taken made him laugh. He'd been so naïve back then, so full of belief about what it meant to be a male, and adult.

The smile died on the next page. Trembor and him. His first love. His abuser.

Gorrek Shiningpelt had been amazing. Tall, strong, confident, full of life, of vitality, and virility. Trembor had to admit the sex had been one of the big factors to the attraction. He hadn't been inexperienced by then, but he hadn't had the breadth of knowledge Gorrek had on the subject. Trembor had learned a lot at the other lion's hands. Not all of it unpleasant, he'd been able to admit to himself once the hurt lessened.

That first year had been wonderful, and everyone in his family liked Gorrek. Then Trembor had moved in with the other lion.

The change hadn't been immediate, but quick enough Trembor should have noticed it, he kept telling himself. At first, it had been the house rules. What Trembor could and couldn't do, innocent enough stuff at first, Trembor was in charge of washing the dishes or preparing food, of cleaning the house. It was the punishments that were out of proportion.

If a glass still had spots on it, Gorrek would scream at him. And Trembor couldn't seem to do anything right. After a few months came the first blow.

You didn't leave me any choice. Gorrek's favorite excuse. Of course, it had been Trembor's fault. The rules were clear, and he hadn't followed them. He didn't remember what the first infraction had been, but he knew that hadn't mattered. Gorrek liked to hit, and he'd have found an excuse, if not whatever that one had been. By then Trembor was too cowed to do more than take it. He'd been no more than prey for the other lion, being played with until the time came for the kill.

Only it didn't come. After one hospital stay more than he could endure, Trembor had fled back to his parents in spite of the shame he felt, and they'd taken him in. Sarene had protected him, like this protected each of them, when Gorrek came demanding his return. She would have killed him if Trembor hadn't begged her not to. Gorrek didn't deserve to die. After all, Trembor had been the one who'd fucked up.

He kept the few pictures showing how happy he'd been with the other lion as a reminder of how easy it was to be taken in, so he would never allow it to happen again.

He turned the pages to the last page.

Him and Marlot in one of the bedrooms, the wolf seated on his lap, the two of them kissing passionately. Marlot had been overwhelmed by the number of people at that first family dinner, the boisterousness of the conversations, the questions. He'd needed some quiet, so Trembor had taken him to his childhood bedroom, now redecorated neutrally for guests and they'd sat on the one chair.

He didn't know who had taken the picture. Probably his mother, she'd have been the first to notice the two of them had gone missing and come looking. It had shown up on his pad from the family account. He'd printed it and added it to the album, the first in a series he'd hoped to have documented the deepness of his and the wolf's love.

He threw the album across the living room.

How could he have been such an idiot!

Series of death-5

Marlot sat in his car in the office's parking lot, forcing down the last of the package of the meat substitute he'd bought for breakfast. No wonder the price was coming down on this stuff, it was horrible; it was the only way self-respecting predators would buy it. At least the price meant he didn't have to go hungry while he finished healing, but keeping the stuff down might become a problem if he had to eat it for too long.

He got out of the car, locked it, and headed for the door.

"Good morning, Mister Blackclaw."

"Morning Hela'han," Marlot greeted his receptionist. The elephant looked him over, trying to hide her worry, but Marlot could smell it. That was the drawback with scent recognition, once the class got him in the habit of identifying them, he couldn't stop. It made it hard to pretend she didn't worry about him. That the fact he'd only gone out of the office to head home in almost a week didn't bode well for his productivity,

which would impact hers.

He stilled her trunk with a hand. “How are you doing?”

Marlot forced a smile. “I’m okay. I need to go over a few witness reports, then go out to run down leads on the last two bodies. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

She brightened. “Oh, that’s good.” The inside of her large ears gained a pink hue. “I mean, it’s...”

“I know. I need to stop letting what happened affect work. Don’t worry, I’m back to my old self. I’ll be bringing those tax evaders to justice in no time.” He almost headed to his office. “How is Jesdan? Are you two still seeing each other? He hasn’t been by recently.” The male elephant hadn’t set foot in the office since Marlot had returned, not even when he was out. Only his stale scent remained.

“Oh, yes, we are. His work’s been keeping him busy.”

“Construction, right?”

She nodded.

“Tell him he’s welcome to visit you here.”

Her concern spiked, but she remained silent. Marlot wondered if he looked that hungry. Or so badly off he’d eat an employee’s boyfriend. He’d heard stories; there were always stories of employers encouraging relationships among their workers so they wouldn’t have to go out to hunt, but Marlot wasn’t like that. No one was, he suspected.

He closed the door behind him and headed to his desk. He sat and looked at the other desk, Trembor’s desk, while his computer ran through its security checks.

He should remove it, he didn’t need the reminder, but without it, the room would feel even emptier it was so large. Too large. They’d picked it because with the two of them sharing territory they had more of everything to store, not to mention the things they’d gotten up to together these last weeks before—

Why couldn’t he just stop thinking about him?

The system was waiting for his login. He entered it went through messages. No updates since he’d barely done any follow up on the bodies. He transferred the relevant information to his pad; he would spend the morning out. He would talk to witnesses, track these prey, and bring at least one in before lunch.

He had too, he couldn’t keep Hela’han employed on only the basic RI pay. He needed the bonuses closing cases gave him. Not to say he didn’t want her productivity rating to drop to low.

Maybe he should talk with her about finding new employment? He could definitely stretch his budget more without having to pay her.

Not yet. He was fine.

* * * * *

“Any of you hungry?” Marlot growled, pushing the skinny wolf through Financial Holding’s lobby. Marlot limped and his side hurt. “I’ll split the tax with you.”

She’d run. He’d tracked her down to a second cousin’s home, and instead of turning herself over when he’d provided his ID, she’d run. When he’d caught up to her, she’d kicked and punched. She’d probably delayed his recovery by a week.

The Financial Officers looked at him, some chuckled, but he got shakes of the heads. Unlike with the enforcers, it was considered bad form to eat one of their cases. An antelope motioned for him, and Marlot pushed his quarry in that direction, forcing her down in the chair. He rattled off the case number, noting the antelope's name.

He was nicely muscular, but finance was a high productivity environment. He'd do a check, he had to keep adding names to his programs, but he doubted he could afford him. Once the antelope indicated everything was in order, Marlot left him to process the wolf.

A week and he'd get the bonus; fortunately, that wasn't dependent on them getting her to pay what she owed, because Marlot had seen where she lived. She'd been just this side of homelessness. If not for the bonus, he would have considered eating her himself.

* * * * *

Marlot eyed the package of artificial meat on his desk. This was a different brand. One that tasted just like the real thing, or so they claimed.

He could heat it after the chase he'd been through to get the wolf. He needed to be fed to heal properly; if that stuff even had everything he needed. He fought the itch to go on the network and verify what it was made with. He was scared of what he'd see.

He ate a piece and made a face. The meat tasted nothing like this. Slowly he forced more down as he worked.

Hela'han entered after knocking. "The mail came in." She handed him the few envelopes and left.

Two hunting insurance offers. Those companies were getting out of control. Now they were offering to cover the cost of a failed hunt, for a small fee. Right, because that fee would stay small after a few missed hunt. The city should put an end to them. These were going to create a generation of hunters who either couldn't afford to pay for their kills on top of the insurance premium or who would go depended on the company to eat. He ripped them apart after reading only a few lines.

The third made him angrier.

He'd hoped the Revenue Department had fixed the problem, but clearly not.

"Revenue Department, ID issuance division," a young sounding-male answered. Marlot wondered if it was the same as the previous times, or they just all sounded the same.

"This is Marlot Blackclaw, again." He gave his ID number.

"RI Blackclaw, what can I do for you?" the male sounded uncertain.

"You can tell me why it is you keep sending me other people's ID cards."

"Sir?"

Marlot sighed. Someone different then. "I just received a card or Arlant Shines." He recited the number. "And before you tell me, yes, I know that your system claims he never requested a replacement. It's always the same."

"I see this is the sixth time you've called about this."

"Yes, so you can understand why I'm getting tired of dealing with this problem."

"That's perfectly understandable. I too would be annoyed," the male said in that

friendly tone that was starting to drive Marlot insane. “I see here that our technicians looked over the system and didn’t find any fault on our side of things.”

“Really?” Marlot asked dryly. “So your not sending out ID cards by accident?”

“No, sir.”

“So, you’re sending me these cards on purpose?”

“No, sir, that’s not how the system works. The card is only sent to the address registered to the number.”

“So, my office’s address is registered to this Shines’ number.”

“No, of course not. It’s his home address.”

“So, you’re perfectly working system sent this card to an address that’s not registered to the number?”

“Of course not, sir. For something like that to happen, there would have to be a flaw in the system, and our technicians went over it. It’s working fine.”

“What’s your name?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your name. I want to so a productivity check on you because there is no way the level of incompetence you’re showing his helping your tax.”

“Sir, there’s no call for threats. I’m only doing my job here. And we’re not allowed to give out our names, specifically because of people like you. If you aren’t happy with the Revenue Department, we have a complaint line you are welcome to call. Will there be anything else?”

Marlot sighed. “Just ask them to take another look at the code, they clearly missed something.”

“So, our technicians are the best out there, they don’t miss anything.”

Marlot looked at the ID card in his hand. “Right.” Maybe he should go through the entire Revenue Department’s employee listing. There had to be a lot of affordable people there if this was the kind of service they offered.

“Will there be anything else?” the young male asked.

Marlot rolled his eyes, yeah, he was definitely going to look into how the department’s productivity was calculated when he had time. He hung up.

He turned the card in his hand. This wasn’t his job. He could destroy it and no one would be the wiser, except for one Farnal Shines, who’d be freaking out because he thought was a free meal without this.

He wasn’t. If the predator was conscientious, he’d contact the Revenue Department when he didn’t find the ID and they’d send someone to run a DNA check, but that wasn’t common knowledge.

Of course, if the male hadn’t ordered a new card, then Marlot would waste his time delivering it. But the last time, it had been lost, and the male had been overjoyed at getting a replacement.

It would get him out of the office, if nothing else, give him something other than his situation to think about.

Series of death-6

Trembor walked along the houses, looking for the address the caller had provided. New body notifications usually came from the enforcer network, but this time the caller had asked to speak with the territory's Registered Investigator and had given Trembor the address directly. He'd sounded older, nervous, borderline scared, which could indicate he was the killer, coming clean after accidentally killing someone. He'd disconnected suddenly when Trembor asked him what his link to the body was.

The neighborhood catered to predators of good means, mostly people living alone or couples. The houses were modest with large yards. A house like this would have been nice for him and Mar—

No. Why did everything remind him of the wolf? He was done with him.

He turned onto the walkway leading to the house he wanted and froze. A black wolf stood at the door, waiting. As Trembor watched, the wolf pressed the buzzer again. The wind shifted and brought him the wolf's scent. Trembor's hackles stood up.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Marlot spun, looking guilty, before his expression brightened. "Trem! It's so good to see you, what are you doing here?"

"Drop the innocent act. This is my territory and you know it."

The wolf made a show of looking around. "It is? Sorry, I was more focused on finding the house than—"

"What are you doing here?" Trembor growled. Had Marlot arranged it? How many times had Gorrek accidentally crossed Trembor's path after that last hospital stay? Looking surprised and wanting to catch up, trying to convince him to come back home with him?

Had the wolf gotten some old male to make the call? Was that why he'd sounded scared?

"The RDID screwed up again, and I got someone else's replacement ID card. I'm starting to think they're doing it on purpose."

"Right, that again, how convenient." Had Marlot set it up that far back? Was the whole replacement ID card thing just so he'd have an excuse to—No, Marlot was smart, but he'd have to know the future to have set that up, and if he did, he wouldn't have had to act like he did to get the information he needed, which caused Trembor to go against him and caused the mask to drop and reveal the abuser hiding underneath.

The wolf took a card and showed it to Trembor. "I'm not really complaining anymore. How are you doing? How is your family? Are the cub as much of a terror as they were?"

"My family's none of your business."

Marlot laughing nervously as a joke Atilen made.

"Damn it, Trem, I'm trying to—"

"I'm working! And if I wanted to talk to you I'd call you. Now, did you set up the old man who called me about a body here just so you could harass me?"

"What? No, I'd never do that. Trem you know me better than that."

The lion snorted. “That’s what you wanted me to think. Now leave, I have work to do.” Trembor stepped to the door, forcing the wolf aside. He banged on the door.

“No one’s answering,” the wolf said. “Farnal Shines’ car is in the parking, so he should be home.”

“How do you even know his name?” Trembor growled. Marlot raised the card, so he could see the name. The porch was small, forcing them close since the wolf wouldn’t step off it. He’d been standing by the door a good ten minutes by how concentrated his scent here was.

He smelled good. Trembor wanted to touch the wolf. Bury his muzzle in his neck, breathe him in. *You didn’t leave me any choice.* He forced himself to remember the tone in Marlot’s voice, the forced sorrowfulness. Forced himself to see Gorrek standing over him with the same expression.

He wanted nothing to do with this wolf.

“How do you know which car is his?” Trembor asked and immediately added, “Never mind. I don’t want to know. Same with how you found out where he lives. There are laws against what you had to do to find that out.” He banged his fist on the door again. “Mister Shines?” he called and listened.

No sounds from the other side of the house.

“I can unlock the door,” Marlot offered as Trembor looked at it. The lion took a step back and kicked the door, barely missing the wolf who’d moved to reach the lock.

“What the fuck, Trem, you could have hit me.”

“Then you should leave. This is my territory.” He stepped into the house.

The door opened to the kitchen, counters, marks where a preparation table had been in the middle of the room. Dirty dishes in the sink; on the right, was the living room. Entertainment center, bookcase, couch, recliner. A plate with dried blood and scraps of meat on it. He sniffed it. Cooler burn, no spoilage, less than a day old. Probably less than twelve hours. The corridor led to the washroom on the left, a large bedroom on the right, the bed unmade, clothing on the floor, a glass with the remnants of blood in it on the bedside table.

Who even Mister Shines was, neat wasn’t it.

The second room on the left was an office, and Mister Shines lay on the floor, neck clearly broken. The desk chair was overturned, the desk itself had been moved, leaving scratch marks on the wooden floor, papers strewed across the room. No blood anywhere.

It wasn’t often Trembor was a fight that didn’t leave any blood.

He stepped in, careful to avoid the papers on the floor and crouched next to the body. Farnal Shines was a muscular coyote, his left leg and right arm were broken, his eyes open, blood vessels in them burst. He’d been suffocated before his neck was broken. He breathed in. Two scents, definitely; he didn’t know either, so Marlot hadn’t caused this.

“At least he didn’t make the killer’s job easy,” Marlow said.

Trembor growled as he looked up. “What are you still doing here?” the wolf stood

in the doorway, looking in. “If you set foot in here, I am having the enforcers haul you to a cell of interference, am I clear?”

“Hey, I didn’t do this. When I kill someone I pay for them.”

“If I find your fur in here, then you’re a suspect at the minimum. You don’t want to have to deal with that? Then get out of my territory.”

The wolf didn’t move. “Trem, once you’re done here, can we talk?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Trembor put gloves on and felt along the right arm.

“You walk out on me for no reason and you won’t—”

“No reason?” Trembor snapped? “Oh, right, I’m at fault. How could I forget that? Marlot Blackclaw never does anything wrong, never breaks a law, never hacks his way in other people’s pads.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything? I’m a tech-head, you love that about me.?”

Trembor glared at the wolf. “No, I don’t. You have no respect for laws. No respect for other people, the only thing that matters to you his getting your own way. Now get the fuck out of my crime scene.”

“Trem,” Marlot said, having the gall to sound hurt.

Trembor took out his pad. “I’m calling the enforcers, if you’re still here by the time I’m connected, I’m having them take you in.” He entered the number and listened. The wolf looked like he’d protest, then turned and left.

“Enforcer Dispatch,” a male said.

“Hartel?”

“Trembor? That’s a voice I never thought I’d hear call in again. How are you doing?”

“Working. I have a crime scene I need secured.” He gave the squirrel the address. “I’m still walking through it, and I haven’t called my medical examiner yet, yo know Jaxca?”

“Red frog, right? Poisonous. I heard of him.”

“Let the officers know to allow him in.” He disconnected and looked at the empty doorway. He wanted to go after the wolf. He wanted to sit down with him and listen to his explanations. They’d make sense. They’d be perfectly reasoned, he suspected Marlot wouldn’t even make Trembor the culprit. It would be some innocent misunderstanding.

It would be a lie. Marlot would say anything to get Trembor back into a position he could be controlled.

He looked at the dead coyote. “I have the worse luck in relationships, you know that?” He called Jaxca and set back to working out how Farnal Shines had been killed and why.

Series of death-7

“A call came in why you were out,” Hela’han said as Marlot entered the office. He grunted to indicate he’d heard her. He couldn’t believe or understand why Trembor was

so angry and closed off to even discussing their situation. It was like he'd already decided it'd had gone bad and there was nothing left to eat. He couldn't believe *that*. Trembor didn't just give up.

"Sir?" Hela'han looked at him expectantly. "What do you want me to do with the message?"

"What do I care—" he snapped, cutting himself off when she paled. "Sorry. Having a bad day." She could erase the message for all he cared. "Send it to my pad. I'll deal with it." He entered his office before he scared her again.

He dropped in his chair and took the ID card out of his jacket's pocket. What was he supposed to do with that now? There was a process in place for when he killed someone, but for returning it when someone died independent of him? He didn't know if there was one. He should have handed it to Trembor, but he'd been stubborn, and he'd forgotten in the arguing.

He dug through the desk's drawers, there should be some envelopes. Almost everything was handled digitally these days, but the government still had department behaving like this was feudal times and requiring that documentation was physical.

He found a half dozen.

He stared at the screen for a message to write. If he didn't tell the revenue department why he was sending it back, they'd probably just return it to him. He considered sending it to Trembor, as the male investigating the death and pointing out that if he wasn't so stubborn and so set on pushing Marlot away he'd have gotten the card and help working on the case.

He looked at what he wrote, at the anger in the words. He considered sending it as it was, he had a right to be angry, with how unreasonable Trembor was. He should have screamed at him back at the crime scene, done more to make him understand he was trying to find out how to fix this.

He considered softening the language. Creaming at the lion wouldn't help. It would just make him dig in his claws deeper and fight back. What he had to do was calmly explain to Trembor how he was wrong in his interpretation of this, whatever his interpretation was. Whatever it was he thought Marlot had done wrong.

He erased the whole thing. He'd tried talking to the lion, and he'd been shut down. He needed to let the lion come to him, then he'd be ready to listen.

He wrote a quick explanation of receiving the card in error and finding out the owner had died in the meantime, added his RI identification so they could see the history of his calls. Printed it, folded it around the card, and addressed the envelope. He'd mail it when heading home.

Now what?

Now he should work. He gazed at the other desk. Work had been so much easier with Trembor here. He brought up his cases, the top ones were his two oldest cases. No new information. Then his active cases. Dead bodies. Food going to waste.

His hunger made itself known. Fresh meat, even frozen, would be better than the artificial stuff. He brought up his budget. He could afford a kill, if he thought he'd

manage a successful hunt in his state. He needed to stretch this for a week, his bonus would come in and he should be healed enough.

He brought up baking sites. Maybe one of them had some trick to make artificial meat palatable? Marlot chuckled, he should send Jale'i bags of the stuff and let him see come up with something edible. Him and his vaunted baking talents. It would serve that town right to have to live on this stuff.

He closed the sites and brought up work. A few hours of looking for his killers and he'd call it a day.

* * * * *

Yelling came through the closed door.

Marlot was up and opening it before trying to understand what the yelling was about. For it to be heard through the insulation someone was screaming, and Hela'han wasn't one to raise her voice.

"I'm telling you right now," a lean female ocelot yelled, leaning on the desk and getting in the elephant's face, who was trying to push herself back into the wall. "If you don't tell him I'm here, I'm going to eat you and then kick in the door."

"Don't threaten her," Marlot growled.

"Finally!" the ocelot turned to face him. "I was starting to think you were going to hide behind prey all day."

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"What do I want? I've been leaving messages for you all day, has she been hiding those from you like she's trying to hide you from me?"

"If you don't tell me who you are right now, and why you're here, I'm going to eat you."

She snorted. "You can't afford me."

"I've had a bad day and I'm reaching the point where taking a loan just to get to have fresh blood dripping down my throat is sounding good right now."

Hela'han's paler took on a sickly color, but the threat did make the ocelot take him seriously. Maybe there was that to say about the loaning companies. Having a high productivity rating wasn't the security it used to be.

"My name is Laidan Swiftkill. Registered Investigator Laidan Swiftkill. I want to know what you were doing in my territory, hours before a body was discovered."

Marlot moved aside and motioned for her to step in his office. Now that he knew this was going to be something resembling a reasonable discussion, he didn't want Hela'han to have to endure it. And if he did decide to eat the ocelot, she shouldn't see that either.

"I'm sure I travel through your territory on a weakly basis," Marlot said once he closed the door. "Do you question everyone traveling through it anytime a body is found?"

"No, only people who happen to have been at her house hours before she died." She looked around the large office. "Aren't you the RI who works with a partner?" she indicated the empty desk.

Marlot's heart twisted. "I know I haven't killed anyone that I left lying around, so why are you here?" he said harshly. She began smirking, and he bared his teeth with a low growl, he wasn't having her comment on his relationship.

She sobered. "So you claim. Why were you there, if you didn't kill her?"

"When was that?"

"Three weeks ago."

Returning to the city, alone, dazed because Trembor had abandoned him for no reason. He wanted to howl. He clamped down on his emotions. But could do little about his scent. "You're going to have to give me more information. I don't remember much of everywhere I went three weeks ago."

A daze. It was all a daze. Without Trembor, did he have anything left? Was there any reason for him to stay in the city? Maybe he should go back to his hometown, suffer through the humiliation they'd put him through, and become one of them again.

"I said," she raised her voice, pulling him out of the past. "I gave you the address in the message I left you today."

Message, right, Hela'han had said something about a message. What had she done with it? His pad, he'd told her to forward it there. He brought it up and played it. Laidan's voice calmly asked that he contact her in regard to what he'd done in her territory. She gave an address and time.

Neither sounded familiar, but that would have been within days of his return, if not hours. He hardly remembered anything of that week. "Are you sure I was there?"

"I have three witnesses placing a black wolf at the doorstep talking with her."

Marlot looked at her over the display. "A black wolf? And you decided it was me?"

"I also got a description of your car and a partial registration tag on it that matched it yours too."

Marlot had to admit he'd have investigated something like that too. "I'm sorry, I don't remember going there." He looked at the empty desk. "Trembor broke up with me around that time. I wasn't really all there for a few days."

"So you could have killed her and left her to rot."

He fixed his gaze on her. "Was there any of my fur on or around her body? Any of my blood?"

"No blood, the killer broke her neck. And no, no black wolf fur inside the house."

"So all that screaming at my secretary?"

"It's been three weeks," the ocelot said. "Do you know what the odds are of finding the killer about three weeks? You're my last lead and it was looking like she was purposely keeping me from talking to you."

Marlot nodded. "She looks after my wellbeing. I'm not very social these days."

She looked at the empty desk. "I've had my share of breakups, I know how that goes. You don't remember going there at all?"

"I couldn't tell you what I did that week. I was on automatic. I will look into it, try to piece my movements together, see if something comes back to me and I'll let you

know.”

“Okay, thanks,” she replied unhappily.

“I have two bodies that are over a year old in my freeze, and one that’s two a half week, I know how that goes too. I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

She forced a smile. “Thanks.”

He escorted out of the office to ensure there was no altercation with Hela’han and returned to work. As he sat on his computer, he realized he could have at least confirmed if he’d been there. He brought up the tracking from his phone, he used it for all his driving so it would have the records.

The address came up as a destination he’d entered, and as Laidan said, he’d been there hours before the kill. It was the day after he’d returned. Why would he have gone there? The address wasn’t one he knew, neither was the name. As far as he could tell, he wouldn’t have had any reason to go there.

His gaze fell on the envelope on the desk.

Unless he’d been given a reason to go there.

Series of death-8

The scent of warming meat spread through the kitchen as Trembor roasted the vegetable, adding spices to them, before taking a sip of his drink. Drinking while at home was becoming a bad habit, but tonight was not the time to try to break it, not after dealing with Marlot today. The nice thing about cutting his blood with alcohol was that it stretched how much he had. He grinned as he took another sip. Of course, he ended up drinking four or five times as much this way, so it wasn’t helping. He should move on to the premixed canned stuff.

His pad buzzed and indicated Bo was calling. He set the roasting pan aside. “Bo, how is it going?”

“I need your help, Trem.”

“I figured, since that’s about the only time you call, Is Herelex okay?”

“He’s fine, this isn’t about him.”

Trembor sighed. “Then this is about you and dad, isn’t it? I’m not getting between the two of you.”

“It’s not about dad,” Bo replied, “Well, partially. You can’t tell him about this. He’s going to gut me if he finds out.”

Trembor straightened, keeping the cub’s confidence was an old habit for him, to have one of the adults ask? “Why would dad gut you?” Trembor finished his drink while waiting for Bo to answer. The silence stretched long enough he worried about the answer.

“I might have gotten into something of a debt problem.”

That, Trembor hadn’t expected. Bo was normally good about managing his funds. “Tried out new hunting grounds and ended up with an expensive kill?”

His brother sighed. “No. I had a losing streak recently.”

Loosing...? “Bo, you told dad you were just playing a little.”

“What did you expect me to say? He was shouting at me, and you know how unreasonable he gets about it. It’s not that big of a deal anyway, I’m going to make it up, I just need a bit of fund to cover my payment. I’ll pay you back in payday.”

“No.” Trembor didn’t bother asking how much Bo needed. He was not enabling anyone with a gambling problem, certainly not a relative.

“Come, bro, don’t be like that, it’s not that much I told you I’ll pay you back.”

“Bo, I’m not an idiot, if you reached the point where your gambling debt requires regular payments, it’s more than just a little money. I don’t want to know how much, Bo. I don’t care. Call a gambling help center. Better yet, Call Mother.”

“Are you insane? Serene’s will make me suffer before gutting me.”

“After what she had to do to get dad out of his gambling problem, and how strongly he showed us the danger of it, could you blame her? Then talk to the helpline. They’ll set you up wit ha counselor, and so long as you stick to the meetings and show progress in controlling your addition they—”

“I’m not addicted,” Bo protested.

“So long as you show progress in controlling your *addiction*,” Trembor repeated, emphasizing the word, “they will keep the gambling house off your back.”

“I am not addicted,” Bo repeated.

“Bo, when you can’t stop once you’re out of money, it’s an addiction.”

“Oh, and you’re such an expert on the subject are you?”

“No, but it was covered in enforcer training. When you’re the first responder to someone at the end of their line, you need to be able to talk them down. Suicide is too much of a waste. So, call the helpline, see the counselor they assign you, they’ll figure out a way for you to repay the gambling house and then, if I ever find out you’re gambling again, I’m going to tell dad and mother.”

His brother remained silent long enough Trembor figured the threat had worked and that his next questions would be about getting the number for—

“It won’t help.”

Why did his brother have to be so stubborn? “Bo, no one is so deep in debt with a gambling house that they won’t work with the helpline.”

“It’s not that.” Bo fell silent.

“What is it, then?” Trembor prodded.

“The gambling house I went to might not have been exactly legal.”

“What? Why the fuck would you go to one of those seedy places when there’s half a dozen legal houses in the city?”

“It might be because they won’t let me in anymore,” Bo answered hesitatingly.

“They don’t—Why wouldn’t they let you in?”

Bo sighed. “I had a bad streak at one of them, and I almost couldn’t pay back what I owed, so they banned me. When it happened at the second one I went to I guess they warned the other houses because they wouldn’t let me play there.”

“You got banned from all gambling houses for accrued debt, and—”

“I paid them back.”

“Really? Because I don’t know any gambling houses that’ll bar someone who can pay what they owe. The helpline exists for a reason, those places tend to be way too lax with who they let play. So I don’t want to know what you actually did that got you banned. Fuck, Bo, just how long have you been gambling?”

“A while.”

“Bo, you don’t get banned from the gambling houses in ‘a while’.”

“I don’t know, a few years now.”

Years? And his brother said he didn’t have a problem? “Tell dad. Tell Mother.”

“Are you insane?”

“Me?” Trembor snapped. “I’m not the one who got himself in a situation so bad he’s got to lie about it!”

“No, of course not, because mighty Trembor never made that kind of mistake, did he? Never at all.” Bo’s tone was turning mocking, and Trembor began growling, knowing where his brother was going. “I mean it’s not like you spend years being so guys’ prey, telling us you’d gotten hurt in one hunt or another. No, and it’s not like you did it only once too, is it? How long did that wolf fool you? How much did you take from him before you walked away? How many of those injuries did you cover up with hunting accidents?”

“Fuck you! I was a kid, I was barely out of cubhood when Gorrek got his claws into me, and unlike you, I didn’t have anyone warning me those kinds of males existed! You had dad’s example! You heard what he went through, what Serene had to do to get him out! And don’t you fucking dare bring Marlot into this. He never laid a finger on me. I walked away the instant I realized the kind of male he was. You turned around and walked into an illegal gambling house! How fucking stupid is that? Bo. Didn’t you see getting banned was a sign you have a problem?”

“I don’t have a problem! Gambling isn’t a problem, it’s just something I like, and yeah, you get a run of bad luck once in a while. That’s part of the game!”

“Then deal with your fucking game by yourself!” Trembor disconnected the call.

He glared at his empty glass. Why was it empty when what he needed was to down its content? Fell the alcohol burn down his throat, the buzz that would chase away the taste of the argument.

He filled the glass halfway with alcohol and took the bottle of blood out of the cooler. The delay of the actions forced him to calm enough to realize the stupidity of drinking more right now.

But how dare he mention Marlot? Bringing Gorrek in hurt, but he had been young. Marlot had fooled him completely. Enough, he’d almost had to get pointers from the lion himself. Trembor shuddered at that idea. It hadn’t happened. Gorrek would never share with someone else.

Trembor cursed, he did so loudly. He cursed his brother, he cursed Gorrek, and he cursed Marlot. He especially cursed Marlot. He had loved the wolf. He’d given him his heart. That mating contract should have been a sign. No one did that on a whim. A lifetime contract without any cancellation clauses. How stupid had he been not to see the

trap?

Trembor cursed himself more than any of the others.

Series of death-9

Something was off, and it wasn't the revenue clerk on the other end of the call, although Marlot was beginning to think they found the most annoying people for the position.

"I don't know what I can tell you," the female said, "I can't give you what you want, because it's impossible for the replacement system to send you someone else's card."

"Yes, I know, the person I called each time it happened told me the exact same thing while I held the card in my hand and gave them the information on it. Now I need you to look in your system and tell me who they were."

"Don't you know? If you're the one who called to complain about it?"

"It's been happening over the last four months, there's been four in total, I know the last two, I need you to tell me the previous ones."

"I told you, that doesn't happen, even if I wanted to, I can't ask the system to tell me what cards were sent out in error. It just—"

"Doesn't happen, I know." Marlot did his best not to growl. "Look, you don't need to ask the system anything, pull up my account, I'm an RI, so I am in your records. There's going to be a log and notes for each of my call-in." If the idiot who took the call did their job. "The name of the person involved will be in those notes because I know I gave it when I called."

"This is a joke, isn't it? Some prank on the new guy, right?" His voice continued muzzled by a hand over the microphone, but he raised his voice "It's not funny you know. We're supposed to be working, not causing me to waste my time."

Male? How young was he to sound like that? Were they hiring under-predation age people now? "Is this going to be easier if you transfer me to your supervisor?"

"What? No, of course not. There's no need to involve her in this."

"Good, then how about you look through my previous calls?"

The male, he had to be a cub, did so and gave Marlot seven names.

Marlot looked at them, how had he called eight times before and not noticed? The oldest call was six months ago. He tried to remember what he'd been doing then that could have distracted him so much, and Trembor was all he could recall. He smiled, before the pain because too much, the lion would have been enough of a distraction. He looked at he empty desk and sighed.

So he was up to nine replacement cards sent to him by mistake. He thanks the cub and made sure to give a positive review on the automated survey that followed the call. As a new person at the call center, he could use the small bump up in his productivity rating the review would give.

The cub hadn't been willing to give was their ID numbers, so Marlot had to track those himself. With nothing more than a name, it was a difficult task that stretched well

into the night and required matching the address of people with matching names to the records from his GPS's travels within the city.

The next day, as soon as he'd cleared his work-related tasks he went back to confirming his suspicions.

He hadn't thought about it when he'd found out the latest one had been killed, even killed and left to do to waste. Deaths happened every day, and that he happened to have one body's replacement ID card only looked improbable if you ignored the thousands of daily deaths.

But RI Swiftkill also had a body for whom Marlot had received a replacement card. Two bodies still fell in the realm of the possible, if slightly less so, but it had made Marlot uncomfortable. With the ID number of a third name, He was able to pull up their status and found they were dead. Finding out their recorded time of death simply required him to log into the medical database. His Registered Investigator status allowed him to look up deaths and get some information, like when it had happened. Two days after his visit.

That made three deaths whose ID cards ended up in his hands before they happened.

By lunchtime, he'd confirmed all nine followed the same pattern. They had been killed sometime after Marlot handed the ID card back to its owner. The oldest one five days after, and the period shortening until, with Trembor's body, he'd arrived after the card's owner had been killed.

The city had another hunter, and for some reason, they'd involved Marlot. He had the Revenue Bureau's numbered entered by reflex before he stopped himself. The hunter had targeted Marlot. If he told the RB, they'd put every Registered Investigator on this. The hunter had been smart, each kill was in a different territory, so no one had noticed a pattern, even Marlot had missed it, despite being handed invitation cards with each death.

Did the hunter consider this a personal game between the two of them? Why? Marlot wondered. Why him? Was this the hunter mocking him? That would mean it was personal. Would involving other RIs anger the hunter? It didn't matter, the RB needed to know, and with all the RIs being pulled in, Trembor would be.

Marlot smiled at the memory of their first meeting during the previous hunter's attacks on the city. Trembor had been so strong, confident, handsome, and he'd been the only one to work with the shy stranger from some unknown town who'd barged into their territory in pursuit of the hunter.

They could work together again to catch this one.

The lion's cold glare before walking away from Marlot without explanation. His screaming at Marlot as if it was his fault Trembor had walked away.

Had it been? Had Marlot not bothering following the law in the search for Na'ego's killer been that much of an affront to Trembor's sense of right and wrong? Marlot had believed justice trumped the law, but...

If Marlot caught this hunter, brought them to justice the right way, that would

show Trembor he could do it. He could follow the law and get justice.

But first, he needed to do one thing. He erased the RB's number and entered a new one.

"RI Swiftkill speaking."

"Laidan, it's Marlot, I have some information for you."

"You remember why you visited my body's house?"

"I was returning her ID. I received it by mistake."

"You received someone else's ID? By mistake?"

"It was a replacement card. The revenue system must have glitched. I let them know it happened."

"I thought their systems were foolproof," Laiden said. "Does that happen often to you?"

"Nothing is foolproof," Marlot replied, "And it was the only time. They probably found and fixed the problem." He was counting on the fact no other RI had come demanding what he'd been doing near one of the body they were investigating over the last months to confirm they didn't know. It was also why he'd called, he didn't want her scenting he was lying.

"So, it's just a coincidence, and I had to go back to looking for a killer's who's probably far gone now."

"That is why we love this job."

She sighed. "My dad said I should be an accountant; guaranteed rating that way since everyone needs accountants, but I had to give in to my love of the chase. Thanks for getting back to me."

"If I remember anything, I'll let you know." He disconnected and went back to his computer. Now he needed to find a pattern. Hunters always had one, it was part of their psychology, they didn't kill to feed their body, but they still did it to feed a part of themselves. Marlot would have to reread the research on hunters, what he'd read when tracking Ruxul had faded away. But he did remember that. So what was this hunter's pattern?

Predators? The kills had been predators, but was it that simple? Ruxul had gone after people he felt wrongs him. From a perceived slight to an actual argument. If this one's pattern was simply predators, why so few kills? Predators were everywhere. Had they stolen prey from the hunter? If they had, could Marlot find out?

Why involve him? Marlot wondered. They had to have met, hunters didn't target total strangers. They had to know them well enough to develop a reason to target them, but had there ever been a case where a hunter warned someone of what he was planning? Ruxul hadn't, but he was one hunter. There had been hundreds of recorded cases of hunters, at least one of them had to have warning someone as part of their pattern.

Marlot would pull up research on hunters later. Right now he could look for commonality into these kills.

Method, had they been killed the same way? Marlot was partially through the medical database's security before remembering he needed to do this legally.

That would complicate things.

Laidan's body had her neck broken, and no blood spilled. He didn't recall seeing blood at Trembor's body, but he'd been paying attention to the lion.

He called Jaxca.

"Marlot, how can I help you?" the frog said, smiling as he appeared on the screen.

"I..." Marlot hesitated, did this qualified as breaking the law? It was just a conversation, and so long as he didn't force Jaxca to reveal anything. "I'm wondering if you can help me with something."

"Of course."

"Trembor called you about a body yesterday."

"Yes, a mink, a Mister Shines."

"Can you tell me how he died?"

"Are you and Trembor working together again? He didn't mention anything about that when I saw him."

Marlot sighed. "No, I'm just trying to help him." Not a lie, he told himself, ultimately this was to get them back together, and that was helping the lion. "Did he tell you about the falling out we had?"

"No more than you did. I know it happened, but I know better than to pry. Too much curiosity can make a predator forget I'm poisonous until after they ate me."

"I won't eat you, Jaxca, but I appreciate you not prying. But yeah, I'm hoping that if I help him with this, he'll be willing to sit down and talk. I want to fix this."

"Well, you know I'm not supposed to share that kind of information."

"I know, and I understand if you're not comfortable doing it."

"Just make sure you don't slip and mention I told you, but Mister Shines died of a broken neck."

"Snapped?"

"No, the result of a blow, by the shape of the bruising, I wrote it as being the result of a fist to the back of the neck, it broke the third and fourth cervical vertebrae."

"What kind of force would that require?" Marlot broke necks by grabbing and twisting.

"A reasonable amount, but it's more about precision than strength."

"So if the killer knows what they're doing, one blow and it's over?"

"Yes, but in this case, it took more than one. Mister Shines put up quite the fight and has the bruises to show for it."

"Any blood under his claws?"

"No, his killer was adept at avoiding being slashed."

"So I'm looking for a predator who's at least moderately strong, well trained in fighting, and who prefers to avoid spilling blood."

"I believe that describe most successful predators," Jaxca said.

Marlot chuckled. "yeah, just about all of us who eat well," he said as his stomach growled in hunger.

Series of death-10

The gym Trembor went to now was different from Grebor's. This one had a stricter structure, the schedule wasn't just a suggestion to get a sense of how busy the gym was; it was respected down to the minute. Matif Whitecollar, one of the officers he'd been at the enforcer training center with, had told him about it and it was on the way to the enforcer station so it added convenience, on top of ensuring he wouldn't run into Marlot.

Changed into shorts and combat gloves and boots and scrolled through the schedule. This gym had an electronic version, instead of the page Grebor kept by the entrance. This early in the morning not many people were training, which meant finding a partner didn't always happen. The mongoose who ran the gym had a strict policy of not allowing anyone in a fighting ring unless they were partnered up.

Currently, two couples were sparring and a tiger in shorts, a shirt, and combat gloves was at the counter drinking something clear. Trembor found the only single entry in the schedule and went to the bar.

"Are you K'Dar?"

The tiger looked him over and smiled. "That'd be me." He had hints of an accent.

"Are you waiting for someone? I haven't found a regular sparring partner yet and I need to get some fighting in before I got to work."

"I am waiting for a lion of my own, but he should have been here a while ago now. I can take you on in his place." He motioned to the mongoose. "M'lady, put—" he indicated Trembor.

"Trembor," he told her.

"Trembor as my partner. T can wait his turn." He headed for a ring. "How do you want to do this? Word of warning, I'm no good at holding back."

"A real fight is what I'm looking for. I'm not prey. But no claws." Trembor indicated the tiger's uncovered feet.

"Birth defect, no claws on them. You can check, but M'lady Talls did clear me."

"I guess we've evolved beyond using foot claws in a hunt so it mustn't put you at much of a disadvantage."

The tiger gave Trembor an odd smile. "You could say that. I can still kick as hard as anyone else. You have a preferred style? I'm all over the place with my fighting."

"I'm primarily a kicker," Trembor replied, "but I like training against someone who can surprise me." His chest tightened at the memory of Marlot's unorthodox fighting technique, but before it could overwhelm him. The tiger threw a punch at him. Trembor blocked reflexively, then kicked out, catching the tiger in the side.

"Fast little bugger," The tiger said with a grin, launching himself at Trembor. Training cut his surprise down and he threw himself to the side as the tiger flew through the space Trembor had occupied.

Trembor rolled to a couch. "You weren't kidding when you said you fighting was all over the place. I don't think I ever saw someone pounce within the confines of a ring."

“Can’t let tight places cramp your fighting, that’s asking for death.” The tiger ran at him and Trembor blocked and dodged fists and feet until he had space for a roundhouse kick, which met air as the tiger rolled back in onto his feet.

“What would you do if someone started ordering you about?” Trembor asked as they circled each other, then closed, almost planting a foot in the tiger’s chest as he opened his mouth to reply. His opponent was fast, Trembor gave him that.

“Was the question a distraction, or you interested in my opinion?” Punches came fast, a few getting through Trembor’s defenses, as well as a knee to his side.

“I’m interested. Sparring helps me think.”

The tiger paused. “You must have stranger sparring partners. I don’t know anyone who likes to talk while fighting.” He covered the distance separating them, in two steps and a volley of punch came at Trembor while the tiger continued. “But I got to know if the person ordering you about’s a commanding officer first.”

“No.” Trembor blocked and managed to connect with a kick. “Boyfriend, would-be mate.”

The tiger nodded. “You into that stuff?”

Trembor froze. *You didn’t leave me any choice.* The lion was glare down at him. Trembor’s muzzle hurt. Tripped and fell downstairs, he’d told the medic when he’d gone to the hospital hours later.

“No,” he told the tiger with vehemence once he shook the memory off.

The tiger hadn’t pressed the advantage. “Then kick his ass. You good to continue?”

Trembor went at the tiger angrily. “I did, but I can’t stop wanting him.” He kicked and kneed and the tiger mostly blocked. Trembor even threw a poorly aimed punch hoping to surprise him, but it was caught and then Trembor was on his back.

“Love’ll do that to you. I’d say kill him and pay the tax since you can do that here.”

Trembor was on his feet and roaring as he attacked the tiger. He wanted to dig his claws into him, rip his throat out, have his guts spilled on the mat for him to take back his—he hit the mat hard enough his breath left him.

“Real bad letting emotions distract you like that.” The tiger offered him a hand and pulled him back to his feet. “Why don’t you talk with him?”

“I can’t! He lied to me. Told me he loved me then did the exact same thing Gorrek did to me! Blamed me when he had to hurt me! How am I supposed to believe one word that comes out of his muzzle?”

The tiger winced.

“Ya should just rip his spin out,” a new voice said, “since you can do that stuff here.” The new lion’s accent was similar to the tiger’s, but thicker.

“T, where you been? You weren’t here so I’ve been trying on this one, I think I’m going to replace you with him.”

“Some pack of hyena jumped me. Had to show them the error of their way.”

“You killed any of them?” The tiger asked, sounding worried.

“You know me better than that, K. As for replacing me.” The lion grabbed the tiger’s head with both hands and pulled him close, kissing him hard. The moans that emanated from both of them hurt Trembor.

He and Marlot had kissed like that. He wanted to kiss him like that again so bad. Maybe the tiger was right, maybe he should give him a second chance. He’d sounded reasonable when at the body’s house, apologetic even.

You didn’t leave me any choice.

Gorrek always sounded apologetic afterward. Could be downright nice and loving for a few days. Just long enough Trembor almost forgot being hit.

He strengthened his resolve. He was not putting himself through that ever again.

“Fraid you’ve got to keep looking for a partner,” the tiger said, panting slightly. “I’m keeping this one.” He smelled like he wanted the lion badly and utterly unconcerned about letting others know.

Trembor blinked to keep the tears from forming. “It’s okay, I’m looking to replace anyone. I just wish I had what you two have again.”

The lion opened his mouth but yelling from the entrance kept him from saying anything.

“Get out!” the mongoose was in the doorway. “This is a predator only gym.” Her muscular body blocked who she was talking to. “I don’t care if you think you can take one of us on. You’re prey. I’m, not dealing with having one of my customers gore you and then have to clean the mess. Go to one of your own gyms and find someone to fight there.” Trembor made out a form walking away, but the lettering on the window hide any details.

“That was pretty harsh,” the other lion said. “S’not cause he’s not like us he can’t also fight.”

Trembor eyed the lion. Definitely not from anywhere near here. “Prey doesn’t know how to fight,” He said. “Whoever that was, they were probably looking for someone to end their lives and that shouldn’t be something Lasha has to deal with.” Trembor smiled, well, all prey except maybe one. He wondered if the hare still frequented Grebor’s gym and trounced the predators there.

The tiger and lion exchanged a look, then shrugged in unison.

“I’m going to let you two fight,” Trembor said, suddenly feeling like the scavenger tagging along with a hunt in the hopes of catching scraps. He headed to the locker room, undressed, and spent a long time under the shower jet.

He punched the wall. “Why? Why did Marlot have to turn out to be an abuser? They’d been so perfect together. Once he’d stopped being terrified of people finding out they were together...

Had that been an act? It couldn’t be. No, it hadn’t been, Trembor decided. Maybe that was what had kept the abusive part in check, and once he’d gotten over that, he’d been comfortable starting on it? Once he’d shown Trembor where he came from, the abuse he’d suffered, maybe he’d decided he’d lulled the lion enough he no longer had to bother hiding it?

Trembor growled. Why couldn't Marlot have been the simple broken male he'd seem? Trembor had looked forward to helping him heal from the abuse he'd suffered. Trembor knew abuse, he could have helped him so much.

He missed Marlot. Missed him so much it hurt, and he hated himself for thinking that many the abuse would hurt less, because he knew about being abused.

Series of death-11

Investigating past death outside his territory without breaking any laws was difficult. His position as a Registered Investigator gave him access to all the systems required to get the information, but those deaths belonged to other RIs, therefore he wasn't allowed to pull their information. He could easily bypass all the security and get every filed reports, he could even get into the RIs' personal computers for what they hadn't filed yet, but he wanted to show Trembor he could work entirely within the law.

What he had worked out, after four days of scraping every and all publicly accessible database, was that the bodies were all predators. All different species except for two wolves; Coyote, jaguar, badger, tiger, bear, leopard, cougar, and the two wolves. Five males and four females, in not order he could determine, the two oldest ones had been males, a wolf, and cougar, then three females, the other wolf, a leopard, and the bear, two males after that, a tiger and a badger, then a female jaguar and the most recent, a male coyote.

The schedule of the kills had accelerated, the first two coming a month apart, the third three weeks later, as did the next two, there had been a month gap between the fifth and sixth kill, two weeks after that the seventh than a few days later the eight and a few weeks after that the ninth. It wasn't as linear as it had first seemed, but the acceleration was there.

Did it mean anything? There were a few experts on hunters, but Marlot was reluctant to contact them in case they then informed someone within the Revenue Services. Research was freely available on the net, but they were written in *scientific*, which Marlot was nowhere near fluent enough to make that easy reads. Why couldn't one of the researchers write those using computer technical terms?

He couldn't confirm method-of-kill since this was in the medical examiners' reports and the RIs didn't use Jaxca, not that he expected he could talk the frog into giving him information on other RIs than Trembor. Were two death by broken neck enough to expect the others to be the same?

They were all single, killed in their own homes, which ensured, no one interrupted the kill, and that they wouldn't be discovered too quickly. Marlot couldn't find out who had called the deaths in since that involved getting into the enforcer's systems. Plotting the deaths didn't show much, other than each was in a different territory the locations had nothing in common beyond being in residential areas.

He tried tracking the bodies' movements before death, but without accessing the Revenue system to pull the times and locations their ID cards were scanned, he couldn't get anything. There had been talk of setting up a camera network throughout the city

around the time Marlot had moved here, but prey had risen en masse to oppose it, claiming it would give predators too much of an advantage in their tracking them, and it had been scrapped.

Marlot had agreed with them, not that he'd been against it, it would have made his tracking program much more effective. Unfortunately, his program was constructed to track current movement, gather current information, not dig through the death servers.

A knock at the office door kept him from smashing his head against the desk in an attempt to get ideas to form.

Hela'han entered. "This just came in." She handed him an envelope with the Revenue Bureau logo in the top right corner. Marlot barely kept himself from snatching it out of her hand. He felt the card in it as he opened it.

The card fell on his desk. The image of a wolverine glared at him on the right side of the card. Radima Vicious was her name. Her address put her in yet another territory, Jermal Point. Marlot vaguely remembered the name. Some cervid who'd managed to stay alive all these years. They'd met during the hunt for Ruxul, it was where Marlot had met most of the city's RIs. He'd spent time in the protectors if Marlot recalled correctly.

He'd scanned the card before he stopped himself and cursed and he should his pad down. He couldn't do an ID check on someone living, and if she was already dead, Points would show up demanding to know why Marlot had run her number. Had he shut it down in time?

He'd find out if Point showed up; until then he needed to keep working. He restarted his pad. Any functions that had been interrupted would be forgotten. He entered Radima's name in his tracking program and let it do its thing while he did his own search on her.

He confirmed that she was still alive as of a few days ago, before she lost her card, without it she wouldn't do too much in public, although she was strong and looked like she'd take on anyone who gave her a problem. The killer might have taken on more than they could handle with her, but Marlot couldn't let her simply kill him. He had to be the one to capture and bring him in. It was the only way he'd show Trembor he could do things by the rules.

Checking his program he found out she as a supervisor in a construction company. Not usually a place that employed high-cost people, but to become a supervisor she had to have more determination, more focus, which would raise her price. She didn't have any infraction within the company to reduce her productivity or any crimes on record. He could afford her, not that he expected he could take her on, Wolverines were notoriously tough to take down.

Marlot shook himself. He wasn't tracking her for food, although he should consider someone from his program after the day was done. He was mostly healed and he fresh meat would be good.

His program noted an anomaly, she hadn't been into work in two days. She'd informed them she wasn't feeling well. She'd never taken a day off in the eight years she'd worked there. She was in her home, alone. The perfect situation for the hunter to

strike.

Marlot grabbed his jacket as he exited his office. “Going out to run down a lead,” he told Hela’han. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

“I’ll leave any messages in the buffer,” she replied. “It’s good to see you back to your old self.”

Marlot stopped. Was he? He smiled. “It’s good to be back.” He had a clear goal, with known results. He did feel more like himself. Once he had the hunter, Trembor would have no choice but to see he could do this, that he deserved a second chance.

Series of death-12

Trembor’s pad buzzed, his father’s name displayed. He fought the impulse to answer him with the annoyance of knowing it probably wasn’t the emergency using the bypass code for his blocked phone was meant for. He considered not answering, he could tell him the battery had run out. He checked, and it was on the last of its charge; he had forgotten to charge it again.

But there was a chance it was an emergency.

“Dad,” he began, pad to his ear.

“What is it I hear about your brother having gambling debts?” Torim snapped.

Trembor stifled the sigh. “Dad, I don’t—”

“Don’t give me that. I’m not asking you to tell me something I don’t know. Cerek already let slip Bo asked him for a loan. I got the story out of him. Now I want to know what you know.”

“No, Dad. If I know anything, I’m not telling you.” He hated edging what he said, but he hadn’t grown up with a lawyer without learning a few tricks about how to not say something.

“Trembor Goldenmane, I am your father, the master of this family, you will—”

“Mom anywhere within hearing range?”

“No,” Torim replied. He didn’t stutter and stumbled anymore when reminded the women in their family were in charge. Trembor, as well as his siblings, had always enjoyed tripping their father when he went on a rant and proclaimed himself master of the family. They’d all been witness to the gentle, and not so gentle, reminders that for as much as they loved him, their mothers wouldn’t let Torim get away with saying such things.

“Dad, whatever Bo might or might not have told me, was done in confidence. I wouldn’t tell Serene if she kicked my door down and demanded answers.” Trembor looked at the door, then shook his head in amusement. His mother wouldn’t come kicking doors just because her name was mentioned. First, she’d have to get through the enforcers in the station, so he’d get plenty of warning.

“That brother of yours is gambling! Not only that but in spite of my warnings, he went and got himself in debt with the gambling house! Do you know what they are within their rights to do? They can take his house! His car. What’s going to happen to Herelex if they sue him?”

At least his father didn't seem to be aware of who his brother owed money to. He didn't want to imagine how his father will react when that tidbit of information comes out. "Dad, it won't come to that." Trembor tried to come up with something that wouldn't be a lie. Torim wasn't the lie detector he liked to claim he was, but he did have an uncanny knack for knowing when Trembor was untruthful. "I'm sure Bo can reach an agreement with a lending agency if it comes to that." Crooks didn't care where the money came from, did they? Of course, that depended entirely on how much Bo owed.

"So he does owe them money," Torim exclaimed triumphantly.

Trembor groaned. "Really dad? I'm not an opposing lawyer, or even being cross-examined."

"The way you're covering for your brother—"

"I'm not covering for anyone dad," he snapped. "And you fucking know it! I'm the one person in this family the others can go to and not be judged because our father is so much the lawyer he can't help himself but pass judgment. And for your information, I did give Bo a piece of my mind about the stupidity of what he did. Happy now?"

Torim growled but didn't say anything.

"Look, Dad. Bo's been an idiot. I know it, you know it, even he knows it at this point. Screaming at him isn't going to make him want to come to us for help." Not after he'd also lost it on his brother and told him to fend for himself. *Way to go Trembor*. "As much as you want to protect us, sometimes we need to screw up to learn. Take that one from me."

The silence stretched.

"How are you, Son?" Torim asked, his tone gentle.

"I hurt," Trembor answered with a sigh. "I can't seem to stop thinking about him, and of course, because he's that kind of persistent asshole, Gorrek claws his way out of my memory right after. How could I not see the signs, Dad? I worked with Marlot for over three years."

"Abusers aren't stupid, Son. They are patient, they'll wait until they have their claws so deep in you you can't see a way out before dropping the mask. From what you told me he didn't mean to show his true scent. If it helps, even Sarene didn't see it coming and you know how your mother is about sniffing out bad people."

"I know," Trembor sighed. "It's just that... Fuck, After Gorrek I should have known better."

"You saw a chance to be happy, Son. Don't hate yourself for someone taking advantage of that."

"I loved him so much, Dad." He still did. He still wanted to hold his scared wolf, comfort him after he thought someone had realized he loved another male; or pretended to be scared, anyway. The act had been perfect.

"You're a loving male, Trembor, that's not a flaw."

"Fucking feels like it right now."

"I know, but it'll pass. One day, you will find a male who loves you just as much." Trembor didn't want 'a male'.

“I’ve looked into the contract,” Torim said.

“Dad,” Trembor whined.

“Regardless of the no cancellation clause, I think I could get it annulled if you’re willing to talk with an adjudicator.”:

“No, Dad, I am not talking about this with anyone. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever.”

“He can hold the contract over you, Trembor. Legally, you are mates, and as such, he can make demands.”

“Let him try to see how well he enjoys my claws in his face.” As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t see himself hurting Marlot.

“Alright, it is your decision to make. I’ll write a brief about it for when you decide to get the contract annulled.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“If you need to talk, I am here. I can listen without judging.”

“I know. Have a good day.”

He dug out the charging plate from the drawer it’d put it in and put his pad on it, and tried to get back to work, but he couldn’t. His mind went from Marlot to Gorrek, to Bo, to how he’d accused his father of being judgmental after screaming at his brother forgetting in debt. Granted, Bo was in debt to criminals, so Trembor felt justified for losing it, but he should have been more supportive.

He looked through the search he was doing. Nothing new on Shines, which was his only open case. The others were waiting for responses from various people, so he had nothing urgent to deal with. He closed his system and left the station.

Once in his car, he realized he couldn’t just show up at his brother’s workplace unannounced. He called him, but Bo didn’t answer. Okay, Trembor deserved that after how he’d treated him. He called his workplace, so they’d let him know he was coming over and found out he wasn’t in today.

That...was odd. His brother wasn’t one to neglect his work. Maybe the stress of his situation was more than Trembor guessed? He headed to his brother’s house, where his brother refused to answer the door, no matter how loudly Trembor knocked. He eyed the lock. Marlot could open it. Trembor’s method would just piss off Bo more.

He called his brother three times before leaving a message. “Bo, I’m sorry for pulling a Dad on you, okay? I’m outside your door, come open it so we can talk and I can see about helping you deal with this.”

Five minutes later his brother still hadn’t opened the door or called him back. Maybe this was unrelated? If Bo was sick, he might not be able to come to the door, or even answer his pad.

After considering it for a few seconds he called Herelex, Bo’s son would have an idea.

“Uncle Trembor,” the young male answered. “What’s up?”

“Shouldn’t you be in calls? I was going to leave a message.”

“I don’t have one this hour. I’m heading to the fighting rings to get some training

in.”

“Do you know where your dad is? He isn’t answering his pad.”

“He should be at work. And yeah, he is pretty angry at you. Something about being an inconsiderate copy of grandpa. I didn’t ask details.”

Trembor chuckled despite himself. “That was a good move. When are you going to be home?”

“I’m not. I’m staying with Zerns.”

“I don’t know that name, someone special?” Trembor asked.

“Just a guy I know.”

“A guy? Does that mean your first heat passed and you—”

“Uncle!”

Trembor laughed. “I’ll butt out. Just make sure he treats you well.”

“If he doesn’t I’ve been taking fighting training, so I can point out what I don’t like. As for dropping by, Now’s probably not a good time. I think dad’s interested in a female. It’s why I’m spending a few nights at Zerns. He asked me to leave him the house.”

So Herelex didn’t know his father wasn’t at work. No reason he would. If Bo was wooing a female, it could be why he wasn’t answering. But now? When he was so deep in debt he came to him asking for a loan? Bo had never been the one to seek distraction in females.

But then again, he’d never been one to get himself into gambling trouble, or so Trembor had thought. Then again, he’d missed Marlot was an abuser for three years, so maybe he shouldn’t rely on his sense of how things should be.

Still, something felt wrong here.

“Uncle?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll give your dad space, I don’t want to ruin his chances at giving you a mother.”

Herelex groaned. “I’m not a cub anymore. I don’t need a mother. He needs a mate.”

Don’t we all, Trembor thought. “Have fun fighting, give your opponent a chance to get a few blows in, not everyone is fortunate to have over a dozen female family member teaching him how to hunt.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be gentle. See you.” Herelex disconnected.

Trembor look at the door to his brother’s house then called Isenson. “Uncle!”

“Why aren’t you in class? Don’t they have classes anymore?”

“I am, but I’ve done my work, and it’s you, but you need to make it quick, Miss Blacks is glaring at me.”

“Where are you staying tonight?”

“Uncle Cerek is picking me up after class. Dad’s getting lucky.”

No, Bo wasn’t. If he was behind that door with a female, Trembor was a mouse.

“Okay, tell your uncle to call me when he gets you home, okay?”

“Okay, bye.” His nephew disconnected.

Trembor considered kicking the door in; he'd deal with his brother's anger. But this wasn't a body he was investigating. And while his dad would easily get the infraction dismissed, it was still breaking the law.

He called his brother. "Bo, it's me again. I talked to your sons, pushing them away like that isn't like you. Call me and I will help. No lecture, just help."

Walking back to his car he couldn't help wonder just how deep had his brother gotten himself into with the gambling house that he was hiding out. There were stories circulation around the enforcers about what happened to people who got in too deep. Scary stuff like forced servitude, forced to commit crimes. Being bleed dry, figuratively, and literally. Vanishing so completely that even the Missing Person Bureau wasn't aware of it.

He glanced over his shoulder and hoped his brother wasn't in that deep.

Series of death-13

Radima was on the move.

Her house was in a middling neighborhood, which should have meant Marlow would have spent the afternoon and evening, possibly the night, in his car a few houses away watching for the hunter's approach.

What he hadn't expected was for the wolverine to get in her car and drive away. Staying with her was simple; mid-afternoon traffic was light, and her red car stood out among the gray ones.

She parked in a lot near one of the industrial zones and got out. Marlot followed her, checking on his pad for what might have drawn her here. It was close to the employer's current construction site, so there might be something urgent that needed to be done? Urgent enough she would brave going out without an ID?

Not that anyone but him and her knew that; Possibly if someone had found the lost ID they knew too, but since it was clear they were targeted, Marlot doubted the loss of the card was accidental. He looked around at the crowd of prey and predators they walked through. The hunter he was tracking could be among them, tracking her.

He stayed back so she wouldn't tell his scent apart from the crowd even if the wind shifted, but close enough he wouldn't lose sight of her. She walked purposely, but not in the direction of the construction site. Where was she going?

There was a commotion further ahead; raised voices, anger, and Radima took off.

Marlot took a few seconds to get over the surprise, had she scented him somehow? It wasn't like he was hunting her. He was just one person among a crowd, this one with more than twenty-five percent predator in it at least. He ran after her, coming to where the commotion happened, people getting up, grumbling about predator and their lack of respect for public places.

Of course, what else would get a predator out of her house even when she was at risk? Hunger.

Even the location made sense. She'd get to know the area from working the construction site. She probably parked away to have a reason to walk the around,

familiarize herself with the prey here, get a sense for their value. Industrial factory workers weren't highly rated as a whole.

He caught the scent of fear, prey, cervid; her scent, excitement. He ran faster, chasing the prey had drawn her out of the crowd, a perfect time for the hunter to take her down. He cursed his constant moping as his breathing became harder. Without Trembor he'd let his training fall behind and he might not be able to stay with his target through the alleys.

His legs hurt, but he didn't dare slow as a bellow echoed off the alley's walls. They didn't tell him where his quarry was, but he still had their scent. She'd cornered her prey, the question was had she been cornered by the predator chasing her? As tough as she was, if the hunter fell on her after a fight, she might not be able to take him on. The fight became audible as he got closer, by the sound of it, the prey was fighting back hard.

It fell silent as Marlot turned a corner and stopped.

The wolverine was on the ground; her head twisted around. A massive moose stood over her, hands on knee, panting heavily. He looked up, eyes going wider as he sniffed the air and his eyes met Marlot's.

The moose had taken the wolverine down. Prey had killed a predator. It happened; predators got careless, prey got in a lucky blow. But this was a broken neck, like two of the other victim.

His hunter was a prey species? Was that even a thing? Had he used his status to lure her here and then kill her? Every other body was a predator. Was this some sick vendetta against predators? Prey often talked about abolishing the predation system, but it worked, it was stable, ensured society functioned.

With a bellow, the moose bolted.

With a curse, Marlot took off after him. He couldn't let the hunter escape.

Despite his lead, Marlot caught up to the moose, his scent of fear was thick as the previous chase had exhausted the moose more than Marlot, it seemed. When he was close enough, and with the sound of a busy street coming from further ahead, Marlot jumped on the moose's back, his weight binging him down, but the momentum then throwing Marlot off.

He rolled and got to his feet. He was between the moose and an easy escape. His only option was to run back deeper in the alleys. The moose bellowed and charged. With a curse, Marlot took the impact and redirected the moose toward a wall. The action left a mark in the concrete wall, and Marlot's muscles protesting. The moose massed twice what he did. And he was still sore from his failed hunt.

His stomach growled a reminder that if he took the moose down, he'd have meat for a month.

The moose came at him, slower, but swinging. Marlot dodged and punched the cervid's side. It was like hitting stone. A backhand glanced off Marlot's head, and he saw stars. He backed away for a chance to clear it, but the moose saw the open path to the crowd.

Marlot ran, jumped on the moose's back, and locked his arms around his neck

tightening them as much as he could. Trying to shake Marlot off the moose turned himself around so that when he ran for an opening, it was away from the street. The moose reached back to grab at Marlot, but his fingers only caught on his jacket and it slipped away as he pulled.

His running turned into staggering as Marlot kept the pressure on. He backed into a wall and Marlot momentarily loosened his grip from the impact. He re-tightened it as the moose took a breath and shook himself hard. Marlot's legs flew around and he kicked at then had that tried to grab his foot before he could bring them back down. The moose hadn't gotten much air, and he fell to a knee.

With his feet on the ground, Marlot pulled back until he heard the spine start cracking, this was almost done. A little more and the moose would be meat, he'd have fresh food.

Except he wanted the hunter alive.

With protests from his stomach, he stopped pulling.

The moose's struggles slowed, and eventually stopped. Marlot waited to release his grip until he's sure the moose wasn't playacting. Then slumped against him, catching his breath.

It was too bad there was no reward system for the captured of hunters, because he wasn't going to be in any shape to do a hunt of his own for weeks after this abuse.

Series of death-14

Trembor changed into something more comfortable as soon as he got home, an older pair of looser pants, a padded shirt, and jacket, boots with ankle guards. He had a small glass of blood, then drove to a large neighborhood the intersected his territory. He parked a block away from it, then walked.

The area was old; almost as old as the city itself, and had been named after the hill that had originally been the entirety of the housing; Safe Knoll. As the city grew to encompass it, it also overflowed the hill itself, spreading down as more herbivores came to it. Now it was a fifty square block zone where only prey lived.

City regulation didn't allow for neighborhoods to exclude anyone, but behavior didn't have to be written down anywhere for the city to find to affect how people acted. Even walking through, there was a sense Trembor wasn't welcome here. Looks, the stepping away, closer to their kind, often with one of the larger prey species interposing themselves between him and the weaker ones.

Trembor had no issues with prey congregating together. It meant he knew where to find them. No need for complicated programs, no need to spend hours searching through databases to work out who was worth what. All he needed was to walk through this neighborhood, look at the people, how they acted, the way they were dressed. If they were included in the circles of protection that formed, and he could work out who was worth hunting.

He wasn't the only predator here, not even the only one on the prowl, but most

predators were simply walking, shopping at the stores that lined the area, a wall of commerce that rose in an attempt to keep the city from intruding, to keep the predators away. It had had the opposite effect and gave Trembor the camouflage he needed to observe without chasing his target away.

Today he picked an elephant who was dressed in old clothing, worn at the knees and elbows. She did menial work and hadn't been able to afford to replace them. She'd experienced a drop in her rating over the last months, maybe the last year. Her clothing had been good quality when bought, not the cheap stuff those with low rating could afford.

She was aware her lowered rating put her at risk, she nervously glanced around, kept to the center of the walkway, away from the walls and alleys, where a predator could be hiding. Even a haven like Safe Knoll wasn't totally safe. She even looked over her shoulder a few times, but Trembor was far enough away, and downwind of her, that she couldn't see him. He kept track of her mostly by scent, waiting for the moment when her nervousness ebbed as she got closer to her home.

Then he ran, eliciting yells of surprise and drowning her scent in all the fear he caused, but he had her in his sight. She'd been heading toward the larger alley on her left, so he used her hesitation as the screams registered to head that way and cut her off. Cause her to bolt away from her place of safety.

She saw him running at her and as prey did, ran in the opposite direction. Her worry at being worth less feeding the sudden jolt of fear at being a target and overriding common sense. No other elephant around meant no family to protect her, with the surprise of the predator in their midst even friends might not come to her defense.

She trumpeted for help, but it only served to scatter the people before her, remove obstacles. And she made the mistake that would turn her from a person into meat. She left the road, seeking shelter in the maze of alleys.

Trembor smiled, this was what life was about, the hunt, the running after his meal. The fight and the coming kill. The scent of her desperation drove him forward, focus on her only. She was all that mattered right now.

She was closer, her desperation growing as her she tired. She stumbled ahead, tried to push herself, found she was done for. It was fight or die, and by her expression, she had little energy left for a fight.

Trembor stopped, let her catch her breath. Let her decide how this would go. He would make her death as quick and painless as he could regardless, but the prey deserved the right to decide how they would go. Lie down, or fighting.

The running behind him registered as his heart slowed and he spun. Had others decided to come to her rescue? He'd been certain no one had known her on the street, been attached to her. Every one had recognized the risk her lowered value brought and kept their distances.

The first one to be visible was a wolf and for an instant, Trembor thought Marlot had followed him. Out of the shadows, the wolf was gray, not black, and Marlot wouldn't dress in dark green pants and sand colors shirt. The pang of regret at the man

not being Marlot was chased away by the tigress on his heel and the warthog next to her. Two predators and one of the more dangerous prey coming at him meant he was their quarry, and this wasn't a rescue.

The wolf was the first to reach him, and Trembor blocked the punch, then kicked out, only scoring a glancing blow off the wolf's thigh as he moved out of the way of the tigress who tackled Trembor to the ground. He pushed her off him with a foot and got to his feet, barely avoiding the warthog's tusks.

Trembor put some distance between him and them, noticing his prey's back vanishing in the distance.

"If this is a mugging, you guys picked the worst time for it," he said, adjusting his stance, "but you just cost me my kill. If you expect me to be your kill, you better be ready to pay for at least two, because I am taking one of you down with me, I promise you that."

The wolf snorted. "Oh, we're not here to kill you. We're here to give you a message to pass along to that brother of yours. We don't like it when someone who owes us goes to ground. If he doesn't stop hiding, we're going to have to meet up with the rest of his family and impress on them how they should convince him to come out."

Trembor's anger washed away. "Are you threatening my family?"

The wolf shrugged. "Hey, people get hurt all the time, isn't that right? I figure that if you don't want your family to get hurt, you'll tell your brother to take the punishment he deserves."

"I'll tell Bo your message," Trembor replied, wondering just how deep his brother was gotten himself into.

"See, the message isn't you telling him. Predators don't really do well with just being told, do we? We do much better when we see what happens if we don't do what we're told."

Trembor looked them over. "Then I'm going to show you what happens to people who threaten my family." He ran at them, using the momentary surprise to plant a foot in the wolf's chest and send him flying back. He deflected the tigress' fist and kned her in the side. But couldn't avoid the warthog, only moving enough to turn the goring strike into a shallow cut across his stomach, the kicking and sending him head first into the wall.

The wolf tackled Trembor, who managed to keep his footing but ended up against a wall. The alley wasn't a great place to take on three opponents. He punched the wolf in the face and took a solid blow himself before he had enough space between them to put a foot on his stomach and send the wolf back, causing him to trip over the recovering tigress.

Tight space worked to his advantage too, if he could make sure they got in each other's way.

The warthog ran at him again, head down, tusks first. He was easy to deal with. Trembor stepped to the side and let him impact with the wall, then slammed his elbow at the back of his neck. The warthog dropped.

The tigress was back, hands open, claws out, swiping at him. Trembor blocked as best as he could, but the only thing that saved his arms from being shredded was the padding in the jacket's sleeve. He'd need a new hunting jacket after this. He caught one of her arms and brought it down on his knee, breaking it, before kicking her away.

The wolf was on him, swinging fast and hard. Trembor blocked and took blows, backing, making sure not to let himself be pinned again. When the wolf slowed to catch his breath, Trembor spun kicked him off his feet, then brought his foot down hard, hitting the ground instead of the neck he'd aimed for.

"Barkon," the tigress called. "We did enough, let's get out of here."

The wolf backed away as he got to his feet and Trembor considered going after them. "Remember this," the wolf snarled, "because if your brother doesn't contact our boss, we're going to come back. Maybe we're going to go after someone else in your family next time."

Trembor hurt too much to reply and watched the two of them leave. The warthog remained on the ground, deathly still. Trembor watched the body. At least he was going to have food.

"But how much are you going to cost me?" Good clothing meant higher in the productivity chain, but he was a criminal. If he'd been arrested a few times it would bring his rating down. He took out his phone. He'd find out when he reached a payment kiosk.

"Bo," he said once the message his brother wasn't able to answer finished, "You need to contact me. I'm serious, I just had a few of that gambling house's employees pay me a visit. If you don't pad me as soon as you can, I will hunt you down, and you're not going to like how I'm going to tell you what I think of this mess you made for our family."

He put the phone away and eyed the warthog. He was mainly muscle, so a lot of meat, and a lot of mass for him to carry in his injured state.

"There's a reason I go for those who've been ostracized," he grumbled as he grabbed the body's arms and pulled it over his shoulder. "They never put up this kind of fight."

Series of death-15

The enforcers gave Marlot space as he stormed through the precinct. It could be the snarl on his face or the terrified expression of the elk Marlow pushed through the enforcers on their way to the interrogation rooms. Passing the wall of screen he noted which weren't in use and shoved the elk toward the closest one. Marlot sat the elk down and took the chair on the other side of the table, studying him.

He was good. He even smelled scared. Marlot hadn't expected anyone could fool him after his scent recognition class.

"You can drop the act, it's just the two of us."

The elk didn't. He kept glancing at the closed door, eyes wide, pupils dilated.

Maybe the camera was the reason he maintained the act? Marlot didn't care. He'd get his answers.

He took his phone out and brought up information. "Radima Vicious, thirty-five, unmated. Supervisor at Pelt's Construction. Did you know her?"

The elk shook his head almost imperceptibly. At least he'd decided to stop acting too scared to cooperate.

"Then why did you pick her? Did she harass you? Did she threaten you in some way? She was a predator, after all. They all were," Marlot added, watching the elk's reaction.

Confusion. "I?" the elk swallowed. "She stalked me."

"Like I said, she's a predator."

"Why am I here?" the elk asked. He'd decided to play the victim?

"You know why you're here. Why did you run?"

"She was stalking me. I didn't want to die."

"After you killed her, you ran. You left her body to rot, why did you run?"

"You." The elk's eyes grew wide again. "You showed up, and I got scared again. I was tired, you were going to eat me."

"If I was going to eat you, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

"I didn't know that!" the elk stood, his chair clattering to the floor.

Marlot fought the reflex to stand, to growl, to cow the elk; he let him pace. As satisfying as it would be to fight the elk, to kill him, and put an end to all of it, Marlot wanted answers.

"Sit down."

The elk kept pacing. He'd heard Marlot, the ear flick indicated that; he was ignoring him. Showing couldn't be ordered around? Was this hunter behavior? Marlot didn't know all that much about them. What he'd read up on while tracking Ruxul and recently hadn't helped; hunters were killed, the only thing psychologists could do was look at what they'd done and try to guess at the why. Were they broken from birth? Was it a defect that occurred after an accident? Was it just whim?

"I said sit down." This time Marlot put a growl in the words and the elk picked up the chair and sat. "My guess is that you ran because you're not done. You're playing the scared prey because you hope I'll believe you reacted, instead of having planned it."

The elk froze his fear scent spiking, surprise written on his face.

"Here's what I think happened. You miscalculated somehow with Radima. You already took down a badger you figured she'd be the same, but she was cleverer. Maybe she caught your scent when you stole your ID. Oh, I know you stole it. How else can you get them to order a replacement? Why bother erasing the request from the Revenue system thought? To keep me from making the connection too quickly? Why me? Why send me the IDs? Why make sure I'd eventually work it out? Did you want this meeting? Did you want someone you could gloat to? Show us, predators, just how much better you are? You think we don't die too? That we don't grow careless and get taken down by another predator? There's no such thing as someone above predation."

The elk stared at Marlot, trembling, ready to bolt. Looking ready to bolt, Marlot reminded himself. This had to be the best actor he'd ever seen. If Marlot didn't know he was a hunter, he'd believe this was some scared prey, cornered and about to crack.

Marlot slammed a hand on the table. "Why?" he yelled.

The elk was up and in the far corner, back against the wall.

This time Marlot stood too. "Tell me why the fuck you dragged me into this sick game of yours? What did I do to you to deserve this? I know I didn't gloat. I didn't stalk you. So why me?"

The elk trembled in the corner, as far as Marlot guessed, it would look to anyone else like he wasn't even hearing him. Marlot didn't buy it. He walked around the table and approached the elk, who seemed to notice him again and whimpered.

"Why are you killing predators and leaving them to rot? What did they do to you? Tell me!"

The elk shook his head, eyes wide, pushing himself back against the wall. Just how long could he maintain the act? It had to be tiring.

Marlot took a step back, gave the elk space to breathe. "We're out of the camera's view," he said softly, hoping the elk wasn't aware of the setup for the interrogation room. "If you keep your voice low, it won't hear you. So you can tell me, there won't be anything on record. I'll be the only one who knows. You've kept this up long enough, I'll have to let you go, you'll have to play for Radima, of course, since I'm a witness to it, but after that, you can go back to your game. You can go back to taunting me."

The elk whimpered again. "No. I can't." Was he crying? That was going a bit far, Marlot thought.

"Wolverine! Coyote! Jaguar! Badger! Tiger! Bear! Leopard! Wolf! Cougar! Those are the predators you killed and left to rot! You're going to tell me why or I'm going to gut you. Have there been more? Did you torment some other RI? Or did you somehow decide this was the only way to do it?"

The elk crumpled.

"No." Marlot grabbed him by the collar. "No, you're not doing this. This act has gone on long enough." He pulled him up, ignoring the protests from his injuries, and held him against the wall. "I know you killed them all and you're going to tell me why. I'm not going to put you out of whatever misery this is about until you do that. So start talking."

The elk's eyes rolled back as the trembling got stronger. Marlot slammed him against the wall.

"Don't you fucking try that. I know it's an act."

The door slammed open. "What the fuck are you doing?" Bahamel yelled.

Marlot ignored her, growling at the elk who was pushing his acting for all it was worth.

A hand grabbed the back of Marlot's collar and pulled him away. "You're coming to my office and explaining yourself, wolf."

Series of death-16

The heavy wooden desk screeched as Bahamel bumped it to get behind. “What were you thinking?” she snapped. “If Belric hadn’t shut down the camera as soon as you started screaming in there, and wiped the recording, it’d be your license is anyone at the revenue bureau saw it.”

“I was just questioning a suspect,” Marlot answered, doing his best to keep his scent under control, as well as his tail, which was hitting the door he leaned against angrily.

“What kind of questioning leave your suspect near a terror-induced coma?”

“It’s just an act,” Marlot scoffed, which earned him a disbelieving stare.

“Didn’t you smell the room you were standing in? They fear stench is so thick the next criminal I bring in there will answer my questions before I even have to ask them. If it doesn’t induce them to just drop dead.”

“It wasn’t—”

“Wolf, I went in there to drag you out. I smelled it. Don’t try to shift the wind, it’s too late. What were you terrorizing him about?”

It hadn’t been that bad, Marlot told himself. The elk had been acting. “About a body, that’s my job.”

“This is a bit out of your territory for someone to run after an accidental kill.”

“It wasn’t accidental.”

The massive bear narrowed her eyes. “That’s an elk. They don’t kill purposely.”

“This one did.”

“Marlot, prey isn’t wired to kill on purpose. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get them to be efficient soldiers? It takes years to break them of their racial conditioning, and all it takes is getting them out of the Protector environment and they go right back to being prey. Their training means they’ll deal with predator easier, but they don’t kill on purpose.”

“I saw him do it!” Marlot snarled.

She stilled. “You saw him stalk and kill someone?”

“He was cleverer than that. He got her to stalk him until they were isolated, then he killed her.”

She sighed. “So, you saw her stalk him, and watched as he... what? How exactly does an elk arrange to keep a wolverine?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t actually see him kill her. I heard the scuffle and by the time I got there she was at his feet, her neck broken.”

“And you decided he’d killed her on purpose?” she asked in disbelief.

“He ran as soon as he saw me.”

“He’s prey, Wolf. Of course, he ran, it’s what prey does.” She let out a breath. “Where the body?”

“In the trunk of my car. I didn’t want to leave her for the scavengers.”

“You have her body? You have him? What are you doing here? You should have gone to the revenue bureau to get him to pay for his kill.”

“He has to—” Marlot snapped his muzzle closed. He couldn’t bring up the other bodies if he didn’t want this to be moved up the chain. Could he even tell Bahamel Radina hadn’t been the elk’s first kill? How many did it take before someone was considered a hunter and put down?

“Marlot, look, I know the lion leaving you had been tough, but—”

“It’s got nothing to do with Trembor!”

She looked at him, smirking, and Marlot shook his head, the reason why he’d kept all the deaths to himself coming up.

Marlot sighed. “Fine, it might have something to do with him. It doesn’t change the fact that the elk arranged to kill Radima.”

“How do you know her name?”

“I checked her ID,” Marlot said, pulling it out of his pocket.

“Okay, fine. Let’s say he did arrange to kill her. Maybe she pissed him off or something. It doesn’t matter. The only thing you should care about is that he pays his tax. That’s your job, Marlot. Not finding out why he killed her.” Her pad beeped. “Corniel Ironhoves, construction worker,” she read, “no priors, nothing notable either, no case of tax evasion recorded against him. He’s been in the same position for fifteen years. Meat waiting to happen. The only thing keeping him alive has to be his size and mass. He scares most predators. You really think this male aimed to kill her?”

Having him described like this did make Marlot question his thoughts. Yes, the elk was strong enough to kill, but to plan it? To arrange for someone to stalk him until he was in a position to kill them? And hadn’t the others been killed in their homes? Or had they been moved there after the kill?

He didn’t know. He hadn’t investigated each death. He hadn’t been able to. To do that, he’d have to have broken Trembor’s precious laws.

“Marlot?” Bahamel asked.

“Just mulling over the kind of idiot I’ve been.”

Could the elk be the hunter? Possibly. Maybe the construction job he’d held for fifteen years was part of the act. Marlot chuckled. That terrified male, acting like someone who couldn’t rise above construction work for all that time? Maybe. He tried to step back from the interrogation, tried to look at it objectively, but couldn’t. He’d actively ignored everything but the trail he wanted to lead to the kill.

“And what kind have you been?”

The kind who shouldn’t let someone else’s believe box him in. “The kind that lets his emotions get in the way of his work. Ba, I need to talk with the elk.”

“Wolf, you’ve already done enough.”

He raised his hand placatingly. “Send Belric in with me to ensure I don’t do anything stupid. Keep the camera running this time. I just need to clear a few things out for myself.”

“Marlot, if you do anything in there that’s going to cost you your license, I’m not going to be able to protect you. If this is about being angry, just kill him and pay his tax.”

“He’s not who I’m angry at.”

She nodded, consulted her pad. “He’s been moved to room eight. He’d have died on his own fear if I’d let him in that room. The camera will stay on, Wolf.”

Marlot nodded and exited her office. In the bullpen, he imagined the eyes on him, the judgment for barging in. He doubted anyone thought he’d misused his authority, RI could get away with a lot in the pursuit of their quarry. He still felt like he’d crossed a personal line. He’d never been one of those RI’s who shoved enforcers out of their way just because they could.

The elk tensed as soon as Marlot entered the interrogation room. His eyes were wide, he was already looking for a way out. The scent of fear climbed in the small space. Marlot took the corner by the door, not blocking it and not getting any closer to the elk.

“I’m sorry for how I treated you,” Marlot said, studying the elk. How had he thought any of this was an act? That someone could control their scent to that level? “Can you walk me through what lead to Radima’s death? The wolverine,” he added at the elk’s confusion.

The elk swallowed. “I noticed her, caught her scent on the wind, her hunger. I ran. She chased. I couldn’t run anymore. She attacked. I reacted. She was clumsy. I just wanted her to leave. I wanted to run. I grabbed her and shoved her.” He looked at his hands. “She didn’t get up. I saw you. I got scared. I don’t want to be anyone’s food.”

The elk was subdued, tired. Fear could exhaust someone. He looked like prey. Sounded like it. Marlot checked someone on his pad, read out a date and time. “Do you remember where you were?”

The elk shrugged. “At work. I work a lot to keep myself as expensive as I can.”

It could be a lie, with the fear in the air, it would be easy to hide that, but it was too easy to check his whereabouts, why bother lying? Marlot should have done that first, instead of being obsessed with tracking a kill that wasn’t there. Speaking of which. Marlot placed Radima’s ID on the table.

The elk pushed himself away, away from it. The fear increasing. “I can’t. If I pay, if I killed a predator, they aren’t going to let me work. They won’t trust me not to kill another.” He stifled a whine. “I didn’t mean to kill her.”

Marlot nodded. “If you let me keep her body, I’ll pay for her.” She might be above his budget. He didn’t know he hadn’t run her value when putting her in his program, but she was fresh meat. If the elk took her, he’d... what, have to find someone to take her, anyway? “Officially, I’ll be the one who killed her. The system doesn’t care about that, just that her tax gets paid. No one where you work will know this happened.”

Hope mixed in with the fear on the elk’s face. He glanced at the door.

“You’re free to go,” Marlot said.

The elk bolted out of the room, leaving a trail of fear behind him. Marlot wondered if that would cause one of the predator enforcers to chase him? Or if those instincts were kept well in check while working?

He looked at the camera and gave Bahamel a small smile. He’d made this better. Hopefully redeemed his actions a little in her views. Now he needed to get the body processed so he could finally eat fresh meat.

Series of death-17

Trembor tapped the desk with a finger. None of Bo's friends knew where he was. He'd even called some of the females he'd been involved with for a time, but they hadn't seen or heard from him either. His brother was determined not to be found.

Trembor tried to put him out of his mind and brought up Farnal Shines' file. His brother was an adult, he could handle his problem by himself. He'd call Trembor once he decided he wanted help.

Unless it was too late by then.

He left his office and crossed the bullpen to stop before a jaguar typing away at her computer. "Need help with something, Goldenmane?" she asked, not looking up.

"Can you run a search for a car?"

She looked at him, an ear canted. "Forgot how to send out a description file in all the years you abandoned us? Or did you get your RI license revoked somehow?"

"This isn't related to a case. My brother got himself in trouble and found a hole to hide in."

"Wouldn't he be with family? You lions are big on that."

"Checked, the trouble he's in pissed off our father, so even if he wanted to go to him to hide, he'd be kicked out. He wouldn't risk our siblings because they'd tell dad."

"You won't?"

"Only after I'm sure he isn't in trouble anymore."

"Sure, give me the info," Trembor told her the make and model, as well as the identification tag. "Any special instructions you want to be included?"

"Just let me know where it is. I'll do the stalking myself."

* * * * *

His brother's car was parked at a crowded mall in a neighborhood Trembor wasn't familiar with. He didn't think Bo knew it either; the cars around his were more expensive. This area was wealthier than his brother normally frequented. He'd tried to hide his car in a herd of others, but he either hadn't had the time to find a more appropriate place or didn't understand herd mentality and had picked a place with a lot of cars thinking that was all there was to it. Trembor expected it was the latter.

The mall security didn't cover the parking lot, so no way to know where his brother had gone from here. Public transit had four stops nearby, so he could have gone on any of them, or simply walked off.

His brother had done one thing right, not to be easily tracked. He'd lost his scent among others. Even next to Bo's car, Trembor could only smell hints of his brother, and that was drowned as soon as he stepped away from it. Looking around, he tried to work out what his brother was thinking.

He Trembor was tracking prey, he'd go in the mall; until his quarry realized he was stalked, they'd stick to the largest crowd they could. He if was tracking a criminal, he'd head to known hangouts, based on who they were affiliated with. His brother was neither. He was a predator trying to behave like he wasn't one. He'd stand out in a group,

predators always did, no matter how hard they tried to not act like one. Just like the panther that was doing her best to blend in with the prey species coming and going, but they were giving her a wide berth, drawing attention to her.

Trembor ignored her. She was probably letting him do the work, hoping to take both him and Bo down once he found his brother. This meant she had friends close by, but he didn't worry about it. If they tried to take him and Bo, they'd need a lot more people, and unlike them, he and his brother wouldn't have to worry about keeping any of them alive. He could dump any extra bodies in his freezer until he needed the meat.

Of course, he needed to find Bo first, and the city was a big place to hide in; if his brother was still in it.

* * * * *

Trembor walked through the bus depot, looking for any signs his brother might have come by here. What he found instead was a warthog by the ticket kiosks glaring at the lion as he approached. There was nothing overt indicating he was a criminal or part of the same group looking for Bo, but the way he made sure Trembor saw him, the anger in the male's eyes, said they were on opposite sides of the same hunt.

Every way out of the city that wouldn't leave a financial mark in his brother's accounts had someone there, waiting for Bo. Trembor had had someone within the financial crime division look through his brother's account to confirm no payment for a flight out of the city, and had received confirmation his brother hadn't even touched any accounts in three days.

So Bo was remaining hidden without using funds. It ensured he couldn't be tracked that way, but how long could he do that? As far as he knew his brother didn't have a reserve of physical currency.

Was his brother hiding among the homeless population?

Trembor shuddered at the idea, but it was a place to start. A place where his brother wouldn't need money, and might quickly blend in, if he could stand going hungry for a few days, not bathing for that long. If his brother was going that route to hide, he was definitely going against type for anyone who knew him.

Which wasn't a bad way to hide, Trembor had to admit.

Series of death-18

The homeless were everywhere, but still difficult to find. Their lack of worth made them appealing to each other, or anyone trying to survive while being near homelessness themselves. Having meat in your stomach could be the difference between being about to work or ending up among the homeless.

There were a handful of organizations that tried to help them. Tried to set them back on the path to productivity, and there were even stories of some succeeding. Shaking off the stench of homelessness and returning to society. But mostly, those organizations handed out scraps, begs for support from others, put their own productivity at risk.

Trembor didn't know how to feel about it, as he walked through a deserted alley.

The stench was fresh; they ran off when they noticed him. Letting a predator get close was asking for death and even if it would end their misery, the drive to survive was strong. It was his seventh such alley, trying to catch the scent of his brother.

Somewhere after the second one, he lost his stalkers. Possibly the scents of misery were too much even for them, or they realized this was Trembor's own desperation and saw it as useless. And it was useless, Trembor knew it. Even if his brother was hiding among them, finding one lion among this mass of people doing all they could to not be caught was impossible.

He stopped by a form lying on the ground; the stench emanating from it match that of the alley so he couldn't learn anything, but that they hadn't fled told him they were dead. He checked for a pulse, then wiped his hand from the grime that covered the body's fur. Still warm, it must have been recent, his arrival had distracted the others before they realized it. No signs of violence so death by hunger?

Trembor shuddered. That was a horrible way to go. Better to be someone's meal than suffer like that. He walked away, the others would return, eat the little meat that was on the body, postpone their death for a while.

He considered looking for the body's ID, they might still have it; but other than getting himself dirty, what would it serve? If they had family, they didn't need to know this was what their relative had amounted to.

He walked out of the alley and head rustling behind him as the homeless returned. He heard the fight break as he tried to merge with the crowd, the stench of the alley clinging to him, making the crowd keep away, marking him as an outlier, someone ripe for eating.

Trembor felt eyes on him and kept to the well-lit area of the sidewalk as the sun set. He didn't feel like fighting off a predator tonight. He called his brother's pad again, to the same result.

"Come on Bo," Trembor said, "you can't survive by hiding, call me back. Tell me where you are. I promise I'll keep the talk for after we've resolved your problem."

He made it back to the lot he parked his car in with little more than looks. He might smell like someone worth little, but he looked healthy, he looked strong. Only the youngest of predators went only by one sense to decide who they would stalk.

At this hour few cars were left, which made noticing the warthog leaning against Trembor's easy. He might be the same as earlier in the day, Trembor hadn't gotten his scent before and he was downwind. He might be a relative of the one Trembor had in his cooler. Relatives didn't do revenge, it got too expensive, but criminal gangs were different. Quite a few of them wiped each other out because of one body. Whatever the hog's reason, Trembor would take him, adjust his budget, and not worry about food for a while.

Others entered the lot behind Trembor, four more, two massive bears, a tiger and a wolf, each with a predatory grin matching the one the warthog now sported. Him against five was not good odds. Unlike the last time, these were ready for him to fight back. Even the wolf, who was leaner than the others, still looked like he could give Trembor a

tough time.

They kept their distance as the warthog approached Trembor, who unbuttoned his jacket. So this was going to be a grudge match with the others there to make sure Trembor didn't win?

The warthog stopped a few paces away, out of easy reach, or a lunge, and looked Trembor over. The look was contempt. Easy to give, Trembor thought, when it was five against one.

The warthog smiled. "Someone would like to see you." He motioned toward the back of the lot, where Trembor made out a large car at the edge of the light.

Trap resounded in Trembor's mind and he fought the instinct to run, it would just cause them to chase him. And they already had him at a disadvantage. If they wanted to eat him, they had nothing to gain by leading him anywhere.

Trembor stepped toward the car, and the five others formed out behind him. If he decided to turn and run, Trembor wouldn't survive it.

The car was expensive, he decided, something like his father used to own when he was still working. A way to advertise his success, his value, to anyone who might want to hire him, or would consider him a meal. Lawyers tended to attract people who wanted to eat them if they didn't get the result they were after.

Trembor stopped as the door opened. The inside remained dark, revealing only vague shapes. Three people, Trembor thought. One of them made himself known by being pushed out with a surprised cry.

Bo sprawled on the ground, the door closed and the car drove away.

By the time Trembor got over his surprise, his brother was on hands and knees and the thugs had left. He hurried to help him.

"Bo, are you okay?" Trembor grabbed his brother's arm only to have his jerked out of his grasp.

"I'm fine," Bo snapped.

Trembor grabbed his brother and pulled him to his feet, glaring at him. "Who was that? What happened? Where did you vanish to?"

"I said I'm fine." Bo pulled out of Trembor's hold. "No thanks to you."

"Don't lay this at my feet, Bo."

"I asked you for help and you told me to fuck off."

Trembor bit back his reply. Bo was right, he hadn't exactly helped. "Who was that?"

"No one. You can stop worrying about me, it's been resolved."

Trembor narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means this isn't any of your business," Bo replied, "Just like you wanted it."

"That isn't what—"

"Fuck off, Trem. You had your chance to help. I handled it myself, like an adult."

Trembor rolls his eyes but stayed silent. Right running off and hiding was the adult thing to do. "Fine. I'll drive you home."

"To my car. I can drive myself home. I don't need you nagging me any longer

than I have to.”

Trembor stayed silent again, he even managed to keep from speaking all the way to the impound lot, where Bo’s car was waiting, but the moment his brother was out of the car, Trembor took his pad and sent instructions to Herelex to keep an eye on his father and to tell him if he did anything out of character.

Series of death-19

Being sated did wonders for his mood, being sated on actual meat after days of the artificial stuff was a wonder on its own. Never again was he ending up with an empty cooler. That meant getting back into his training regiment, even without Trembor, making sure he had enough potential prey for his program to evaluate and enough money to pay for his next body.

For the next week, Marlot cleared the cases he’d been lax on and took side work cleaning computers of viruses and tracking a hacker for someone who didn’t want to go to the authorities. When he had free time, he did what he could to avoid thinking of Trembor, which wasn’t as easy as he’d like. Even the absence of the lion’s scent in the office acted to remind Marlot he wasn’t there, rather than let him not think about him.

In an attempt to keep his mind busy, he worked on a copy of his evaluation program. Radima Vicious had shown him it wasn’t built to deal with predators. For one thing, there was nothing in it to take into account the need to go out and hunt for food. Could he take advantage of the kiosk’s rating system for his program to find out when a predator had last hunted? Could he look at their preferred kills and work out their hunting territories? How many of the predators’ behavior could be tracked through how they used their ID cards?

Not as many as he’d like, considering he was hoping to keep one from dying, but more than he’d expected. Did prey write such programs to work out places to avoid? Could Marlot find new prey by programming predator behavior within his tracking program?

He’d have to test it once he’d caught the hunter. If it worked, he’d be able to show Trembor that technology didn’t have to mean an entirely different way to hunt, that it could simply add to how he already did it.

His thoughts trailed off, and he sniffed the air, searching for a last trace of the lion. He looked at the empty desk and took out his pad, setting it to record.

“Hey Trem, it’s me again. I miss you.” He looked for more to say. He needed to talk to the lion, but without him there to respond this felt like what it was. Talking to himself. “I still can’t figure out what set you off. What happened to make you walk out like that. Maybe if I could I’d be able to decide what to do. Did you want me just because I was helpless? Pliable? Was it because for once I wanted to do things my way? I have trouble believing that, you worked so hard to get me to be comfortable with who I am. Or was that it? Did you want me only confident enough to stand tall in your shadow?” He let out a breath. “I don’t want to believe that. It’s not who you are. If I’d become more than you wanted to handle, somehow, you’d have set me free, not walked

out. You're not that callous. What happened, Trem? I wish you'd tell me. I want to fix this. Hopefully when I bring you this hunter, you'll—" the knock stopped him.

Hela'han entered and handed him the mail. Two data slates from other cities. Hopefully updates on his cold cases that had out of city connections. An envelope from the revenue department. He ripped it open and looked at the ID card. A bobcat. Delmer Shortfur. He entered the name in his updated copy of his tracking program and watched it work.

Delmer Shortfur, female, thirty-eight, factory supervisor.

Another mid-level productivity person. Did it mean the hunter was in that rating bracket? That those were the kind of people around him, or where they chance encounter? He still didn't know what triggered them to go track them, get their ID, and send that to Marlot. According to the kiosk rating system, Delmer kept to average prey. Her movements surrounding when she paid for one marked her as having a few stalking grounds away from her home. She'd killed less than a week ago and did so every three to four weeks, so at least this time, Marlot didn't have to worry about her going out for food and becoming prey herself.

She hadn't missed work yet. Did it mean she didn't know she'd lost her card yet? It couldn't be. The replacement system was quick, but she had to request it, didn't she? Marlot looked at the card in his hand. It was new. This was a replacement and not the original, so she knew, had to know. This meant she was confident in her ability to hide she'd lost it long enough to get the replacement.

Only it had been redirected to him. The envelope addressed to him.

He wanted to get into the revenue system and looked the code over. The hunter had access; either the knowledge, his claws into someone who could do it or... could he work at the revenue bureau? Marlot couldn't find out any of that within the law so he set the question aside. He'd know who the hunter was once he caught them, and now that he knew their next prey, it wouldn't be long.

"I'm heading out," he told Hela'han, "I might not be back today." He paused at the door. "I might not be in tomorrow. I need to deal with something." The hunter didn't always kill within hours of him receiving the ID card. He might have to watch Delmer Shortfur for a few days.

"If anything related to bodies comes, should I forward the information to your pad or the buffer?" she asked.

"Send it to the buffer. I'll access it throughout the day." Unless a body was found he wasn't expecting anything relevant.

Did he return the ID? He wondered as he drove away. Them having it didn't keep the hunter from killing them, and Delmer had shown enough confidence to keep with her routine, but if she didn't receive it, she'd have to be more careful. Maybe call in sick, stay home. Keeping her in one place would make watching for the hunter easier.

He'd hand her the card after the hunter was killed, it was better if Marlot kept control of as many elements as he could right now.

Series of death-20

Trembor got ready for work, only to find he was out of clean clothing. He tried to remember when he'd last done laundry, but these last weeks were a blur of work. Staying busy to avoid thinking about Marlot. Staying out of the house to avoid the memories of him in it.

He considered going to work in yesterday's clothing; he doubted any of the enforcers would care. All of them had had to work in clothing a few days old at times. He remembered week-long stakeouts back in his enforcer days. Those hadn't been pleasant.

He decided to do laundry before heading into work.

While waiting for it to be done, he noticed a layer of dust on the picture frames in the living room, then the dust accumulating in the corner. The fur embedded in the bedroom carpet, some of it black, and he had to vacuum that out.

By the time lunch came around he'd added the bedsheets to the laundry pile, he'd placed in a call for someone to clean the air circulation system when he caught Marlot's scent on the air. His fur had to be clogging the filters.

That meant he had to stay home for the rest of the day, so he took the time to set his home computer to clean up. Marlot had been adamant about it being done regularly to keep it running properly, but Trembor never noticed his computer misbehaving. He almost stopped when the thought that it was a subtle way Marlot had tried to exert control popped up, but the cleanup program came pre-installed, so the manufacturer had to believe it had a value.

He ran it and moved on to ordering his office.

Once the air circulation maintenance female arrived, it was mid-afternoon, and he had his closet refilled and ordered, his bed made, the other rooms sparkling. And he was considering heading into the office for a few hours.

He checked his pad to see if any messages relating to the bodies he was investigating had come in and found the battery was drained. He'd forgotten to charge it again. Marlot would chew him out of it.

He shook his head. No, he wouldn't. Marlot wasn't part of his life anymore. With his pad needing a charge, he wasn't going anywhere. So he looked around for something to do. The house was clean. It was a couple of hours until dinner time.

He could watch some TV. It had been a while since he'd checked the Survivor show. He should be able to call up the episodes he'd missed. After the maintenance female left, he decided. That was interrupted by the hyena female walking up to his door as the maintenance one left.

"Derimak," Trembor greeted her, "what are you doing here?" she was out of uniform.

She raised a pack of cans and one wrapped in butcher paper. "I brought drinks and snacks. Can I come in?"

Trembor let her in. "So you brought a bribe, still doesn't explain what you're doing here."

She sniffed the air. “You didn’t show up at the precinct, so we decided to see if anything had happened to you. They figured I had the best chance of surviving if you were in a bad mood.” She motioned around. “Cleaning day?”

“It was needed.” Trembor mentioned to the couch before dropping in his chair. “I was out of clean clothes.”

She tilted an ear, handing him a can. “The last time I remember you not having anything to wear we had been in that housing complex for five days, watching the house on the other side of the street and you complained about wanting to head out to get a change of clothing.”

“They could have made sure there was a laundry setup if we were going to be there for so long.” He claws the can open and took a sip. Barely any alcohol in it.

“I’m not looking to get you bawling on my shoulder,” the hyena said.

“Just loosen my tongue a little.”

She shrugged. “This is the first day you haven’t been into work since that wolf hurt you. You haven’t really talked about it.”

“If I was interested in talking about it, I would have, no alcohol required.”

She nodded. “Are you going to keep the office?”

Trembor tilted an ear at the change in subject. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“The renewal is in three days. If you’re still in, Captain Gold’s going to have to let the accounting department know and they’re going to have to charge you rent.”

Trembor had come in a few days after the previous charge date, and the captain had let him use the office free of charge since he wasn’t required to inform anyone it was in use until the next date. Which was in three days. The tiger had probably told Trembor, but those first days without Marlot had been rough and he didn’t remember much of them.

“I’m going to have to look around. See how much other offices charge.”

“I’m pretty sure accounting will give you a lower rate, on account of you being RI and having been one of us.”

Trembor snorted. “Accounting doesn’t give anyone anything. They’re like bears and honey, never want to share.”

Derimak winced. “That’s a stereotype and you know it.”

“Still gets the point across.” He cut the package open with a claw and pulled a strip of dried meat. “Is this leftover from that bust?”

“Yeah. Ogber dried what was left, and it’s been in a sitting there, waiting for someone to eat it.”

“So you volunteered me?”

She took a strip. “How are you eating?”

“Quite well, thank you.”

She seemed surprised by the response.

“I do go out to hunt, you know. I have meat in the cooler, warthog.”

“Then what’s been distracting you? These last days you’ve been missing things, don’t think we didn’t notice.”

Trembor frowned. What had he missed? It couldn't be important stuff, they would have pointed that out.

"If you tell me it's that wolf, I am going to head out and bring back his body."

"Family stuff." Bo was behaving, at least Herelex hadn't messaged him, but Trembor was still worried about his brother and whatever deal he'd made.

"Family can be a bitch," Derimak said. "Especially big ones." She too had a large family. Trembor had met many of them at one enforcer event or another back when he was one. There had been much more biting and snarking in her family than in his.

"And you're not bringing me that body either," Trembor said with a grin.

"Wouldn't dream of it. Getting in the middle of another family's problems is the best way to lose limbs."

As was getting involved with criminals. He wished Bo would talk to him.

"How is your family doing?" Trembor asked to change the subject.

Derimak snorted and started telling him about which of her brother was now on the outs with their mother, or which of the fathers was trying to ingratiate himself back in her good grace.

Hyena family structure was weird, as far as Trembor was concerned with the mother taking in this male or that to father her children but never mating them. Keeping the females close and making life difficult for the males. Nothing like the arrangement his father and mothers had.

But her family made for great entertainment when he didn't want to think about himself, Bo, or Marlot.

Series of death-21

Marlot looked at the map he'd bought on which he'd plotted Shortfur's movements; her preferred hunting grounds, the route she took to go into work. The store she did business with. He'd even included the friends he'd been able to find and the best route to go to them.

He'd marked all ambush spots along those routes. There was a lot. He'd never considered it before, but the city seemed to have been built more for predators than prey. There were a lot of alleys funneling into one exit, lots of buildings with elevated fire escapes; those were a safety thing, but had the city planners considered they were also a good place for a predator to drop from onto their prey?

Delmer Shortfur stepped out of her house, and Marlot shadowed her, careful not to be noticed. She did seem to be a little nervous, she'd finally called in sick. The afternoon crowd was thin, and the hunter hadn't killed in public, but Marlot still observed the ambush places he'd found and looked for others.

The hunter wasn't the only predator he needed to worry about. Nervousness was a prey behavior and Delmer was a smaller person. She lived and dressed as a middle rated worker. A predator down on their luck might decide she's made a good meal.

He'd have to stop anyone trying to kill her, on the off chance they were the hunter. He'd be better controlled this time. Question them instead of losing it as he had with the

Elk.

She bought a variety of spices and herbs as well as some greens and headed home. She was a baker, it seemed. That hadn't shown up in his research.

Once she was back inside her house, Marlot went back to his car and pulled up the other bodies. Had any of them also called in sick? Radima had, but Marlot hadn't thought to look for that with the others since they were already dead.

A call came in—he didn't recognize the number—and he continued working. Shines was home when he died. Called in sick too. The jaguar before that as well. The badger had been, but had returned to work the day before he died. Marlot remembered him now. He was the last he'd returned the ID card to before leaving for the commune.

Before his life fell about.

Before Trembor walked away from him.

A call came in—the same number. Marlot was too lost in his misery to care about it.

He brought up a picture of the lion. His shirt and jacket open to reveal his golden fur, his dark mane flowing over it. Marlot closed his eyes and breathed in, trying to remember the scent. The feel of Trembor's arms around him; his body pressing against his.

His pad buzzed again—the same number and it pulled Marlot out of the painful memories. Three times was more than someone miss-entering a number.

“Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw speaking.”

“Hello, Mister Blackclaw,” someone said. He couldn't tell the gender. The voice was artificially modulated. “Or do you prefer I call you Marlot?” Who would call him and hide their voices? He considered terminating the call, but they knew his name. They'd called him multiple times.

“I guess it depends on what I get to call you,” Marlot answered, looking around. He'd picked this parking lot because it had a line of sight to Shortfur's house, but it also didn't offer much in the way of hiding places, other than being inside his car. People were moving about, prey and predator, some talking on their pads.

“I'll have to call you Mister Blackclaw then.”

Marlot tried to see if anyone's lip movement matched the words.

“If you're not going to give me your name, how about you tell me why you're calling me?”

“I wanted to say that I'm happy you're feeling better, I'm told that a breakup isn't always easy to get over.”

Marlot snorted. “What makes you think I'm over anything?” Then he realized the implication of the comment. Whoever this person was, they'd watched him. They knew about him and Trembor.

“I see.” The silence stretched. “I thought that you'd gotten back on my trail because you were your old self again.”

“My old self isn't going to happen without my cougar in it.” How well did this person know Marlot's life?

“You are still enough of yourself to try to trick me, I’m glad. Trembor is a lion.”

Marlot swallowed and searched around. He hadn’t been secretive about his relationship with Trembor in those last months, but someone still had to get relatively close to know about it. Were they here? Watching him now? Why? He almost asked, but something the person on the other end of the call said finally registered.

“You’re the hunter.”

“I am.” Was that satisfaction in the voice? Smugness? The modulation made it difficult to tell, and pads didn’t carry scents. Could they? Marlot pushed the inquisitiveness away. “Can I ask you a question?”

Marlot wasn’t certain how to answer that. “Sure.”

“What is it like being with someone else?”

“Don’t you know?”

The hunter was silent. “Not the way you and Trembor were.”

Were. The hunter had watched him long enough to have seen them together. Marlot tried to remember when the first ID card had arrived. It was after Trembor had gotten shot after Marlot had finally told his lion he loved him. Once he stopped hiding it for everyone else. Should he answer? He didn’t have anything set up to trace the call. But maybe he could get the hunter to reveal something by keeping the conversation going.

“I don’t know how to describe it. He made me happy, but it didn’t stop there. With him, I felt alive.” Marlot smiled to himself, remembering Trembor pushing him in a hidden corner to kiss him, Marlot freaking out someone might see them. “He pushed me to get over my fear. To realize what we had wasn’t anyone else’s business. That I deserved to be happy.”

“That sounds nice.” Was that sorrow? Marlot cursed the modulation. How was he supposed to learn anything about the hunter if he couldn’t properly read the intonations? “Why did you break up?”

“He left me,” Marlot snapped. “We didn’t break up, he left me.”

“Why?” this time the surprise in the voice was unmistakable.

“I don’t know.” Marlot deflated. Trembor had been so angry over... nothing. Over Marlot doing things his way, which he’d done often enough, the lion shouldn’t have been surprised. “I just don’t know.”

“You want him back.”

Marlot snorted. “Of course I want him back. I’m not prey, to just accept my fate. Why are you calling me?” Marlot asked. He was done reminiscing about the past, hurting. “Why are you sending me the ID cards? You’re the one doing that, right? You got in the Revenue replacement system and are redirecting the cards to me. Why?”

“Then why didn’t you...” he trailed off. “I called you because I wanted to congratulate you for getting back on my trail.” Even with the modulation, the tone was all business now. “After the wolverine, I was worried you might make our game public. I’m happy you didn’t. Having other people interfere would be such a bother.”

“A game? You think this is a game? You’re leaving bodies to rot.”

“They serve a purpose, even if it’s not to feed you.”

Marlot sighed to reign in his anger. Hunters didn’t think like other predators. Getting angry over them leaving meat lying around wouldn’t help.

“Why are you sending me the ID cards? You had to realize it was just a question of time before I’d realize what’s going on.”

“I was hoping you’d be faster, but you had your own issues to deal with, I understand that.”

“You want me to find you? You want me to stop you?” That went contrary to everything he’d read, to what he’d experienced with Ruxol. That hunter had wanted to continue to kill, had done everything he could to prevent his capture.

“I have to be stopped.” Was that a statement? Had there been sadness? Defiance? Was the hunter goading Marlot?

“If you know you have to stop, then turn yourself over to the enforcer.” Marlot would lose the opportunity to show Trembor he could catch the hunter while still following the law, but at least he’d be off the street.

“No.”

“Do you or don’t you want to be stopped? Or is what you’re saying meaningless?”

“A soldier doesn’t surrender himself to the enemy!” The hunter was male and a soldier. Or was this someone who thought himself part of the Protectors?

“The enforcers are not the enemy. They’re here to keep everyone safe, just like the Protectors do.”

The snort was loud, but the hunter didn’t add anything. No other piece of information to be had here.

“If you aren’t going to turn yourself over. Why don’t you simply stop?”

“I tried. I fighting you would be enough to appease what they did to me.” They’d fought? “But it didn’t work.”

Marlot tried to remember everyone he’d fought, but it wasn’t like he’d been selective. When Trembor wasn’t there, he’d fight any and all predators at the gym.

“Then just end it,” Marlot said.

“Could you give up?” the hunter replied. “Could you abandon your mission?”

“I’m not leaving bodies to rot, I’m not breaking one of our core laws.”

“But you are breaking laws. Why aren’t you stopping?”

“Because it’s what I need to do to get things done.”

“Same as me.” Hunters made no sense.

“Fine. Why me?”

“Because I thought you could stop me; since you’ve done it before.”

He couldn’t mean him specifically, Marlot would remember having to do something like this before. So what did he mean?

The hunter sighed. “Now I’m wondering how many more bodies it will take before to put some serious effort into it.”

“What are you—” Marlot looked at the house and cursed. With a chuckle from the other end, the call terminated.

Marlot ran to the house and banged on the door. When Shortfur didn't answer he considered hacking the lock, but if he left any evidence he'd have to pay for the body. And maybe she wasn't dead. Maybe she was taking a nap and was a heavy sleeper. Marlot went around the house, looking in every window he could see in.

He found her body looking into the kitchen window. The back door was unlocked, but he didn't go in. This wasn't his territory. He called the hunter and heard a ring coming from the tall grass in the backyard. He had to call it again before he located the pad. The hunter had left it behind. Marlot didn't believe he'd accidentally dropped it. He took it, stepping to the fence door leading to the lane behind the yards. No one stood in it, waiting for Marlot to notice him before running off.

But he had a pad now, and there might be information on it he could use. Using the lane to walk around the block and to his car, he called the anonymous reporting line and gave Shortfur's address. This would ensure the body got into a freeze before it went to waste. Now, when he caught the hunter and all his bodies were released, this one would feed someone.

Series of death-22

The voices were loud and joyous when Trembor opened the door to the Watering Hole. He had to dodge prey and predator that moved from table to table, drink in hand, congratulating one another. At the bar, he received a nod from L'nard as his cousin made a series of drinks for his servers to deliver. A sleek fox and ermine had joined the bear tonight in carrying trays.

L'nard placed a tall glass of alcoholized blood before Trembor in passing, and he drank a quarter of it before his cousin returned and remained.

"Should I start calling ahead of time to reserve a stool?" Trembor asked, trying not to laugh at the be-ragged expression on the other lion.

"Office party," L'nard replied, filling a glass with water and drinking most of it in one go. "Someone got promoted at an actuarial firm, so you can imagine I didn't expect this level of... energy." The lion studied Trembor. "How are you doing?"

"Have you heard about Bo?" Trembor sipped his blood, watching his cousin.

"I heard he's on the outs with your dad."

"Bo's taken up gambling."

L'nard winced. "And Torim hasn't gutted him?"

"It came close to it at the last family dinner. Dad is angry, Bo is, well, Bo, and digging his claws in."

"It's got to be more than being stubbornness if it's unnerving you like this."

"Bo is in—" Trembor stopped, shook his head, not coming up with anything he could say.

L'nard smiled. "Ahh, the famous Trembor neutrality. Keeping all those family secrets is hounding you now?"

Trembor smiled back. "You're one to talk. How many things do you hear you

won't divulge from behind this bar?"

"The big difference is that it's mostly strangers talking to me. I can count on one hand the times that's put in a bind and even then, the worse I had to deal with was an unexpected expense and finding space in my cooler for the extra meat, when neither side was reasonable. I don't think that's going to work with family."

Trembor shook his head. "Whichever I'd end up putting in a freezer, I'd have to deal with Serene."

L'nard shuddered. "Now that's a scary female. Your dad ever say how they hooked up?"

"That's a story you have to hear from her mouth directly. Ask her next time everyone gets together."

"Absolutely not." L'nard smiled. "I want to leave long enough for me and Tiff to have plenty of cubs." Someone raised his voice at the other end of the bar. "Break's over. Signal me if you want a refill. You get two more, then I'm cutting you off, family or not." His cousin grabbed glasses and bottles on his way to the insistent customer.

Trembor drank slowly. He wanted his cousin's advice on what to do about Bo, but he wasn't sure how to step around his self-imposed restrictions to maintain his position as family confidant. Marlot would be a better person to speak with, he realized, and had his pad in hand, his number pulled up before he stopped himself. He was not talking to him ever again. He was not putting himself in a position of owing that male anything.

Even if it meant Bo got in even deeper with whatever criminal family he was indebted to? He placed the pad on the bartop. Fuck. Why was life so damned complicated? Marlot knew people within the criminal underworld and unlike his friends within the enforcers, he wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion Bo needed to be a pawn in a sting to arrest them. Trembor just wanted his brother out of it, not involved deeper.

But he knew what price Marlot would demand, and Trembor had sworn to never put himself at someone else's mercy like that again.

A cheer erupted and the male on the stool next to Trembor winced hard enough his drink sloshed over the rim. The hare gave Trembor a sheepish smile as he mopped up the liquid with a napkin.

"Not comfortable in large crowds?" Trembor asked, motioned to L'nard for a refill.

"I grew up with thirty or so siblings, crowds are normal for us." He folded the wet napkin and set it on L'nard's side of the bar. "It's sudden loud noises that put me on edge." Another sheepish smile. "It usually means a predator's about to strike."

"The Watering Hole's a no predation bar, you're safe here."

"I know. It's why I come." The hare lifted his glass as L'nard gave his space a quick wipe after delivering Trembor's drink. "But the instinct has saved my life often. Loud roars, hide in the closest hole."

His cousin took the empty glass and went back to his other customers, starting to look like he regretted opening the bar.

“You’re here today, so I have to agree that the instinct served you well.” Trembor took a sip and looked at the number on his pad, trying to decide what to do.

“I don’t often see someone agonizing over a number they blocked,” the hare commented with a nod toward the pad. Trembor realized the icon was next to the number. He’d been so used to seeing it there, it barely registered.

“Someone who could, maybe, help a family situation.”

“Bo?”

Trembor narrowed his eyes at the hare.

“I sat down before your conversation with the barman. I caught the name and that he’s in trouble with your father. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Trembor shook his head. “My fault for talking about family problems in a bar.”

“Barmales are good people to unload on,” the hare said, “although I get a sense the two of you are related, so that might impede the act.”

“L’nard’s my cousin.”

The hare nodded to the pad again. “If that person can help, what is the issue?”

Trembor ran a loving finger over the number. “He’s my ex.” A message ‘the number is currently blocked. Do you wish to remove the block?’ appeared. He tapped no.

“Ah.” The hare sipped his drink. “Bad breakup?”

You didn’t leave me any choice. Marlot had said, looking at him from across the roof of the car, his expression that of being hurt.

“I broke it up before it turned bad.”

“I see. Are you certain it would have turned bad? If you knew what would happen, couldn’t you have done something to keep it in the right direction?”

You didn’t leave me any choice. Gorrek had said, standing over Trembor, his expression pained. Trembor’s muzzle broken.

He shook his head. “I know the type. The only way to keep things from getting worse with them is to walk away.”

The hare turned to face Trembor, the angle of his ears inquisitive.

“I’ve been in an abusive relationship before,” Trembor said with a shrug. The hare was a stranger. Why not unload since he couldn’t really do with L’nard? “It got really bad before I finally found the guts to walk away from that one. In the hospital, bad. I was no more than a kid, but that’s no excuse. I’m a predator, I should have known better than to let Gorrek charm me into a position where I was nothing more than his thing.”

“And you are certain his male would do the same thing? Is it possible you misinterpreted his actions?”

“Are you a counselor?” Trembor asked, amused. The hare replied with a shrug. Trembor could see him as a counselor. He was prey, unassuming, disarming. There was this air around him that put the lion at ease. “You don’t misinterpret those signs. Especially not when they’re basically identical.”

“Maybe he doesn’t mean to be like that?”

Trembor snorted. “He kept up the loving act for three years before he slipped.

Only intent explains that. He knew what he was doing and if he hadn't slipped, he would have slowly turned me into a thing too." Trembor cursed quietly. "I should have seen it coming." He took a long swallow.

The hare nodded. "You barely avoided a predator's teeth once and think you've learned everything there was to know about them. Only to discover every predator's different. That each has his stalking method, his way of taking you down. More than one prey lost their lives because of that assumption."

"Yeah, you're a counselor." Trembor grinned. "And yeah, I've gotten more than one meal because a prey though I'd behave how previous predators did. I hadn't really thought about how I'd done the same thing with Marlot."

"That's this male?" the hare nodded to the number.

"Yeah. He really had me fooled with the defenseless act." Trembor sighed.

The hare took his pad out and looked at it before finishing his drink. "I need to go."

"Work in the morning?"

"Yes, and I want to be away from here before too many predators realize this party is going on. The no predation zone ends at the bar's door. And this many drunk prey might cause a frenzy. I'd hate to be caught in the middle of that." He left a bill on the counter as he stood. "If I can give you a last piece of advice, don't let the past define your future. Some people are locked on their paths, but sometimes people just make mistakes and don't mean to cause hurt."

Trembor watched the hare leave. He was sure he meant well, but it was clear he hadn't been in an abusive relationship. Marlot hadn't hacked his pad and locked him out by mistake. *You didn't leave me any choice.* It had been a deliberate act to establish control over him.

"Do you want a refill?" L'nard asked, indicating the nearly empty glass.

Trembor finished it, then shook his head. "That hare, is he a regular?"

His cousin frowned. "I don't think so. I thought he was with the party."

"If you need someone to help out, you should offer him a job. He's amazing at getting people to open up."

"He got you to open up? That's high praise. What's his name?"

Trembor opened his muzzle, then closed it. "Never thought to ask. He didn't ask for mine either."

"And he's good at maintaining anonymity."

"I think he's a counselor. He has that way of talking that reminds me of the one I had to see after Gorrek."

L'nard nodded to the pad on the bartop. "I guess he's reopened wounds."

"I allowed him to reopen them. I was so taken in by his act I never even bothered looking for the signs."

"What if there wasn't any?" L'nard said.

"What do you mean?"

His cousin looked conflicted. "I'm just saying, how would you feel if you could

look back on everything clearly and you didn't see any signs? Would it change the current situation?"

"I don't know. But if somehow there weren't any signs, it just means he's that much craftier than Gorrek ever was."

L'nard looked like he wanted to say something, but a customer called out to him. He took the money the hare left and went serve them. Trembor didn't wait for him to be done. He gave his cousin a wave and headed out. The hare was right in that all these drunk prey would cause a frenzy around the block, and while he didn't intend to take advantage of it, he didn't want to be in the middle of it either.

Series of death-23

The pad was unregistered. Marlot wasn't surprised, but he was disappointed. He'd hoped the hunter had dropped it by accident, rather than gotten rid of it after his crime. His pad would have contained call histories, messages sent back and forth, and it would have every location he'd been to.

Instead, it only had one number in it, and only one location. The house where he'd killed Shortfur and Marlot's number. The one program added was the modulator that made his voice impossible to distinguish.

It was a generic model sold anywhere in the city. The hunter could have a case of them, only turning one on when he needed to place a call. If he had contacts within the enforcers he was willing to bring into this, he could have them trace the registry number engraved on the back and find out which store it had been bought in. But even with that, he didn't expect it would help; he hadn't found any stay fur attached to the pad to tell Marlot what species the hunter was. And didn't even know when the pad had been bought. Unless the hunter had bought a case of it, the purchase would be unnoticed.

He disconnected the pad from his computer and put it in a drawer. He'd wipe it thoroughly later and have a backup if he needed it. One that couldn't be traced to him, even if he accidentally left clues to who he was on it, was a good thing to have.

Marlot accessed the enforcer network and checked if Shortfur's house was part of the area covered. The crime rate in that area was too low to warrant the expense, so he couldn't hope to find someone fleeing from the house as Marlot ran to it. He couldn't wait for the entire city to be covered, it would make his job much easier.

He pulled Shortfur's ID from a pocket. It was new. It had none of the scuff marks those acquired over the years of being handled. Since the revenue department insisted they hadn't sent out the cards, was this a fake? He ran a finger against the back, feeling the indentations along the bottom. Without the machine to read it, he couldn't tell if it was gibberish or the proper information for the system to read. The hologram superimposed over Shortfur's face was accurate. Those two were where amateurs tended to screw up. The indentations were mistaken for wear and not put there, and the hologram was difficult to recreate without the proper machines.

He sent a message to a contact, asking for pricing for a top of the line ID

reproduction and set to work finding a different way to locate his quarry.

He brought up his prey tracking program. Could he retool it to backtrack to the kind of predator who would go after these people? What would that require? Figuring out prey and their worth was all numbers. But this new program would have to take into account personality. Could computers do that?

His pad buzzed with his contact's response. The price for a top of the line fake ID was exorbitant. For the hunter to have bought eleven of them, he'd be rich beyond the need to do what he was doing.

Hunters were sick, Marlot reminded himself. How rich they were didn't come into it, other than maybe their family could have them treated. Was that even a thing?

The odds were good they weren't fake, which meant the hunter could, or knew someone who could get within the revenue department's computers. The security on those computers was high, but there was no such thing as an unbreakable computer security wall.

Marlot considered calling Afirna and have her go into them to look for traces, but he didn't have a case or even an official body. She liked her job and freedom too much to agree. Could he do it? He was skilled, but not on Afirna's level.

He went to their site. Brought up the page's code on a second screen. He could see exploits, three glaring ones that had to be traps. Four that could have been missed, but probably were also traps and found two after half an hour of exploring the page and reading related posts on less than legal boards he was confident he could use to get within the system. There would be more security after that, but as much as he wanted to capture the hunter right now, he had the time.

With a grin, Marlot began coding his way into one of the exploits. "And it's the tech head on the attack," he whispered to himself, using Trembor's pet name for him.

His fingers froze over the keys. He shook the memory away. He needed to do this. It was the only way he could track the hunter and show Trembor he was worthy of him. Except that he was about to break the law big time; what would Trembor think of *that*?

He'd understand, he tried to convince himself. Except Marlot knew the lion wouldn't. He'd only tolerated Marlot making use of his contacts in the underworld because that wasn't technically illegal.

"Forget Trembor," Marlot told himself. Could he do this and not get caught? Breaking into the revenue department's system would destroy his productivity rating. He'd definitely be stripped of his RI license, and he wouldn't be surprised if they made an example of him. He wouldn't be able to afford the fine. Maybe he could negotiate a deal like Afirna?

He snorted. He definitely didn't have the kind of skill she did. He'd be looking at a work detail. At least he wouldn't be eaten for this, at least not directly. Work details didn't count for his productivity, so only be left worthless once he was done with that.

Not to say anything of not being with Trembor.

He moved his hands away from the keyboard and forced his breathing to slow. His goal was to show Trembor he could work within the law. He figured the lion would let

him get away with skirting it if required, but outright breaking in wouldn't be accepted.

“Okay, Marlot. If you can't break the law, what would Trembor's thoughts be on hiring someone who can?” that would be breaking the law by extension, so also off the table.

What did he have left? Little. If he couldn't break into the revenue department, breaking into the other RI's computers for information was also out. Those he expected he could do without being caught, but he'd have to explain to Trembor how he got the information.

If he wanted them to tell him what they knew, he'd have to tell them about the hunter, and he'd made it clear he wanted this to remain between the two of them. He hadn't said what he'd do if Marlot brought anyone else in, but it would probably lead to some sort of end without Marlot capturing him.

Would he chase the hunter to another city if he ran? That was how Marlot had arrived here, but he'd had nothing holding him to the commune, he'd been looking for any excuses to leave. If he left the city, would Trembor come with him?

No, not right now.

Would the lion wait for him? Trembor had blocked him out of his life; that wasn't a sign he was interested in waiting.

Marlot had to play this by the rules the hunter set and by those wanting Trembor back imposed.

He sighed. “What the fuck is left for me to work with?”

Series of death-24

Trembor sat the thin puma down before the processing officer. “Jerder Masshunter, case 254-6542.” The poor male had killed his neighbor during an argument, freaked out, and been hiding for the last three weeks. Trembor found evidence he'd eaten a little of the homeless, but only out of desperation. The meat on those was not particularly edible.

“You have the supporting evidence?” the deer on the other side of the desk asked.

“I didn't do it,” the puma said, earning himself a stern glare from her.

Trembor handed her the slate. The puma had left fur at the scene, the bull had had the puma's blood on his knuckles. Identifying him as the killer had been simple. It was tracking him down that had been time-consuming.

“Any personal opinion, RI Goldenmane?” she asked.

This was why he tried to hand over his quarry to her. She wasn't as hard as some of the other processing officers within the revenue bureau. “An argument got out of hand. Everything I found speaks to him being scared more than anything. He didn't set out to break the law.”

“Why didn't you just pay the tax?” she asked the puma.

“I couldn't afford it,” he replied meekly.

“There are lending agencies.”

“I already owe too much. It's why I moved back in with my mom. I was trying to

cut down on the expenses to I could repay everyone.”

“Couldn’t she pay it for you?” the officer asked, her tone still neutral.

“I can’t put that on her,” he exclaimed. “I’m supposed to be of hunting age now. I’m not...” he trailed off, blinking to keep tears from falling.

“Does your mother know you’re okay?” She asked.

The puma shook his head.

“I called her to let her know I’d found him,” Trembor said.

The puma looked scared.

“Should I expect her?” the officer asked Trembor.

“I didn’t tell her which office I was taking him to. I figured you’d want to process him in peace. But she is expecting a call.”

She watched the youth for a few seconds. “What’s left of the body?”

“It’s in relatively good condition. It was only exposed to the elements for a few hours. After three weeks it might have freezer burn, but I’d eat it if it was my kill.”

She inserted the slate, typed, and read. “Would your mother be willing to pay the tax? It is the simplest thing all around.”

“I can’t ask her to do that.”

She placed a hand on the puma’s. “Jerder, she’s your mother. I’m sure she’d rather pay than see you do time among the work crews.”

The puma pulled his hand away. “He’s my kill,” he said defiantly. “My responsibility. I’ll do the time.”

She used her screen to hide a smile from the puma. *Cubs*, she mouthed to Trembor, who shrugged. He’d been the same at that age, determined to prove he didn’t need anyone’s help, and got himself involved with Gorrek, so just as stupid.

“I have him in hand, RI Goldenmane. I should have him processed by the end of the day. Thank you for your good work.”

He nodded, feeling slightly hollow as he left. On the trail of Gorrek came Marlot. The reflex to call him, to let him know he’d cleared another body out of the freezer. Celebrate with the wolf.

Why did he still miss him? Miss his touch, his scent? The male was an abuser. He wanted nothing to do with him.

He looked at the empty passenger seat as he started his car. Imagined the wolf there. Imagined his hand on his thigh. He shook the memory away. He’d get over the wolf, as he’d gotten over Gorrek.

* * * * *

He sat the rust-colored wolf in the chair before the revenue bureau officer. This one was an angry-looking boar who glared at Trembor first, then the wolf.

“Boldian firepelt,” Trembor said, handing the slate over. “Case 254-6555.” The deer had been busy processing someone. Not that he’d intended to bring this wolf to her. His tax evasion hadn’t been accidental. He’d done everything he could to cover his tracks, and he’d given Trembor a workout, as well as bruises and cuts.

The boar inserted the slate read his screen. After a minute he seemed to realize he

wasn't alone. "I've got this, you can get out of here." As an afterthought, he added. "Good work."

* * * * *

Trembor read the file again. He'd asked the scene investigators to re-run the tests because the first one had come back without any usable evidence of the killer and that was just... well, not impossible, he knew that, but highly unlikely. Everyone left something.

There had been... he tried to recall her name. Spottedfur, that was it. Her killer had been a reptile. He and Marlot had had a tough time figuring in that out. He rubbed his shoulder, the memory of the bullet wound coming back. And Marlot had made that bastard pay for hurting him.

The smile fell as the context changed. Of course, Marlot had killed the reptile, he'd dared hurt his possession. Gorrek had never done anything quite that extreme, but there had been a few beatings in clubs where Trembor had been paraded, and males had been too free with how they touched him. Gorrek didn't share.

With a curse, he shook the memory away and focused on the case. Farnal Shines. Coyote, without any known enemy, only a few work-related grudges, but Trembor had cleared them. The only think of note was that he'd requested a replacement ID card. Which Trembor already knew, since Marlot was at the coyote's house to return it when Trembor arrived.

Of course, it'd be the case the wolf showed up at that Trembor couldn't clear. Enforcer had asked around the neighborhood and no one had seen anything. He didn't want to think about any cases this way, but he suspected this was going to turn into that one case every investigator ended up with that lingered in their freezer for their entire career.

Marlot had one of those. Trembor had managed to avoid it, until now.

Marlot again.

He growled and took his pad, proud of himself for remembering to set it on the charging plate this time and specifically not think of Marlot and his constant reminders to do so.

"Hey uncle Trembor," Herelex greeted him.

"Hey kid, how are you doing?"

"Don't you mean, how is my dad doing?"

Trembor let out a breath. "My scent's that strong?"

"He's the one in trouble at the moment," his nephew replied, and Trembor smiled as he heard the shrug in his voice.

"How is my brother doing?"

"Dad looks to be okay. He's a little on edge, but Isy hasn't picked up on it and dad is working hard to hide it. He took us to Grand Central yesterday after classes."

"How's the amusement park?"

"It's okay," Herelex answered in a clear "I am not a cub anymore," tone. "Isy had fun. Dad was distracted."

“Anyone new show up to the house? People your dad didn’t use to hang out with?”

“No, no one. He hasn’t even brought a female over since we last talk, and that is weird for him.”

“Okay, thanks. Let me know if anything changes.”

“Are you okay?” Herelex asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Right, because you always call me while working when you’re fine. His *him* again, isn’t it?” Marlot had gone back to being “him”, for which Trembor was grateful.

He sighed. “He keeps sneaking into my thoughts. He’s particularly perseverant today.”

“You’ll get past him. You’re stronger than he is.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you at the next family dinner.” He disconnected. Was he stronger than Marlot? If he was, why did he still yearn for him? For his touch. The feel of his body against him. Why did he want to comfort the wolf?

“Because you’re addicted,” Trembor snarled. “You know that. You were the same way to Gorrek. They get you used to them and use that to control you.”

But he should be stronger than that. Trembor knew the trick, so he should be able to ignore it.

Maybe he wasn’t as strong at Herelex thought.

His pad buzzed, breaking the chain of thoughts.

“RI Goldenmane,” he answered.

“Trembor,” the enforcer dispatcher said, “a call just came in, there’s a body in your territory.”

“I’m on it,” He replied, standing, happy for anything to distract him, even if it meant someone had been left to rot.

Series of death-25

How many retired soldiers were there in the city? Maybe not retired, but discharged. If the guy was a hunter, Marlot figured he’d have caused problems within the Protectors.

He ran the search and came up with a page explaining that the Protectors didn’t release that information to protect the people who had served, regardless of how they left the service. Secretive bunch, the Protectors. Unlike the enforcers, they didn’t advertise other than to recruit. No big show every year to demonstrate their strength. No parading through the streets after every victory. They trained and acted away from the center of populations.

Soldiers weren’t under an order of secrecy. Once they left, there had been one, a medic, Marlot met a few months before. Maybe if he could track her down, she’d be able to put him in contact with someone within the Protectors? Would they talk to him even then?

He searched the city’s medic database, but there were so many of them and a lot

of sheep too. No notes of which one had served, although he could dismiss the younger ones. Service was twelve years, and only people of predation age could join. So the youngest would be thirty. Marlot added a few to the list. He'd expected the youngest to leave the service in his forties.

That left him eight sheep, three of which were male. He'd have to contact the five others to find out which was the one who had treated him.

Hela'han knocked at the office door as he transferred the five numbers to his pad. "Sir? An express delivery just arrived." She held an envelope to him.

"Thanks." He knew what it was before looking at the provenance. He recognized the weight of it. He dropped it on the desk as Hela'han closed the door behind her, and he went back to transferring the medic's information.

The symbol and address in the upper right corner of the envelope kept pulling at his attention. The revenue department's central address next to the simplified punch card initially used to keep track of people. He knew where the damned thing came from. He also knew who'd arranged to send it to him. Only this time he had no interest in playing his game.

He tried to get back to his research, speaking with the first medic on his list, eyes glued to the envelope. There was someone in there. Someone's life. Someone's future. It was a game to the hunter, but there was a life at stake, one that if Marlot did nothing would go to waste, be left to rot.

With a curse, he disconnected in the middle of what the medic said and grabbed the envelope. The card fell out of it, this one different from the others, not new; scoffed and chipped with years of being carried around.

It was face down, with strings of numbers and letters on the back, revenue code for the system to read when the indentations were damaged like it was on this one. With trepidation, Marlot reached for it. Why had the hunter changed how he did things?

He flipped the card over and stared at the lion pictured in the left corner. He recognized him, how could he not, but refused to acknowledge it. There was no way this could be him. He was too smart to let someone like this hunter get close to him.

There was no way someone had gotten Trembor's ID without him knowing about it.

Marlot was out the door, card in one hand, phone in the other, listening to Trembor's system message telling Marlot he was blocked.

He slammed into his car, the door refusing to open. With a curse, he unlocked it and got out of the parking lot, almost hitting another car in his hurry. He forced himself to slow down. He wouldn't be able to help Trembor if he got in an accident. He gently merged with traffic.

He needed to get in contact with his lion. He couldn't hack his way through the block while driving, and he couldn't think of anyone in his family who'd accept his call. Or at least, not his immediate family at least.

He searched for the Watering Hole's number and called it. It rang, and kept ringing, not going to a message center. Marlot let it ring. There had to be someone there,

even early afternoon like this.

“Watering Hole,” a male finally answered, “We’re closed.”

“L’nard?”

“Yeah.” The lion sounded cautious.

“It’s Marlot, I’m—”

“Trembor’s friend, I remember you.”

He was more than a friend, he wanted to tell the bar male, but remembered L’nard was Trembor’s extended family, so outside of his bar male duties he didn’t have to be nice to Marlot.

“I need you to call Trembor, I need to talk to him, it’s important.”

The silence stretched. “I can’t call him.”

“Look, I know you feel you have to take his side, but this is more—”

“That’s not it,” L’nard cut him off. “I can’t call him. He doesn’t take family calls during the workdays. We’re all on a timed block list. Only those with the override can get through. I don’t have it.”

“Who does? L’nard, it’s important!”

The lion sighed. “His immediate family. His parents, brothers and sisters, the oldest of his nieces and nephews. Maybe some of his cousins he’s close to. I don’t.”

Marlot cursed and disconnected. This wasn’t going to work. He just had to hope he’d get to Trembor before the hunter.

* * * * *

The car skidded to a stop before the house and Marlot was out, running for the door before the engine finished shutting down. He banged on it. “Trembor! Open up!” He glared at the lock and entered the code the lion gave him. The light remained red. Of course, it had been changed. Trembor was too smart to forget a detail like this. He banged on the door again and listened for sounds inside.

Every body had been found in their homes, so if Trembor wasn’t here, he wasn’t in danger. Marlot pulled the ID card. Only the hunter had changed one of the parameters. Had he changed others? Would he go after Trembor elsewhere? His office?

No, he couldn’t target Trembor there. It was surrounded by enforcers. But Trembor would leave, as part of a case, to head home, to hunt himself lunch. He could at least confirm if he was there. Someone at the precinct could let the lion know he was in danger.

Marlot searched for that precinct’s number, cursing himself for not having added it to Trembor’s information earlier. His pad buzzed with a notification of an incoming call—unknown number.

He was tempted to ignore it, but on a hunch accepted it.

“Hello Marlot,” the too calm voice greeted him.

“What have you done with him!”

“And who might you be referring to?”

“You fucking know who. You sent me his ID card. You didn’t even wait for him to realize it was missing and order one.”

“I doubt that would have worked. Have you told him about our game?”

“Is that why you’ve targeting him? You think I told him? No, I haven’t! You want this to be between you and me, I’m keeping it that way.”

“But does he know about the ID cards you’ve received? I expect he does, after all, they have been redirected to your office, which you used to share with him.”

“Of course he knows! It isn’t like the first one came with instructions to keep it secret from him. Are you fucking telling me this is some punishment because I didn’t know what the rules are even before I knew it was you doing it?”

A pause. “No, of course not. This isn’t punishment.” Another pause. “Think of it as an incentive. I’ve begun to suspect you aren’t taking me, our little game, seriously. So I’m raising the stakes. I’m putting your so very handsome lover on the table.” The hunter sighed. “I’m almost regretting doing this, Marlot. He is very good looking. Tell me, how is he in bed?”

“You stay the fuck away from him! Do you hear me? If you even think of touching him, I am going to rip you apart!”

“That’s the spirit. But you do need to hurry, because as much as I’d enjoy touching him that way. When I do touch him, it won’t be to give him pleasure. So if you get here in time, you get to be his hero again, and you get a chance to punish me for what I’m contemplating doing.”

“Where are—” the connection was terminated. “No!” He couldn’t be that cruel. How did he expect Marlot to know where they were?

A message appeared from an unknown number. An address.

Marlot ran, plotting the address in his pad. Stopped when it came up as being halfway across the city and turned around. Once at his car he sped away, only remembering not to kill himself trying to get there as he almost sideswiped a car.

Series of death-26

There was no crowd. Trembor wondered about that as he parked. Normally, anytime enforcers showed up to a scene, the neighbors came out to watch. There were also no enforcers. He checked the information on his pad, confirmed he was at the right address. Stepping out, he called dispatch.

“Dispatch,” said a tired sounding female after two dozen rings.

“RI Goldenmane, I’m at the scene of a body and I’m wondering where my support is.”

“Support? Sorry, I don’t know. A riot exploded down by the revenue bureau. A bunch of those anti-predation freaks went on a rampage. Anyone in the area has been redirected to deal with that to keep the death to a minimum, it’s almost impossible to find the perpetrators during those kinds of things.” Trembor checked his pad; the financial district was only a dozen blocks away.

“Did anyone stay behind?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. A body’s not an important scent right now.”

“I still need someone to—” The door to the house opened, and an enforcer exited,

taking position before it. “Never mind, looks like someone stayed.”

The female let out a breath. “Then I’ll let you handle that, we’re needed to coordinate.” She disconnected.

Trembor put his pad away and headed for the house.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the enforcer said, a young-sounding hare. “This is a crime scene, I need to ask you to return to the sidewalk.”

“Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane.” He showed the enforcer his ID. “Are you the only one here?” Closer the hare looked older but had that jitteriness common in the prey species for whom speed was their asset and the young had trouble mastering.

“Softhoof is at the back, making sure no one enters that way,” he said, studying the ID. “Hardchest is...” he looked around. “Somewhere. She was supposed to take the neighbors’ statements, set up the perimeter. Something happened in the financial district that got everyone sent there, so the three of us have to do everything.” He handed the ID back.

“Where’s the body?”

“Bedroom. Hall on the left of the living room, at the end. I cleared the house, no one else there. Do you need me to go with you?”

Trembor shook his head. “Stay here. At this stage, it’s more important the scene not be contaminated by civilians.”

The hare nodded and opened the door for Trembor.

The house was wider than deep. On Trembor’s right was a kitchen(am I using that term?) with the dining area. Facing him on the other side was the door leading to the yard, an enforcer’s back visible through the window. On the left was the living room, large, with an expensive screen, long couch, and two seats on each side. Every piece of furniture was massive, speaking of someone solidly built. rhinoceroses did tend to be solid muscle. This one had been able to afford the right kind of furniture for his mass.

Pictures on the wall showed a couple with three cubs. Them growing older until it was only the parents. On a shelf was the framed picture of a female rhinoceros with mementos around it. She’d died, leaving the male alone in the large house. Trembor couldn’t get a sense of how long she’d been gone.

The hall on the left had more pictures. The first two bedrooms now served as storage, boxes around the bed, along the walls. The third bedroom was a shrine to the female in the frame. The musty scent in the room indicated no one had come in in a while. Close to a year, Trembor guessed.

The last bedroom was what it looked like. A bed, a dresser, an attached shower, shelves with books spoke of someone who enjoyed reading. Adventure, but the titles. Legs poked out from the other side of the bed. His body.

Trembor moved to look at it.

Death was a broken neck; the head was twisted close to a hundred eighty degrees. How the killer had managed that, Trembor had no idea. Rhinos were tough. Thick hide, strong, stubborn. He expected the examination would reveal multiple bruises. Which

reminded him.

He sent a message to Jaxca, with the address. Trembor had planned on letting the enforcer examiner handle the removal, but they'd be busy with the riot too. Jaxca responded that it'd be an hour before he could be there. Which was fine. It gave Trembor time to process the body.

He put gloves on and searched the body, sniffing it. No more than two hours dead. It had been found moments after it happened. He'd have to ask the dispatcher who had called it in. They might have seen the killer. By the clothing, he'd been getting ready to leave for work. Some office job.

He'd located a wallet when the floor creaked behind him. Annoyed, he glanced over his shoulder to see who was intruding on his scene. The hare was heading in his direction. Great, now the front door was unguarded.

"You shouldn't—" Trembor started, but the hare picked up speed.

Trembor stood and moved away from the body. Whatever this was, he wasn't compromising it. The hare was quick, faster than Trembor expected, despite knowing he'd be fast. Fists came at him and Trembor dodged. Closed hand meant he wasn't looking to kill, although... Trembor glanced at the body, then the hare as he avoided more blows. No, there was no way this was the killer.

Trembor kicked out, catching the hare on the shoulder, but instead of putting him off balance, the hare caught the ankle and used Trembor to remain standing, unbalancing the lion. He pulled his leg out of the hold before the hand slammed a fist in it. This guy was experienced fighting larger, stronger predators.

Trembor stepped back for the space to kick, but the hare stayed close, forcing him to only use short and quick jab with his foot that had no strength to them. Cursing, Trembor found himself backed into the bookcase, having to block more than dodge. The hare didn't have the strength to do a lot of damage, but he was persistent. If Trembor didn't force him away, he would wear him down. Fortunately, training with Marlot had taught Trembor to be more versatile.

As the hare closed in for a punch, Trembor punched first, hand also closed. His aim was off, but the intent was to throw the hare off balance more than connect. Unfortunately, the hare was too quick. He grabbed the arm, twisted it before Trembor could pull it away, and the lion was on his knees, trying not to scream at the pain.

He felt the hare breath by his ear, thought he might explain what this was about, but he pulled back, and before Trembor could ask, pain exploded at the back of his head before everything turned black.

Series of death-27

Marlot parked behind Trembor's car and was out, looking into it. The lion wasn't there. What was he doing here? How had the hunter drawn him here? Trembor was too smart to fall for a trick.

The house was a family unit owned by the Pavir Roughskin, a quick check of property records told him. Rhinoceros, unremarkable at first glance, he'd need his

computer to find out more. Put his name in his stalking program and see what showed up.

He hurried to the front door. It was locked. He looked through the small window and saw no one in what he could see of the kitchen or the living room. Someone stood guard outside the door leading to the yard, their back visible in the door's window. Marlot hurried to around the house, climbing over the fence and only slowing as he reached the corner.

Either the hunter had a partner, or he'd tricked someone into guarding the door. Either way, this was someone who could give Marlot information. A glance showed someone in enforcer uniform. White fur. He hadn't been able to discern the species in that glance. Another look turned longer as he realized the white wasn't fur. He hurried to the unmoving form. The uniform didn't fit the mannequin properly, seen from this close.

A quick check told Marlot there was no alarm system on it, it was just there to dissuade anyone from approaching from the back. He still made sure to move it away from the door quietly, in case the hunter was listening for him. He tried the knob. Unlocked. He cracked the door open and listened. No sounds.

Marlot swallowed and refused to entertain the thought the lack of sound was because Trembor was already dead. He looked in. Spacious dining area with the kitchen at the front of the house. Large living room with expensive screen, shelves with mementos of a life, pictures on the wall. Multiple scents, the only one he recognized was Trembor. Recent, but faint. He slipped into the house and headed for the hallway. No one in it. five doors, two on the left, three on the right side of the hall with the furthest two closed.

The first one on his left was a repurposed bedroom, boxes with three names on them filled it. The one on his right was smaller, but also served as storage. The next one was still a bedroom, the bed made, items on the dresser, pictures on the wall. The scent of dust told him no one had been in there in a while.

He turned the knob on the last right door, pausing when it clicked and listening for sounds. Nothing. Scent of humidity came as he opened it; a shower-room. No one in it. He turned to face the last door. He held the knob, readying himself to what he'd find on the other side. He didn't want Trembor to be dead.

He pushed the door open and immediately saw the legs poking out from the other side of the bed. Before he could panic and run to them, he saw Trembor in a chair, slumped forward, with a hare in an enforcer uniform standing behind him. The incongruity of the large lion restrained with the smaller hare behind kept Marlot from reacting long enough to notice Trembor's breathing.

Trembor was alive.

Marlot found he could breathe again. Rope around his arms kept the lion in place. He couldn't tell how well they were tied, but he doubted they'd hold him once he woke up.

"Who are you?" Marlot asked the hare.

"I'm the one holding Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane."

“I know you’re the hunter who’s been arranging for me to get the IDs. I’m asking for your name.”

The hare straightened and opened his mouth, but closed it. He gave a shake of the head, smiling. “I don’t think so. You can find out who I am when you take my ID off my body.”

“No. I’m not killing you. I’m going to bring you in.”

“Why? You didn’t bring Ruxol in.”

“I—” and that piece fell into place. The hare thought Marlot had killed Ruxol. The wolf didn’t know who had struck the last blow. That fight had been chaotic. The giant of a bear taking all the RIs to bring down, three of them losing their lives in the process, six being injured to the point they might as well have died. The City Governor had held Marlot’s for the media to see as he thanks all the RIs for their work and as a result, the news had placed the win on the wolf’s shoulder.

Would telling the hare the truth make him stand down or set him off?

“Ruxol didn’t give us a choice. If we’d been able, we would have taken him in.”

The hare smiled. “So all I need to do if make you would want me dead.” He grabbed Trembor by the mane and pulled his head up. “I think that can be arranged.” He unsheathed the claws on his free hand.

“Don’t,” Marlot warned. The claws were small, but it didn’t take much to open a jugular.

The hare canted his head. “Why not? What might you do to me if I were to kill this lion, I wonder?” He moved the hand toward Trembor’s throat.

“Do not touch him,” Marlot growled, his vision narrowing on the hare.

“Stop me,” the hare smirked. “If you think you can.”

Marlot crossed the room, with the thought of ripping the hare apart driving him. His maw was close to the hare’s throat, then Marlot was on his back, rolling away, getting to his feet. He launched himself again. The hare caught him. Marlot was in the air, on the bed, bouncing to the other side. His head hit the wall hard enough to have him see stars. He shook it and the stars cleared. With them, so did the bloodlust.

He stood. Trembor was on his side, still unconscious, still tied to the chair. The hare looked up from the rip in his uniform. Marlot didn’t remember his claws cutting into it.

“I thought you wanted to die,” Marlot snarled.

“You think that easy to do?” the hare replied.

“Lie down, bare your throat.” Marlot stepped toward him, keeping away from Trembor.

“I don’t surrender,” the hare said through clenched teeth. “I can’t.”

Marlot rushed the hare, fist closed, striking fast and hard. The hare was faster, moving almost before Marlot decided on how to strike. He kicked the hare, and with a smile he was back on his feet, running at Marlot, claws out.

A sudden sense of having done this before cause Marlot to be slow and he snarled as the small claws cut his arm. The memory of a strike there mixing with the sting of the

cuts. He and the hare circled one another.

“You’re the hare from the gym.”

The hare smiled. “I needed to be sure you were as good as they said you were.”

“You showed up half a dozen times before I fought you.”

“That’s how long it took for you to show up without your lion.”

“You won that fight.”

“You weren’t fighting for someone’s life.” The hare stepped toward Trembor and Marlot was on him, clawing at the uniform, smelling blood. He staggered back, holding his stomach. That kick had more strength in it than he’d expected from someone that small. The hare hadn’t used kicks in the ring.

Marlot chest had new cuts. The hare’s chest and arms had them too.

“That’s more like it.” The hare stepped toward Marlot. “Just remember that the instant you can’t fight anymore, I am killing the lion.”

Marlot snarled but fought the urge to leap, backing up instead. Ensuring the hare was as far from Trembor as the bedroom allowed. He couldn’t simply react. The hare knew how he fought. Seemed to know a lot about Marlot. Once he was captured, Marlot could ask how he’d found out so much. He was more careful about what he allowed to flow on the network than most.

He let the hare make the first move this time, a series of slash Marlot avoided and a kick he blocked before the hare stepped back. Marlot struck; a mix of punches and kicks, doing his best to mix them. A few took the hare by surprise and connected.

“You’re not going to beat me with closed fists,” he said before striking. The hare had speed and precision, which told Marlot he wasn’t trying to kill him. He was holding himself back, just like Marlot was.

Marlot pushed himself, striking with fist and feet, knees and elbows, but the hare blocked or dodged almost everything, and when Marlot did hit, the hare hardly reacted. What was this male made of? Regardless of how easy the hare was taking it with him, Marlot didn’t know if he could bring him down. He was getting tired.

“Claws,” the hare snarled, jabbing Marlot hard in the side.

Marlot ground his teeth. He wasn’t playing the hare’s game. He was going to take him down and deliver him to the revenue bureau. He weaved and bobbed as he punched and kick. Each time the hare blocking or moving out of the way. A punch struck Marlot, and he stepped back to protect himself from the following attacks, but the hare hesitated, his eyes flicking to the left, his lips tightening.

Marlot struck the hare in the face, once, twice, three times, sending him down. Before the hare could do more than roll on his side, Marlot had him on his back and straddled his waist and leaned in.

“I have you,” Marlot growled. “This is over.”

The hare chuckled, then laughed. “You think they’re going to hold me?” he whispered. “You think any cage can hold me? I was trained to escape from people so much more determined to hold me than anyone here. And when I do escape?” He smiled, his eyes turning hard. “Your lion is going to be my first stop, and you’re not getting his

ID card this time.”

With a snarl, Marlot raised his hand, fingers extended, claws out. He wouldn't let this male every hurt—Something impacted with him, sending Marlot off the hare and rolling against the wall. His head rung as he watched Trembor get to his feet between him and the hare.

“Not this time,” the lion growled.

Series of death-28

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Trembor growled, watching the wolf shake himself. He glanced at the hare, unmoving except for his breathing.

“What did it look like I was doing?” Marlot winced as he sat.

“It looked like you were about to kill an enforcer.”

The wolf snorted, then winced again. “He's not an enforcer, I promise you that. He had you tied up.” Marlot cursed as sounds of movement came behind Trembor. The hare jumped the corner of the bed and ran for the bedroom door. When Trembor looked at Marlot again, the wolf was taking a step to chase the hare.

Trembor stepped in his way. “You're not going anywhere until you explain yourself.”

“You're letting him getaway!”

“Tough luck. You can hunt him later. Are you stalking me?”

“What? Of course not,” Marlot scuffed and Trembor found the admission hurt a little. “You told me to leave you alone, blocked me. So I have.”

Trembor pushed the hurt down. He wasn't letting the wolf get to him again. “Then explain why you're here?”

“He told me you'd be here!” Marlot pointed at the bedroom door.

“What is this? Some sick game you stuck me in the middle of?”

“No! I don't want this, he isn't giving me any choice. Don't you get it, that's—” Marlot's muzzle snapped shut so quickly Trembor could imagine the sound as if this was one of the cartoons from his youth.

“Yes?” Trembor insisted, but Marlot only tightened his lips. “That's what I thought. Get out.”

“Trem, please, I was just—”

“This is my scene, wolf, my territory. You have no business being here unless you have something to say about that body.”

“Forget the body! He was going to kill you! I was just protecting—”

Trembor slammed Marlot against the wall. “I am not your thing to protect,” he snarled. “I'm not yours to keep safe. Do you hear me? You don't own me.” The wolf had the balls to look confused. Gorrek had played hurt prey too often for Trembor to believe the scent anymore. “Don't you fucking try to explain this away, wolf. I know what you are.” He shoved Marlot toward the door. “Get out.”

“Trem, what are you—”

“Get the fuck out.” Trembor turned to face him, teeth bared, claws out. “Before I

decide to gut you.”

The wolf took a step back, took something out of a pocket, and placed it on the dresser by the door, and hurried out of the room.

Trembor waited.

He waited for the sound of the outside door to tell him he had finally kicked Marlot out of his life. He was finally free. He'd never have to deal with him again, never have to risk falling for his tricks again.

He pressed an arm against his chest, staggering to the dressed to hold himself up. Why did it feel like he'd ripped out his own heart then? “Because you believed him, you know that.” It would pass. It had with Gorrek, and he'd had his claws in him a lot deeper than the wolf had had time to put his.

“Fuck.” He forced his breathing to slow. Focused on what Marlot had placed on the dressed. An ID card. Trembor's face looked up at him. His ID card. He pulled his wallet and looked in. His card was gone. (I know, going to have to find a way to fix the other chapter where Trembor shows his ID). When had he used it last? Here? No, the enforcer hadn't asked for it. Yesterday? He'd been in the office all day. So the day before, when he'd paid for his kill.

Marlot hadn't been close to him in that time, he was certain of that, but with his contacts, he could have had anyone lift his wallet, take the card, and put it back. Why he'd do that bothered him. To make him believe this was part of all the other ID cards he'd received? Some other trick to manipulate him into getting back together?

He put his card back in the wallet and sat. He should continue examining the body, but he wanted to check something. He called Dispatch.

“Dispatch,” a female answered, sounding calmer.

“RI Goldenmane. I need to find out who was left at my scene.” He gave the address.

“I'm not seeing anyone assigned to it. There was a riot in the financial district and everyone was redirected there. If you give me the name of the officer you're looking for, I can see where they are.”

Trembor realized the hare never gave his name. He tried to remember the names of the other two. “Hardchest, female, I don't know the species.”

“I don't have any officers by that name listed. Are you sure that's her name?”

Trembor shook his head, he couldn't recall the other name. Was Marlot right? Had this been some setup? Trembor looked at the body. Had Marlot set this up? Two bodies he'd showed up at. The first one still without any evidence of who had killed him. He refused to believe Marlot would leave a body to rot just for some way to dig his claws into him.

“Trembor?” A voice came from elsewhere in the house. Jaxca, he realized.

“Last bedroom!” Trembor yelled and forced himself up. He had work to do, a body to examine before his medical examiner could take him away.

The red frog stepped into the bedroom with a rolled body bag over his shoulder. “Did you know you have a mannequin in an enforcer uniform by the back door?” he

asked. “With no one at the front door, I checked before calling for you. When the newsies get here, you’re going to need someone to keep them out.”

Trembor sighed. The riot should keep them busy until he was done here and without a body, they’d leave the place alone until the house was processed. He looked to where Marlot had almost killed the hare. That was going to be interesting to explain.

Series of death-29

Afternoon gave into evening, and the temperature dropped. Marlot put his hands in his pockets and ignored his fogging breath. He didn’t care if he froze to death, although it was too early for that. Why should he? What did he have left now that Trembor had ripped his heart out so completely? The lion hadn’t made much sense, but that had been clear.

He felt eyes on him and tried to make himself seem inviting, so down on his luck anyone hiding in the alleys could afford him. If he couldn’t freeze the pain away, maybe one of them could cut it out of him.

His pad buzzed again.

Marlot kept walking.

* * * * *

The wolf sat on the steps leading to a building. Something with people coming in and out of it, even at this late hour. A gym of some sort, by how people smelled when they exited, either humid and washed or sweaty and tired. They mostly ignored him. Him and his half-empty bottle of alcohol. He hadn’t wanted the noise of a bar. He’d have gone to the Watering Hole, if he’d known where it was or cared to call it up on his pad. He looked at it and the eight missed calls from an unknown number. He’d settled for buying a bottle at a store and sitting down.

The alcohol warmed him and attempted to numb the pain, it couldn’t do it, the pain was infinite and there was only so much alcohol in the bottle.

The pad buzzed again. Unknown number came up. In this case, unknown was code for the hunter, and Marlot considered letting it go to his message center, forcing the hare to decide if he’d leave one this time or try again later.

He should. After all, it was the hare’s fault Marlot’s life was over. He had forced the confrontation between him and Trembor. If not for the hare, Marlot would have had the time to figure out what was wrong with the lion and fix it.

He should let the fucking hare stew.

“What do you want?” he said in the pad. Maybe screaming at the hunter would feel better.

“How the fuck could you screw that up?”

“Screw it up? Maybe if you hadn’t fought so fucking hard, I’d have ripped your throat before I was stopped. I thought you wanted me to kill you. You sure fought hard to keep me from doing that. How about you come here and bare your throat? There won’t be a lion this time to stop me.” He drank from the bottle to wet his throat.

The hunter snorted. “I don’t think you have the motivation to do it right now.”

“Oh, I’m pretty fucking pissed at you. I’m—” he looked around, looking for some sort of reference point he could give the hare. “I’m at the Wolbore Community Center. Why don’t you join me and we can end this?”

“Not with the amount of alcohol you have in you.”

Marlot stood and looked around, searched for the hare. “Where are you?”

“Tell me why you fought.”

“What?”

“You were both there. Why did you fight? That wasn’t what should have happened.”

Marlot considered the bottle, decided the hare already made little sense, and he’d need all his cognitive ability to get him to show up, and put it down.

“You aren’t making any sense.”

The hare let out a breath. “You and the lion are angry. You avoid each other because of that. You should have talked when you were together. That’s how it works.” The last sounded like he was talking through gritted teeth.

“Oh, we talked alright. He said nonsense and ripped my heart out. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“No.”

Marlot let out an exasperated sigh. “Why the fuck do you even care? What are you? So show to entertain you?” The hare remained silent. Marlot searched for him, but while there might not be a lot of people outside at this hour, there were a lot of shadows for the hare to hide in and he couldn’t remember the scent. “You know what. I’m done. I’m done with your games. Come morning, I’m going to the enforcers and telling them everything.”

“Don’t.” Motion in the shadows, someone stiffening. “All that’s going to happen if you involve them is more people will die.”

“It’s not like I’m the one who’s going to have to pay for them.” Marlot walked toward the alley. The shadow vanished deeper in.

“But you don’t want all that meat to go to waste, do you?”

“They aren’t going to affect me personally.”

“What if I go after the lion again?”

Marlot stopped walking. His rage slamming against the pain of Trembor’s words. “What’s the point? So I kill you because of it. I save him. And then what? He rips my heart out again.” Tears fell. “Do you have any fucking idea what you did to me?” he yelled in the pad, causing the hurrying squirrel to veer away from Marlot. “We were supposed to be together. I was going to get us back together, somehow, but I wasn’t ready! I hadn’t figured out what was wrong!”

Not that he’d looked. His alcohol fuzzed brain pointed out. But he would have, once he was done moping. He’d have researched the lion, figured out why he was so angry, and resolved the problem. Marlot was good at fixing problems.

“Now I won’t get the chance.” He wiped his eyes. Looked in the alley again. “And I’m going to make you pay for it.” He entered it.

“Maybe,” the hare said, and Marlot thought he heard the echo of the voice further in the alley. “Maybe you’ll be able to. But it won’t be here.” Marlot sped up.

“Stay still, and we’ll see about that.”

“You’re not at your best, and I don’t know if I could keep myself from killing you. I’ll let you know where to find me.” There was a pause. “You know how.” Something clattered to the ground ahead of Marlot.

“Don’t you fucking run!” he yelled. Marlot heard a tinny version of his voice come from the darkness ahead of him. “Do you hear me? Stay here and let me rip you apart!”

The last word came from the ground at his feet and Marlot saw the pad on the ground. “Coward!” he yelled in the air and slammed his heel on the pad.

Series of death-30

It was too early for this.

Marlot did his best not to glare at the enforcer standing on the other side of his desk. “I’m sorry, what is this about again?” He asked the uniformed hyena.

He’d spent too long following the hare’s scent through the alleys, until he lost it in a crowd, then just trying to find him. He should have taken the day off, but he had cases that needed closing and he couldn’t do that from his bed, as nice as that idea was.

“RI Goldenmane mentioned in his report that you showed up at the scene of a body,” She answered, sounding annoyed. “We’re following up on it.”

So he had heard properly the first time. *Thanks a lot, Trembor, couldn’t you have been nice and left me out of it?* “I did, but he must have said I arrived after him.”

“He did. He said he woke up from being knocked out and tied by someone impersonating an enforcer to you and him, a hare, fighting. That’s what we’re looking into, not your involvement with the body. Currently, the hare is who RI Goldenmane is looking for in relation to that. Although the fight between the two of you is going to make it difficult to figure out what happened.” She smelled angry. Marlot hoped she wasn’t going to unleash her other problems on him. He was not in the mood.

“Sorry about that, next time I’ll make sure to consider the integrity of the scene before I save that lion’s life.”

She narrowed her eyes and leaned on what had been Trembor’s desk. “Let’s make something clear, RI Blackclaw. I’m here because the ones who volunteered to take your statement were going to look for any excuse to rake you apart for what you did to him.”

“And what exactly did I do to him?” Marlot asked with a roll of the eyes, his tail trying to curl under his seat as his annoyance mounted.

“You broke his heart.”

Marlot stared at the hyena. “Right,” he finally drolled. “Because I’m the one who walked out on him. Exactly how did I do that?”

She searched his face, sniffed the air. “Fine, be that way. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but if you’re not going to explain yourself, we’re going back to be to me being an enforcer.” She straightened and her tone turned frosty. “Why were you

at the scene?”

That had been her not being an enforcer and all threatening? Marlot decided antagonizing her might be a bad idea. Hopefully, his sleep-deprived brain would stick to the plan of staying professional.

What had Trembor told them? She hadn't mentioned the lion pulling him off the hare and preventing his death. Marlot was confident she would have if it was in the report. This was an assault and personification case, about the hare, not him.

“RI Blackclaw,” she called. Definitely angry at him this time.

“Sorry, I had a long night trying to find that hare.”

“So he's the reason you were there?”

Okay brain, don't let me down now. “I became aware of a threat on the—on Trembor. I tried to call him, but he's blocking me. I drove to his house, but he wasn't there. I... I found out about the body that had been called in and drove there. I arrived to find a mannequin at the back door and since I'm confident that isn't standard enforcer procedure, I entered the house carefully. I found the—Trembor tied to a chair with the hare behind him, claws to his neck. The hare noticed me and attacked me.” She looked at her pad, reading the transcript, Marlot suspected. Looking for holes. She sniffed the air, but her anger had to mask his scent. The air circulation wasn't great in the office.

“How did you find out about it?”

Marlot made his shrug as casual as he could. “I have contacts in that world. Unlike what the lion thinks, criminals do have their place.” His tone could use some work if her glare was anything to go by.

“And how did you find out about the call?”

Marlot gave her a wry smile. “You don't want to know. You'd have to arrest me.” The look she gave him made Marlot think she was considering getting him to spill, just for that. She seemed to know Trembor. No stranger got that angry over someone's relationship, so she might know what he could do with a computer.

“How did the hare getaway, if you were fighting him? You look like you should be able to take down prey.”

This was the interesting part. What had Trembor put in his report? Had he said he was responsible for the hare escaping? “He knew how to fight.”

She tilted an ear. And made a show of reading her pad. “He is a hare, and as far as I know, you don't have claw marks on you.”

“Just because he kept his hands closed doesn't mean he doesn't know how to fight. The protectors do train prey that join them, right?” that one was a risk, he couldn't justify knowing the hare had been in the protectors without mentioning their talks.

She rolled her eyes. “Prey can't hold on to their training without it being constant, everyone knows that.” She went back to reading her pad. “Why did the hare target Trembor?”

“Are you asking me to read his mind?”

“Didn't your source tell you?” she asked defiantly.

“My source knew me and Trembor were a thing, so he told me. I didn't take the

time to probe, I figured I'd go save him instead."

"Right," she drolled, "because you care so much about him."

Marlot didn't react to the venom in her tone. She knew Trembor, so of course, she was taking his side. "Is there anything else?" he asked, barely keeping from growling.

"Not at this time," she said after looking her pad over. "If something comes up, I'll contact you." She put her pad away and headed to the door. "Oh," she said, hand on the handle. "Stay away from Trembor." She looked at him over her shoulder. "I mean it. You get within scent distance of him again, and I will end you."

"No worries there," Marlot replied. "That lion made it clear he'd rather I let him die than save his life again."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then left.

Marlot leaned back in his seat. Threats aside, that had gone better than he'd expected, and he'd learned a few things. Trembor hadn't mentioned his ID card, or that Marlot had received many of them before. Since he didn't think the lion was protecting him, Trembor hadn't realized each cardholder was now dead.

What did the enforcers have? His testimony, Trembor's report, the blood and fur from the scene. Could they link that to the other bodies? No, as far as Marlot had found out, there was no evidence at any of the scenes to connect to the hare. They didn't even have a name.

Neither did he. How many hares were in the protectors? How many survived to retire? Could he hack his way into their database and find out? Marlot snorted. That wasn't happening. Even if he thought he could get through their security, he suspected they wouldn't take kindly to it. An organization built around fighting wars no one heard about most certainly wouldn't knock at his door with a cease and desist order. They had money. They'd just remove Marlot from the equation, permanently.

What was left? Anything? Who might have even a clue as to who the hare could be? The victims were dead, their family? That was a possibility, but they were in other RI's territories and would have been questioned. If he showed up to ask more questions, someone would eventually call the local RI and inquire as to why Marlot was there.

There was one place.

Marlot found the number through an online search. "Hey Grebor, Marlot here. I have an odd question for you. Do you remember that hare who came to the gym a while back? Yeah. What name did he sign in with?" Marlot typed it in his computer. Al'garinam. It sounded foreign to Marlot. Made up? "Do you happen to remember who fought against him? Yeah, I'm kind of interested in tracking him down for a rematch."

Series of death-31

The knock startled Trembor, and he fought the urge to look around the small office for someone hiding behind him. He was a predator in the prime of his life; he had no business jumping at every sound. The door opened, and the hyena entered,

"So, that wolf didn't have anything useful to contribute."

"What were you doing talking with him? Taking statements is the job is the

recruits. Or did you annoy Captain Sharpfang again? Steal his breakfast, his morning brew? His mate?"

Derimak tilted an ear and smirked. "I keep it within my species, you know that. And his drink and food happened only once. He'd—"

"I heard five times."

"Fine, three times, but he's always leaving it out on the counter and walking away, what does he expect me to do? It's food, I'm a scavenger, doesn't he know I only have so much willpower and it's better used to refuse bribes?" She sat before Trembor. "And if I'd sent one of the new cubs, all we'd have gotten is a transcription of what the wolf said. No probing questions to find out why he left. Why did you let him leave, by the way?"

"I couldn't stand to have him there." Which was true. He'd been careful not to put any falsehood in his report, even if he hadn't put every little detail.

"I really wish you'd tell me what he did to make you feel that way."

Trembor fixed his gaze on her. "Deri, I like you, but I told you, I'm not talking about him with you or anyone else. Please stop before I decide I like you more as a meal than a friend." He gave a toothy smile.

"You do get we ask because we care and we're worried about you right? Threatening us just makes us think you're covering up the pain."

Trembor sighed. "Did Marlot say how showed up just in time to save me?"

"He did. Claims some criminal contact heard about what that hare planned and let him know. He wouldn't say how he found out where you were though."

"Knowing him, he hacked the dispatch database, or," Trembor took his pad out. "Can someone hack a pad if they're blocked out of it?"

"You need to ask the tech division for that one. But it explains his 'I'd have to arrest him' comment. You still have no idea why that hare targeted you? Or who he is? Prey doesn't usually go after predators. And tying someone up usually indicates your death isn't what they're after."

Trembor had considered that it was related to Bo, but it felt wrong. Bo had been released, and Trembor hadn't done more than keep tabs on his brother. Not something that should warrant the people who'd taken him attacking him. And there had been a level of competence in the setup he didn't expect of people running a gambling place. Then there had been the way Marlot and the hare fought; too much viciousness there, even before the wolf had decided to kill him.

"No idea. Something about the hare feels familiar, but that could be because I walked by a dozen of them between here and the parking lot. Have you found out anything about the riot? The timing was a little suspicious if you think about it."

Derimak grinned. "Thinking a lot of yourself today. A whole riot just so you'd be alone with that hare." She shook her head. "Those anti-predation fanatics have been baring their teeth for years now. My guess is some predator got fed up, bit one of them, and it escalated. We're still looking into who organized it since there are half a dozen permits they should have obtained, but the scent's going everywhere, so if you're hoping to feed yourself on that, you'll go hungry."

Trembor nodded. Ever Marlot wasn't that manipulative as to pull off a riot. He frowned. Where had that one come from? Did he think the wolf was so obsessed he'd set the entire thing up to what? Come to Trembor's rescue again? No, the whole thing had been a coincidence. At best the hare had taken advantage of the riot, maybe he was part of it and Trembor was the predator he'd picked to show his displeasure to.

Except that Trembor now had two bodies with broken necks in his freezer and no actual evidence on them of who had killed them. Another coincidence?

"You okay?" Derimak asked, studying him.

"Mind's going in dark places. Turning all this into a conspiracy." He indicated his screen. "I should get back to work. And so should you, before Sharpfang blames me for your drop in productivity."

She smirked as she stood. "No chance of that. I'm among the top ten percent in the precinct."

"That only holds if you continue working, not spend your time looking after my wellbeing."

"That is work, Goldenmane," she replied.

"But it's not work that counts toward your productivity." Trembor smiled sweetly at her.

"Talk with someone, Trembor. Don't keep what the wolf did you inside, it's not healthy." She left him alone with his thoughts.

Thoughts of a black wolf running his fingers through his fur, of him digging his claws into his chest and ripping his heart out. Of a hare who held his own against Marlot. Not a lot of people managed that when the wolf put his mind to it, and the way Trembor remembered that fight, Marlot was determined. If the hare hadn't been distracted when Trembor broke the armrest and freed himself, would have Marlot even taken him down?

Series of death-57

"Hello," Marlot answered the call without looking up from the code. He needed to get his program to accept a prey specie could do the hunting. The silence on the line made him look at his pad. Unknown caller, the display read and he forgot everything about the code. He opened his mouth but the person spoke.

"I hope you appreciate what I'm doing for you."

"Al—" The call had already disconnected.

What had that been about? It had been close to a week since his last encounter with Al'garinam, in the alley. Why would he call now? And why did he sound angry? Pained?

Why did he even care what the hare sounded like? His job was to catch him, not sympathize with whatever he was going through right now.

Series of death-58

And Trembor remembered why the hare was familiar. He'd seen him fight before. He pulled up the gym's number and called. "Grebtor, Trembor. Question, the hare that took on people at your gym, he—yes, how did you know I wanted his name?" Trembor wrote it down, Al'garinam. "Of course he called you too. Anyway, thanks."

Marlot had beaten him to that too. He entered the name in the system and a dozen names came up. Except for three, all were zebras who had that as a family name. A search gave him the origin of the name, it was Pavorian, meant stripes. Of the three others, two were horses and one a tiger. No hare. So he hadn't used his real name when registering at Grebor's gym. It made sense if he was looking for targets.

But targets for what?

Had his two bodies been part of a gym? Trembor accessed the coyote and rhino's files, pulling up where their IDs had been scanned in the last... six months, he decided. If this Al'garinam frequented gyms to pick who he would kill, it would be relatively recent. The coyote did frequent a gym three times a week. Serious fighter, that guy. A call told him no one under the name Al'garinam had ever registered there, but women he talked with did remember a hare coming over a few times. She didn't know if he'd fought anyone, though.

As expected the rhino didn't frequent a gym. Prey didn't fight, and as big as Roughskin was, he was still prey. Something did register. The rhino had scanned his ID at a club which was flagged within the enforcer's system as catering to 'deviants'. A call to the vice division told him the club's patrons were predators who wanted to be treated as prey and vice versa.

Trembor set aside the wrongness of that and focused on the implications. Roughskin, being prey, would go there to act as a predator. Did the hare go there too? Calling the club didn't give him anything. They wouldn't divulge who their clients were, wouldn't even search for a specific name.

Vice couldn't help him either. The club wasn't illegal, sex, between people of predations age, could take whatever form they agreed to, but more than one bodies found in someone's territory had been tracked back to it. Nothing had been linked directly to the club itself, but the current theory was that the bodies were the result of 'plays' the patron engaged in, and the club was watched to determine if it helped disposed of the body, which was illegal.

So, in theory, he had two places the hare could have found a predator to kill. Three is Trembor included himself. This was beginning to feel like a hunter to him, except he could only place the hare at one body, and not on the body itself. Hunters weren't careless, but they did tend to leave a trace. Enforcer experts on them claimed hunters wanted to be caught; that on some level they understood what they did was wrong, and even if it wasn't conscious, they left clues. It had been how they caught Roxul. He'd left some of his fur on every body.

Trembor cursed. Roxul brought the memory of meeting Marlot for the first time, the timid wolf at the back of the room who'd looked so out of place. Trembor had

wanted to comfort him right there.

His pad buzzed, provided a welcome diversion until he saw the name. Herelex Goldenmane. He hesitated. For his nephew to use the bypass, this couldn't be good news.

“Herelex?”

“Uncle Trembor.” His nephews sounded on the edge of panic. “Dad’s been arrested.” The sounds around his nephew made Trembor think he was at the academy.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. Dad called me in the middle of class and told me to get Isie and go to Grandpa after classes. I heard one of his coworkers ask what he was being arrested, but dad disconnected before I heard the answer. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m going to call Bay, her or her mate should be able to pick you and Isenson up. Get your brother right now, if your adviser has problems with it, have them call me. I’m going to find out what’s going on with your father.”

A call to Baytil had Ufen on his way to pick up their nephews. A second one got him the precinct where his brother was taken to, and Trembor was out the door.

Series of death-32

Bolifen’s neighborhood was one of those newer constructions with multiple regulations in place to make family life more pleasing. The one Trembor had to deal with now was that no vehicles were allowed, so he’d parked in the community parking and was hurrying to the cordoned-off house with the enforcer vehicle taking over the street and on unmarked one which, Trembor expected, would be the RI’s. People on official visits could disregard local ordinance.

Reaching the perimeter, a slim bear raised a hand to stop him. “Sir, this is an active investigation scene, you—”

Trembor didn’t hear the rest, he’d seen two young lions standing by the furthest enforcer vehicle, Herelex, and Isenson. What were they doing here? Looking around, he found Ufen kept away from them by the car being within the perimeter. He headed for his relative.

Ufen’s hands were up placatingly. “Before you claw me, Trembor, they were gone from the academy before I got there.” The lion wore a short-sleeve shirt, and the sun shone in dark honey fur, with the rosettes, that were normally lost in the coloring, highlighted in the full daylight.

“I’m not going to claw you,” Trembor replied, his annoyance directed at the enforcer standing by his nephews. “What happened? With our nephews,” he added when Ufen looked like he had no idea how to start.

“When I arrived at the academy, their adviser was waiting for me. He told me the enforcers had left a few minutes before with them and were headed here. I followed. I got here fifteen minutes ago, but they won’t let me cross the perimeter.”

“Have you threatened the officer?” Trembor indicated the young jackal who glared at him. Trembor hadn’t tried to be discreet.

Ufen shrugged, his tail hugging his leg.

Trembor patted the lion's shoulder. Ufen was a good hunter when he had to, but he'd been raised by a family with even more segregated gender duties than his. It's what made him a good match for Baytil, Trembor's sister was the more traditional one of the family. Trembor rounded on the jackal and strode, not slowing until the enforcer stepped forward in a clear confrontational stance.

"Sir, this is an active investigation site. I'm going to have to demand you stay on that side of the perimeter."

Trembor smiled, showing teeth. "And I'm going to demand you move aside so I can go see to my nephews."

"I'm sorry, sir. They are—"

Trembor growled and took a step toward the jackal who stepped back. "They're my family. And right now, they're scared because no one told them what's going on. Why you're going over their house. Why you've arrested their father."

"We can't tell—"

Trembor poked the jackal with a finger hard enough he flinched. "I know you can't tell them. I was one of you once. But I'm going to go make sure they're okay."

"I can't—"

"You are." Trembor's smile became nasty. "The only question is if it's because you let me pass, or because I'm carrying your body over my shoulder to eat tonight."

The jackal swallowed and hurried out of Trembor's way. The lion waiting until his back was to the jackal before smirking. Too young to remember the procedure when threatened was to call for reinforcement. The enforcer with his nephews was a yak, female and older. She might have noticed what he'd done with the jackal, but all she did was place a hand before his nephews when they took a step toward him.

"Uncle Trembor!" Isenson called. Herelex looked torn between being stoic and giving into what had to be fear.

"Sir," the yak said, "can I ask what you are doing here?"

"RI Goldenmane," Trembor said, showing his ID, but continuing before she pointed out it didn't matter to her. "I'm their uncle, why are they here? They are both under predation age." Herelex opened his mouth, then looked at the yak and thought better of commenting. Which was for the best. He might be considered an adult within their family, but legally he still had two years to go. (need to double-check if his age is ever stated)

"We were instructed to bring them by the investigating RI."

Trembor never forced a potential witness back to where it happened, but every RI had their methods, and the only power he had here, was that of being family, which meant little in the face of a body being investigated. Still, he wasn't leaving here without some information with which to decide how to proceed.

"Can we talk?" he asked the yak, motioning for them to move away from the cubs.

"I can't leave them unsupervised."

"I'm not asking for you to leave, just for us to move away so we can talk without

them overhearing. Herelex is a responsible male. He isn't going to go anywhere." He looked at his nephew who nodded, pulled his brother close to him.

The yak moved half a dozen paces away. "Make it quick."

"What is going on here?" Trembor asked, lowering his voice to ensure neither of his nephews overheard. "I know the body isn't my brother because Herelex said his father was arrested when he called me, but even if Bo's having money trouble right now, he wouldn't just leave a body lying around, let alone bring it home without having paid for it."

She shook her head and spoke in a whisper that had Trembor leaning in. "That's not it. The body is under predation age."

"What?" Trembor's loud exclamation had his nephews and Ufen looked at him. He leaned in and lowered his voice. "No, Bo wouldn't do that. My brother doesn't stalk them that young. He has enough experience to make sure it doesn't even happen by accident."

"All I can tell you is what I know," she replied, "and that's the body in his house is under predation age."

"Then—"

A mink in an expensive suit stepped out of the house, a please expression on his face. RI Sleekcoat. Trembor had had a handful of interactions with her since she'd taken this territory. Smug, always pleased with herself, and with one of the better records for closing cases. He didn't like her because she tended to be ruthless in her stalking of killers and cared little for the pain she caused in her wake. Her eye narrowed on seeing him, but her expression didn't falter as she headed for his nephews.

With a curse, Trembor made sure to be there before she started badgering them.

"Well, hello cubs," she said, ignoring Trembor.

Isenson puffed out his chest. "I'm not a cub. I'm twelve!"

The outburst surprised her and Trembor smiled with pride, but it didn't last.

"You're under predations age," she said dismissively, having regained her footing. "That makes the two of you cubs. Now, how about you tell me what your father did?"

Isenson looked from Herelex's worried expression to Trembor's angry one, confused. Herelex was old enough to know RI means an unpaid body, Isenson might not, but like any cub, he was picking up on the mood.

"Come on, you two staying silent about his crimes isn't going to help him."

"That's enough," Trembor stated, barely keeping from snarling.

She turned to acknowledge him. "And what are you doing here? This isn't your territory."

"But it's my family. You can't question underaged cubs without proper representation. You know that."

"You're here, so you can represent them." She looked at Herelex. "You, tell me about the body we found, and I warn you I can push for complici—"

"Fu— this is over," Trembor told her.

"I'm not done with my questions."

“You said I can represent them? Then, as their appointed representative, I’m telling you this joke is over. I can’t believe anyone lets you treat potential witnesses that way, let alone cubs.”

“This is my territory, I’ll investigate any way I want, and the day you have my closing record, you can come and talk about how I conduct my investigations, not before.”

Trembor thought about his near-empty freezer, with the only two bodies in it less than a month old, but didn’t bring it up. A clawing match in front of his nephews wasn’t going to solve anything.

“I’m not saying shit about your skills. I’m telling you, my nephews are off-limits.”

She rolled her eyes, her ear taking an angry tilt. “I’m not done. Until that happens, no one’s going anywhere, that’s a c—”

“Don’t,” Trembor growled.

“Are you telling me you’re contesting what the body’s age is? You have to know, you and your annoying habit of talking to people you have no business talking to?” She glared at the yak, who’d kept her distance.

“I’m telling you that isn’t something you discuss in front of cubs.”

“Witnesses.”

“They were in school for fuck’s sake, what can they know?”

Isenson’s gasp made Trembor close his muzzle before he unleashed any more profanity on her. Herelex didn’t look pleased, but if that was at the situation or his swearing, Trembor couldn’t tell.

Sleekcoat looked amused. “I won’t know that until I’ve questioned them, will I?”

“Then you’re not going to know that today,” Trembor said. “I’m not agreeing to represent them, which means you can’t talk to them.”

She lost some of her smugness, only to regain it as she looked past Trembor.

“You, lion!” she called. “You related to these two?”

“Stay there, Ufen,” Trembor ordered.

She smiled. “So he is related. Good, he can represent them if you won’t.”

“No, he won’t.” He didn’t check. He knew Ufen well enough, the lion hadn’t moved. Orders from a more assertive family member surpassed anything else. “You want a relative to represent them, I’m calling their Grandfather.”

“Why him?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because he’s a lawyer,” Trembor replied smugly.

She ground her teeth.

“I take it you’d rather not have someone who knows the law here to document how you go about questioning his grandchildren?”

The glare she gave him was answer enough. Which was good; with Torim being retired, he wouldn’t have actual legal authority. “How about we do this? Tomorrow you question them at the academy in their adviser’s presence. He’s trained to represent cubs, and he isn’t a lawyer, so he won’t be able to nitpick you on every procedure you’re screwing up.” But Trembor was going to make sure the academy lawyer was present,

even if he had to get his father to pull strings.

“Fine,” she snapped. “Take them out of here, I’m done.” Her tone was insulting, but Trembor didn’t care. He motioned his nephews over and led them out of the perimeter.

“I’m sorry,” Ufen said, “I know I should have done more, but the enforcer wouldn’t let me pass and... and I’m not you.”

“This isn’t on you. It’s on her. She had no business pulling Herelex and Isenson out of the academy. She had no legal ground to do it. What did your adviser tell you when he took you out of your class?” he asked Herelex.

“That something had happened to dad, and that someone needed to ask us questions.”

“I take it you didn’t tell him you know he’d been arrested?”

His nephew shook his head.

“Is dad okay?” Isenson asked. “He paid for the body, right?”

“He isn’t okay right now,” Trembor said, “but I’m going to help him. Whatever this is, your dad didn’t do it.” He knew Bo wouldn’t do something like this. So it was a setup of some sort. The only group he could think of was the criminals he was involved with, but that made no sense. Bo said he’d resolved things with them.

He needed to find a way to talk to his brother. Unfortunately, the only easy one he could think of, he couldn’t use. There was no way getting their father in the same room as Bo was a good idea right now.

“Do you want me to take them to your dad’s?” Ufen asked.

“Can we go with you, Uncle Trembor?” Isenson asked.

Trembor wanted to say no. He’d have too much to do with looking for a way to get his brother out of this mess, but the hope in his young nephew’s eyes broke his resolve. “All right, but only for tonight. My house isn’t set up for nephews to stay there. Tomorrow you’re going to your grandparents, alright?”

“Okay,” Isenson replied, overacting his dejection.

Herelex canted ears proclaimed his irritation at his brother’s antics, but he kept silent. He was better at not showing his stress at the situation, but his scent told Trembor he was scared. This was one of those things the academy couldn’t prepare cubs for and which Trembor wished could be kept from them ever experiencing it.

But life wasn’t that kind, and now it was his job to make sure things went back to normal.

Series of death-33

Marlot wanted to question people who fought against Al, add that

Marlot looked at the envelope Hela’han just handed him. That had been quick. It had only been a few days since Al’garinam had had Trembor tied up. Maybe not dying there had made him need to kill again? Then why had the hare run off once the lion had

Marlot off him? He was starting to wonder if the hare even knew what he was doing, what he wanted.

He could destroy this. Never look at it, wash his fur of the whole thing.

No, if he wanted not to deal with that he had to hand it over to the revenue department, and then he'd have to explain why he hadn't handed over the previous ones. He could excuse the first six or so, but once he'd realized people were being killed? He'd had a responsibility to inform the higher up.

He sighed. Even if he destroyed it; if he never looked at them again. Al'garinam would keep killing, and someone would notice, go after him, and they would realize he'd been doing this for a while. Trembor would probably tell them Marlot had shown up at two of his scene. Swiftkill would definitely mention I'd talked with one of the bodies before they died. It wouldn't be long until everything came out and Marlot was in the middle of it that he wanted to or not.

And while he didn't care for this game of Al'garinam, he did want him to pay for what he made happen. If not for him, there would still be hope for Marlot and Trembor. Getting the hare meant finding him. And what was in the envelope was the only clue to accomplish that.

His next victim.

He ripped the envelope open, and a card dropped onto his desk. His heart froze as he saw the lion's picture and *not again*, flitted to his mind before he realized the mane was almost black with hints of red and his fur more brown than golden. His name was Gorrek Shiningpelt, close to a decade older than Marlot.

He entered him in his stalking program and it went to work and immediately Marlot realized there was a problem. An approximate value appeared based on the lion's employment. Gorrek was upper management for a successful advertising firm, his division specialized in reframing people's in the public view's image. A check of the company's site gave him names Marlot didn't recognize. He wasn't one to pay attention to celebrities, except for L'nard's tigress.

Marlot had watched a few of her movies, as well the show her first movie had been turned into. Both were over the top, the science utterly unrealistic, the situation forces, and the interpersonal relationship between her and the lioness costar borderline ridiculous. He'd been disappointed to find out there had only been sixteen episodes filmed before it was canceled.

Her name wasn't on that list, which made Marlot happy. He picked one at random, a Hunt player who'd was now doing advertising for fur wash. Digging into his history Marlot found quite of a few incidents of violence against his mate, all the way to the breaking-off their mating contract; so public that Marlot recalled reading about it a few years ago. There had been several lawsuits before and after the break.

Then nothing. Utter silence. Digging deeper, Marlot found that the Hunt player settled all the lawsuits with his ex-mate and vanished from public view for six months. Then he was helping at homeless shelters, volunteering for public space re-greening. And then came the advertising contract based on this wholesome image.

If Marlot hadn't known about the involvement of Gorrek's team, he would have been impressed with the length the male went to to make amends. Now, he wondered how much of it had been mandated as a way to rehabilitate his image.

It explained Gorrek's value if he took that male and made everyone forget the trash he'd been.

And that value was the problem.

Al'garinam didn't care for the value of his prey.

His program was designed for Marlot's stalking patterns; it looked at what he found important. Not what the hare did.

He stopped it, went through the code, changed the stalking species to hare, linked that to all the relevant information sites so it could build something of a profile, and restarted it. For it to crash.

He went in; removed sites that weren't as relevant and ran it again. Only for it to crash. He looked at the other sites, removed a few without any stalking information. And it crashed again. And again. And... he had no sites left for the program to use.

"Idiot." Al'garinam was stalking people, but he was a hare. As a species, they didn't do the stalking, so there was no psychological workup of them as predators, only about how they went about avoiding predators.

Should he leave the program as if Marlot was doing the stalking? It had produced usable information before, if not entirely accurate.

And again, Marlot realized he was going about it wrong. His program was designed to find him the best prey. He already knew the prey, what he wanted it to do was tell him about the predator doing the stalking.

Could he get that by altering the program? No, this was going to require building something new. Marlot smiled, when was the last time he's designed a program from the ground up? His stalking program had been the last big one. Everything else had been minor stuff to help with his life and his work.

He tried to slow his excitement. He couldn't get lost in creating the program, not if he wanted to catch the hare with this victim. There was only so long Al'garinam would wait before killing the lion. There would always be the next victim, but Marlot found he wasn't comfortable with that. He might not be the one doing the killing, but it felt complicit to let his one die without at least trying to prevent it.

Marlot looked at the time and gave himself until the end of the workday to work on his new program. After that he'd drive by this Gorrek's house and talk with him. It was a faint scent, but maybe he'd remember crossing path with the hare, and if not, knowing the places where the lion had been in the days before he noticed his ID was missing would help create parameters for his program.

With that decided, Marlot set to programing.

Series of death-34

Trembor followed the black-furred bear through the precinct. It had taken all

evening and too much of the night calling people he knew within the enforcers, trying to arrange this meeting, until he thought of the bear. Unfortunately, this was one of the few precincts where he didn't know anyone in it; he'd almost think Sleekcoat had picked in on purpose, but it was the one in her territory, so it was just bad luck.

It turned out he also didn't know many people within enforcement who were in a position where their authority carried over multiple precincts. He'd made friends with everyone in his classes at the academy, then when getting his enforcer training, but with a few exceptions, they were still all stalking the streets, and those who had raised rank high enough to be able to talk with captains in other precincts, could only ask and not tell them what to do.

"Thanks again for doing this, Bahamel," he told the bear, "I know I'm not your favorite person right now, with you being Marlot's friend, so—"

She turned and fixed him with his gaze. "I'm not happy you and the wolf broke up. I thought what you had was more solid than that. But that's your personal life and none of my business. And you happen to be one of the few RI who respects us, enforcers, instead of barging in making demands, so yes, I'm happy to help you."

Vice crimes were such that they spread throughout the city, so every precinct was involved, they also required a centralized control, because organized crime couldn't be handled in small bites. And that was who Bahamel Strongbones was. She ran the vice division and as such could walk in any precinct with an RI in tow and let him talk with his brother, even if technically, Bo wasn't supposed to see anyone other than the RI who'd brought him in, until his lawyer had spoken with him.

She placed a hand on the door's handle. "I can't order them to turn off the camera, so watch what you say, and don't lead your brother into saying anything that can be used against him if this thing ends up going to court, which we both know it will since he'd claiming he didn't kill that cub."

"He didn't. Bo wouldn't do that."

She shrugged. "Underage death isn't my division, so I don't have to pass judgment. But I hope you're right, because what they do with those criminals isn't pretty." She opened the door.

Bo stood as Trembor entered, looked uncertain, then sat.

"Don't take too long," Bahamel said, "that RI is going to raise her hackles if she finds you in here."

Trembor sat as the door closed. Bo didn't look pleased. "How are you doing?" Trembor asked. The look in his brother's eyes warned of a coming tirade, but Bo closed them, took a breath, let it out, and seemed calmer.

"Not good. How are Herelex and Isenson? Did dad make a fuss about them staying with him?"

"They spent the night at night place, Herelex called me after you called him. I got Ufen to pick them up, but the RI handling the body got to them before him."

"Got to them?" Bo asked, his fur bristling.

"She had them brought to your house so she could question them. I got there

before that, so I kept her from doing it. If she wants to talk to them she'd going to have to do it at the academy, with their adviser present. As soon as their office open I'm going to warn them so they can have a lawyer present. This RI is known for pushing the limits to close her cases."

"Fuck," Bo whispered. "Does that mean I'm screwed? I didn't do this, you know that, right?"

"I do, but the body was in your house, Bo. That's not the kind of thing that happens by mistake." Was this because of Bo's involvement with those criminals? Trembor wanted to ask. "Tell me what happened."

Bo threw his hands up. "What do you mean? The enforcers showed up at the office, cuffed me, telling everyone I was being arrested for underage predation. Do you have any idea how humiliating that is? Now everyone there's going to look at me like 'this is the male who killed a cub,' even once it's proven I didn't do it. I won't be surprised if I'm fired because of this."

"They can't fire you unless you're found guilty."

Bo narrowed his eyes on his brother. "You clearly don't work for the government. The system can't function if people think it's letting criminals work within it."

"Think?" Trembor asked, tilting an ear. "We are talking about the same government who's fighting half a dozen allegations of misconduct, right?"

Bo waved that aside. "Once you run things you can survive that stuff. I'm an office worker, Trem. They're going to make sure it doesn't look like this is the reason I'm fired, but you can be damned sure they're going to see to it I'm quietly let go." He dropped his head in his hands. "Oh, fuck, I'm screwed. I need this job. They're going to k—"

"Bo," Trembor cut his brother off before he said something he shouldn't. "Bo. Look at me." When his brother did, Trembor nodded to the camera with the red light indicating it was active.

Bo mulled it over for a few seconds. "I didn't do anything wrong, what do I care what they record?"

"You care because anything you say in here can be used in any way they can find evidence to support. Don't you remember the stories dad told us about some of his cases?"

"Those were twenty, thirty years ago. Back when they didn't have stuff like DNA, they're going to see I didn't do this." There were hints of desperation in his brother's voice. "They're going to see someone tampered with the lock on the house to get the body in there, right?"

"Tell me where you were yesterday," he asked instead of answering his brother. Marlot had shown him just how easy it was to break into one of those electronic locks most people had without leaving any trace of doing it.

"At work, then at home. As usual, you know that. It's not like I'm out partying all the time."

"Herelex and Isenson can corroborate that?"

The lion facing Trembor opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Bo, I might have made sure the RI can’t abuse her power with your kids, but she will question them. What are they going to tell her?”

Bo sighed. “I went out after we were done eating. I didn’t come back until after they’d gone to bed.”

“Where did you go?”

“To—to hang out with friends.” The hesitation and the way Bo’s eyes flicked toward the camera even if he managed to keep his head from moving told Trembor exactly which friends he meant. Not the kind of friends who would come to his defense.

“Where?” If he couldn’t get someone to give his brother an alibi, he’d need records showing where he’d been.

“At one of their houses.” Bo didn’t volunteer more. Trembor kept his reaction from showing. That meant a residential area, which didn’t have much in the way of camera coverage, and if one of those friends lived there, the odds are good none of the neighbors ever saw anything.

“How much meat is in your cooler?” the lack of a need to hunt as a defense was something their dad would laugh at, but Bo needed something.

His brother shrugged. “I don’t know. I hunted four, no five days ago. I prepared the body myself, but there’ll be records of me seeing the hide and extra fat; not that there was a lot of that. She was an Elk, pretty lean. You know I go healthy for the kids. I’m guessing there’s two weeks worth left.” He sighed. “What did dad have to say?”

“I haven’t spoken to him yet, but I expect he’s making sure you have proper representation.”

Bo snorted.

“Come on, he’s not that kind of father and you know it. It doesn’t matter how angry he is at you, he’s going to do all he can to protect you, you’re still his son. If nothing else, he’s going to make sure this is handled correctly, so all parties have the time to build their cases.” That would piss off Sleekcoat, if nothing else, with her desire to close all cases as quickly as possible.

Bo nodded. “What do you know about this? They haven’t told me anything other than the body in my house is underage.”

“I don’t know anymore myself. This isn’t my territory, and I didn’t make a good impression on the RI so she isn’t inclined to share.”

“Really, it’s hard to imagine you not making a good impression on someone.”

Trembor chuckled. “I had to step between her and your kids pretty hard, it doesn’t lead to making friends. But don’t worry, I’ll find out what I can and help whoever dad finds to defend you.”

“Are Herelex and Isenson staying with you for long? Your house isn’t exactly set up for two cubs.”

Trembor chuckled. “Don’t let Isenson hear you calling him a cub, he got pretty fierce when Sleekcoat did that.” If it wasn’t for how busy he was going to be, he’d let them stay, but he was seeing a lot of long nights in his future. “Maybe for tonight, if Dad

and Moms aren't ready, but you're right, I'm not set up for cubs. If somehow our parents can't, someone in our family will, don't worry, we'll all make sure they're okay."

Bo was quiet for a few seconds. "Trem, my friends, they—" he glanced at the camera and sighed. Trembor hated how helpless his brother looked. "Just make sure the kids are looked after, okay? No matter how this turns out, they're the ones that matter."

"Don't talk like that Bo. Even if the RI here screws this up, I will find out who did this to you, then you and I can have them for dinner, alright?"

Bo nodded, but his helpless expression didn't go away.

Trembor searched for anything else to say, but he couldn't do more to comfort his brother. Now he needed to get to work proving he hadn't done this.

Series of death-35

Gorrek Shiningpelt's home was understated, for someone as successful as he is. The neighborhood catered to small families, with homes large enough for five or six to live, and yards where the cubs could learn to stalk one another. It lost a bedroom, possibly two, by having part of the house converted into a garage. Like the other houses, this one was painted in calm colors, browns, and greens with some blue highlights.

Marlot parked his car in the visitor spot in front of the houses, locked its door, and headed for the entrance. The grass was trimmed and perfect. Shiningpelt either spent a lot of time, or a lot of money, caring for it. He buzzed the door and there was motion on the other side, along with a raised voice from deeper.

The door opened and a muscular cougar looked him over. He wore a white shirt and pants. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Gorrek Shiningpelt," Marlot answered. He'd debated identifying himself as an RI and decided against it; this wasn't his territory, and he didn't want to have to explain his presence to the RI covering it if he couldn't catch Al'garinam before he killed Shiningpelt.

The cougar looked over his shoulder. The hall seemed to reach all the way to the back, and Marlot didn't see anyone. "What is this about?" the cougar asked, a slight tremble in his voice.

"I received his ID card by error, and I'm returning it." He'd decided on the truth on the way here. There was nothing to be gained by creating an elaborate story, especially not with someone who dealt in creating stories for a living.

"Oh, finally," the cougar whispered with a sigh. Extending his hand. "I'll give it to him."

"I take it he's been a wreck with it?" Marlot couldn't help smiling and he took it out.

The cougar winced and looked over his shoulder again. "Something like that," he whispered.

"I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to hand it to him myself, I have a few questions for him."

"Are you with the enforcers?" the cougar voice was neutral, but his face and his

scent were hopeful?

“No. I’m an RI, but this isn’t my territory. As I said, I got his card by mistake, I’m just trying to solve the mystery of why I’ve been getting so many of them and I’m hoping he can help.”

The cougar’s expression cracked and Marlot thought he saw fear in it before it was changed into a pleasantly neutral expression. “Alright, if you’ll come with me.” He led Marlot to a living room, limping on the way there. Stalking injury, Marlot decided. “I’ll tell Gorrek you’re here.”

Marlot only noted the chairs, couch, and screen absently, what caught his attention were the picture frames on the wall. Forty, fifty of them? All of a dark-furred lion with his arm around the shoulder or the waist of another male. They had to go back at least two decades, by how young the lion looked in some of them. The other males were all muscular, and the look of adoration on the faces of those looking at the lion when the picture was taken made Marlot miss Trembor.

A raised voice made Marlot look away. “What did I tell you about answering the door.” A deeper voice. Gorrek. “What if that had been some predator here to eat me, what would you have done then? Maimed as you are.”

Marlot winced, the male was definitely on edge. How long had he been waiting for his card?

“But he brought your ID,” the cougar replied, softly enough Marlot had to strain to hear.

“And you saw it? You know for a fact he had it?”

“He took out a card,” the cougar replied. Marlot thought he heard his voice tremble.

“But did you see it was mine?” the silence stretched. “Why do I even—” another silence, then a sigh. “I’m sorry. You know I didn’t mean that it’s just that I’m a wreck, and you go and do something stupid like answer the door without first checking with me.”

“I’m sorry.” The cougar sounded like he was crying.

“Don’t cry, you know I hate it when you cry.” Another long silence. “Stay here and I’ll see to that. You said he was a wolf, right? I’ll see to him, and then we can talk about this bad habit of yours to just invite anyone into my house.”

Marlot looked at the pictures on the wall, his ears burning from eavesdropping on what should have been a private moment. Shiningpelt’s personal life wasn’t as perfect as the house the neighborhood seemed to indicate.

Whose life was? Marlot thought as he remembered Trembor walking away from him.

“Davan tells me you received my ID.”

Marlot jumped and his ears folded back. How had the lion moved so quietly? He turned and his breath caught. Shiningpelt was shirtless, his muscles defined under the brown fur, and the lion tensed them slightly under the attention Marlot gave him. He wore gray canvas pants, not too tight, but they outlined his package quite well. When

Marlot shook himself and looked back up.

“You have good taste,” Gorrek said with a smirk. Marlot did not answer that, instead, he handed over the card. The lion turned it in his hand. “And it was sent to you, instead of me?”

“There’s a glitch in the revenue’s re-issuing computers. I’ve been receiving one of those every few weeks. It’s how I’ve become aware that a pickpocket is going around stealing IDs.” Marlot took out his phone. Confident it was a believable alteration to the truth, after all, Al’garinam had to be a good pickpocket to get the IDs.

“Why would anyone steal IDs? It isn’t like they can use them, or even access my information with it. I thought it’d just fallen out of my wallet the last time I used it.”

Marlot turned the phone to show him the pictures. “It’s what most of the victims think, but more than one remembers a hare having around them at the time. One even took this picture, but they didn’t realize this was who probably stole their ID at the time. Do you recognize him?”

The picture was from Grebor’s gym, Al’garinam was fighting a wolverine, he was standing low in preparation for the next attack. It was one of the better pictures he’d obtained from talking to the few who’d remembered the hare.

“And you’re not with the enforcers?” the lion asked, taking the phone and studying the image.

“I’m an RI, but I cover another territory.”

“Don’t remember him, but it’s not like I pay attention to his kind.” He offered Marlot his phone back. “But you’re saying he survived that fight?”

Marlot reached for the phone. “It’s a training gym. No one dies there.”

The lion took his hand and held it as he placed the phone in it. “Don’t you think one of the predators there put him out of his misery? Why else does one of them show up at one of our gyms to fight?”

Marlot gently pulled on his hand, but the lion didn’t let go. “He’s been seen after this fight, so I’m guessing no one took pity on him.”

The lion smiled at Marlot. “I guess we’re not really the types to pity those weaker than us, are we?”

“I guess not, and he’s kind of wiry,” Marlot added, feeling nervous for some reason. “I don’t know how edible he’d be.”

“And there are much tastier treats out there, aren’t there?”

“Yeah, there is.” Marlot pulled on his hand a little harder, but the lion’s grip was firm. “I’m going to need my hand back,” he said, chuckling nervously.

“Why? What would you do with it, if I gave it back?” the lion licked his lips as he spoke and Marlot had no trouble hearing the implied ‘to me’ in there.

“Aren’t you with someone?” Marlot asked, and it seemed to break whatever spell the lion was weaving.

He frowned. “What does he have to—” Gorrek looked Marlot over again, seemed to take him in fully. “Of course. My apologies. I didn’t mean to imply...” he trailed off, smiling again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you with catching this thief, but thank you for

bringing my ID back. If there anything else?”

Marlot shook his head, and himself, trying to understand what had happened, other than the obvious, as the lion let go of his hand.

“Then I have someone to attend to.” The lion motioned to the living room’s exit.

Marlot stepped toward it, then paused, noticing a framed picture among all the others. It was Gorrek with another lion. Both were young. So young that Marlot initially doubted it was him, but the golden fur, the light brown mane, the love in those eyes as he gazed on Gorrek, who had his arm around his waist possessively. Marlot had had those eyes directed at him, before he’d walked out and left him alone.

“Ahhh,” Shiningpelt purrs softly, “I was right, you do have good taste.” The lion ran a finger over the picture. “He was wonderful. I was sorry to ever let him go.”

Marlot swallowed as a shiver ran down his spine. Suddenly, he didn’t want to be in this house anymore. In fact, he wanted to be as far from this lion as possible.

Series of death-36

“Derimak,” Trembor called when he saw the hyena, “Have you heard anything back from them?”

She turned. “Sorry, you know how they are about cases where the body’s underage, they don’t want to risk anything leaking to the newsies. And that Sleekcoat person’s making their lives even tougher since she found out a certain someone went to visit her suspect.”

“He’s my brother,” Trembor stated.

“Don’t mean it didn’t piss her off and that she’s making them pay since she can’t reach the person who helped you.”

“Thanks for trying,” he said, dejected. He needed the evidence on Bo if he’d have any chance of proving he hadn’t done it.

* * * * *

“Hey, Velin,” Trembor said, opening his arms for the newt.

“Trembor!” She ran in them for a hug. “Where have you been hiding these last years?” She punched his shoulder. “What happened to those times you’d be down here every other day to talk. Did you bring some meat?” she asked hopefully.

“I became an RI and my office moved away from here,” he answered with a chuckle, taking out a bag with pieces of meat in it. Velin was a slim female with mottled brown and black skin who worked in the forensic lab.

“I hear you’ve been back for a few weeks now.” She eyes the bag. “I really shouldn’t know you that. You’re such a tempter.” She snatched the bag out of his hand before he could pull it away and opened it. “Oh, I missed this. No one brings me the treats you do.” She had a piece in her mouth and moaned as she chewed.

“Others have to know you like meat.”

She nodded, swallowed. “But they don’t want to put my health at risk. Not one of them knows that a little indulgence is a good thing. I have to live, and that comes with some risk, right?”

“Just don’t eat it too quickly, you know how sick you get from unprocessed protein.”

“You ever ate that processed crap?” he eyes him suspiciously.

“You kidding? They’ve been stamping that stuff into something resembling dried meat strips and telling us it’s good for us.” The lion shuddered. “I’m going to hunt my meat until the law says I can’t anymore.”

She eyed him. “You’re going to keep doing it even after that. You predators are addicted.” She popped a second piece of meat in her mouth with a shiver, closed the bag, and pocketed it. “What can I do for you.”

“I’d like to know what they collected on the case regarding Bolifen Goldenmane.”

“I thought the name sounded familiar.” She bit her lip. “I can’t tell you anything.”

“Velin, he’s my brother. I can’t just let that Sleekcoat female deal with this. She’s going to ignore any evidence showing he didn’t do this.”

The newt looked around and lowered her voice. “Look, I can’t give you details, but it looks bad.”

“What are you talking about? Bo didn’t do this.”

“Just about everything we have shows he did.”

Trembor stared at her. “No, that’s not right. Bo wouldn’t do something like this. He didn’t need to hunt.”

“The lab doesn’t address the why someone did something. You need to talk to the counselors for that. Maybe he had an urge he couldn’t—”

“No!”

She squeezed his arm. “I’m sorry.”

* * * * *

Trembor ended the call. Another dead end. Another person who wouldn’t tell him what evidence had been found. They had fur, but that made sense, the body was in Bo’s house, even had neat of a male as his brother was, there was be fur on the floor. He expected they’d found some from Herelex and Isenson too. There had to be a way to take a look at that information.

He snorted. This would be where the wolf would mention he knew someone who could get that information for him. No, this was getting into a computer, he’d do that himself. He’d happily break dozens of laws, get into the forensic lab’s computers, pull the information, and give it to Trembor without even asking why.

That was how much Marlot—

It was just an act. Probably some sick game to get Trembor comfortable breaking the law. Trembor held his head. He wanted to scream. He wanted to go out there and claw someone until they told him what he needed to know to help his brother. If he didn’t, Trembor knew he’d be found guilty, and he’d be handed over to the family to be ripped apart and eaten. He growled. Didn’t any of them see that this was a setup? It had to be Bo’s criminal friends, even if Trembor couldn’t understand why they were doing this. They were the only ones with the connections to do this.

They didn’t care about breaking the laws, and now the fucking laws were tying

Trembor's hands. He stormed out of his office and out of the precinct, ignoring his name being called. He wasn't staying here and letting his brother be killed.

* * * * *

The surrounding smells were of cheap, but potent, alcohol, blood, sweat, and smokestick; he recognized the scent of nip among all the unknown ones. Trembor hated these kinds of bars. They did nothing but encourage people to go at one another. The only times he'd come in them was when a suspect frequented one, back in his enforcer days. About the only good thing that could be said about the criminal elements was that they always paid their taxes. They had plenty of other reasons to be arrested, they didn't want that one too.

It didn't surprise him that the woman he'd contacted picked this as the meeting place. She knew how much he hated them.

The bison sat in the booth opposite Trembor, looking at him with a mix of amusement and suspicion. "So, is this a setup?" a thin and nervous-looking hedgehog sat next to her.

Trembor shook his head.

"Speak up." She tapped the pad in her breast pocket. "You know the courts don't accept gestures."

"It's not a setup, Jasber," Trembor said, hating the words and himself.

She beamed. "As I live and breathe, the almighty Trembor Goldenmane wants to do business with me. How many times did you try to arrest me?"

"I arrested you sixteen times," Trembor replied angrily. "There was not trying involved. You somehow got the witnesses to recant their testimony."

"I did no such thing," she replied innocently. "I know you didn't get them to lie, you're too squeaky clean to do that, but I'm sure someone else in your old precinct put the claws to their necks so they'd tell you what they wanted you to hear. It's not my fault if they had an attack of conscience and told the truth at my hearings."

"Right, and you have nothing to do with them dying right after you went free."

She smiled evilly. "You ever traced any of those payments back to me?"

"Of course not."

"Then how can I have been the one to do it? I'm an honest business female."

"Protection isn't—you know what. Fuck this. I'm not an enforcer anymore. And I'm not here to argue over who did and didn't do something in the past." He nodded to the hedgehog, who shrank in on himself. "Who's that?"

"My brother," she answered.

Trembor tilted an ear but decided not to comment. "And he's here why?"

"Your call indicated you have computer problems, right? You know fixing those isn't my thing. I'm more likely to hand you back a bag of small pieces, but my brother, now he can fix any problems you might have with a computer."

"Can you hack into the enforcer database?" Trembor asked, figuring they were past the point of stalking around the prey.

The hedgehog's eyes grew wide.

“Why do you need him to get in there?” Jasber asked. “I heard you were back with them.”

“I’m using an office there at the moment. I’m still an RI, which means officially I can only access the database on cases I’m working.”

“What do you need?” the hedgehog asked, his voice soft and trembling.

“All evidence information on one specific case.”

“That’s the forensic database,” the hedgehog said, not looking at Trembor. “It’s better protected, they don’t like it when we go in and take or add information.”

“Does that mean you can’t do it?” Trembor did his best to tap down his annoyance. He didn’t put it past Jasber to be wasting his time for old time’s sake.

“It means it’s going to cost you,” the bison said.

“How much?”

She tapped her fingers on the table, a smile forming. “I could be open to discussing an ongoing arrangement.”

“No. This is a one-time thing. You tell me how much, I get you the money, it gets done and we forget we talked. And so there isn’t any misunderstanding. You try to blackmail me with that recording, and I will eat the two of you.”

“I don’t do blackmail, lion. You of all people know that.” She tapped her pad. “This is for my protection because while I trust you to keep your word, I know better than to trust enforcers as a whole.

Trembor shrugged. “Let’s not start arguing about what a protection racket is, okay? How much is it going to cost me?”

She told him, and Trembor had trouble keeping his surprise from showing. He was going to have to stretch his current meat for a lot longer than normal. At least Marlot had shown him how to go about getting physical money without raising flags in the system.

“It’s going to take me a day to get that much,” he told her.

“I’m surprised you even know how to get physical currency.” She smiled. “Do you have less than legal needs I should help you with?” Trembor glared at her and she chuckled. “Bro, you think you can have what he wants by the time he brings me the money?”

The hedgehog shook his head. “That’s not enough for me to risk getting caught,” he answered, looking at the table. “At least a week.”

Jasber smiled. “So you want this done faster? I’ll give you a discount, on account of our previous working relationship and all that.”

A week. If he could afford it, Marlot would want this information tomorrow, but what she already wanted almost wiped his entire budget, and he’d have to agree to an ongoing working relationship with her to pay for the rest. He was not working with criminals. He already hated having to do it this one time.

How long would this take to be processed through the courts? It would be at least a week until a judge looked at it unless Sleekcoat had contacts who could speed it up, but she didn’t have a reason to do that. The moment she’d handed Bo to the revenue department, she’d closed her case, and the body was no longer her responsibility. The

department had no reason to expedite the case, so he had his week. How long would it take for the court to reach a decision? That would depend on who dad found as a lawyer for Bo, and if Trembor could talk him into stretching the procedures. Another week, maybe? Would that be enough?

It had to be, because it was probably all Trembor was getting.

“I’ll be back here tomorrow with your money,” he said, standing.

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” Jasber said. “Everyone gets some dirt in their fur, it’ll wash off.”

Trembor shuddered at the image. He already felt dirty enough he’d need to save his entire body and then scrub the skin to even have a chance to feel clean again.

Series of death-37

Marlot watched the dark-furred lion enter the bar, still not believing what he’d seen. He and Trembor? Marlot couldn’t imagine it, despite the picture. He couldn’t see his confident lion in the company of this... this slime. Marlot shuddered at the memory of the way the lion had held his hand, caressed it, the invitation in what he’d said.

And now he was partying with other males instead of being home with the one there. Marlot wasn’t certain of the relationship between them, but there was one. The anger at the cougar doing something wrong, the contrition in the lion’s tone on realizing he’d gotten carried away. The affection afterward. One didn’t speak like that to a stranger, or even someone he shared the house with. The lion cared.

Marlot was certain of that, even if the next night Gorrek was at someone else’s house for three hours before returning home. The one after that at another male’s house. The lynx wrapped around the lion before the door was fully open. They were more than only friends. The night after that, Gorrek had returned to the lynx’s house, but a panther had also been there, the two uncomfortable until the lion opened his arms to them.

The previous evening Gorrek had gone to yet another house, a jaguar, but the meeting had begun differently. The jaguar had been stiff, unwelcoming. Marlot hadn’t seen anger in the jaguar’s face, but he wasn’t letting the lion get close, or so Marlot had thought. Gorrek spoke for a minute, and the jaguar’s body language shifted. The coldness melted away; he looked shamed. When Gorrek caressed the jaguar’s face he leaned in the touch, then hugged the lion before the went inside.

Whatever that had been about, Marlot had to give this to the lion. He must have quite the way with words, because there was no way Marlot would have gotten the jaguar to melt on seeing him that stiff and cold. And when Gorrek left after his evening, he had a package wrapped in butcher paper under his arm. He’d gotten meat out of the visit on top of everything else, enough for a few days by the size of it.

And now, the lion was here, the lynx on his lap, the panthers leaning against him and laughing in the company of a tiger and another lion.

Was it a lion thing, this being with multiple people at the same time? Trembor’s father had three mates, but while Marlot didn’t know how the relationships had begun,

there was a level of love and respect with Torim and his mates he didn't see here. If not for what he'd seen at the individual doorsteps, Marlot would say the relationships here were only casual.

Was that what his and Trembor's relationship would have turned into? He wanted to say no outright, but with Trembor walking out on him for an unknown reason came the realization he didn't know the lion all that well. Maybe now that they'd been mated, he would have brought other males in. Would have expected Marlot to go along with it.

Would he? Would Marlot share his lion with other males, or would he walk away if the Trembor couldn't be happy with only him? Marlot groaned, wondering why it was so complicated. He loved Trembor, he'd thought Trembor had loved him. It should have been enough to weather everything.

Why had he walked away? Marlot tried to remember the details. They'd argued over how to bring that tiger to justice. Trembor had bristled at how Marlot had made a deal with the hacker for the information, instead of making sure he'd be prosecuted. And he'd walked away when Marlot wouldn't do what Trembor wanted.

He'd gone over all this already. Maybe Trembor had walked away because Marlot hadn't obeyed him. Maybe he was like Gorrek, just not as talented with his muzzle? The wolf smiled at memories of what his lion had done with his muzzle, then groaned again. He didn't need that while surveilling this lion. Not with how he also remembered the way Gorrel had held his hand, looked at him, promised him pleasure without ever saying the words.

Fuck, he was not doing anything with Trembor's old lover, even if he wasn't currently watching him to catch the Al'garinam.

Remembering why he was here, watching Gorrek cooled his blood enough he ponder the other question that had been bothering him. Had Al'garinam picked Gorrek because he was connected to Trembor, or was it a coincidence? Both seemed improbable, but what were the odds he'd accidentally picked Trembor's old lover? Then there was the call. Was this what he'd meant? If so, why? Marlot had known Trembor had had lovers before him. Well, he'd figured he had. Unlike him, the lion had been comfortable being with other males, so he wouldn't have kept to himself.

He rubbed his face. Why was he trying to assign sense to the hare. He was a hunter; he was deranged, nothing he did made sense except in his twisted view of the world where... what? Where Marlot somehow had been picked to stop him. Except now it seemed like the hare had decided to expose his lion as... again, what?

Gorrek left the bar, and Marlot checked the time, almost exactly three hours since he'd arrived. Checking in the large window, the males had not only settled down but without the lion to engage them; they seemed uncomfortable. The lion was the lube that let them enjoy each other's company.

Marlot smiled at the image of the lion with the three males, in bed, all properly lubed up. His smile faltered when he remembered the lion visiting two males at the same house. The odds were he had had sex with both of them. The idea it was not a fantasy doused Marlot's imagination, the fact he then saw himself in bed with this lion and

Trembor shattered the fantasy entirely.

He added the time Gorrek left the bar to his program as the lion got in his car and drove off. Marlot wondered if these males were the extent of Gorrek's pride as he followed him. The lion was heading home, Marlot knew, but he still stayed with him. He wasn't risking this was the one time the lion did something different and ended up dead at the hare's hands.

Another issue occurred to him. If Gorrek got these males to hunt for him, how accurate would his program be at predicting the lion's movement? It was highly prey dependent. Could he alter it to make the lion's prey sexual, instead of hunger-related? Well, sex was a hunger, right? But what were the parameters?

He snorted. "Just use how you feel right now, wolf, you're pretty needy yourself."

When Gorrek pulled into his house's driveway, Marlot figured he could go home and take care of his own need; by himself, since he wouldn't seek out other males. "It's over between you and Trembor," he growled to himself, noting that unlike the previous times, Gorrek didn't drive into the garage, stepping out of the car and looking in his direction. "You're allowed to seek comfort in some other male's arms if you want."

Like there were any other males he wanted, or even knew were interested in him. He glanced at the rearview mirror to make sure the lion was heading inside, then Marlot resigned himself to another lonely night.

Series of death-38

Obtaining the file required Trembor made another visit to the bar to meet with Jasber and her hedgehog brother. When he left, he stank so much he figured he'd have to burn his clothes. He got out of them the moment he was in his house, threw them in the wash, and added more descenter than it probably needed before putting on his gym pants, forcing food down and then sitting in front of his computer.

He spent ten minutes going through everything Marlot had told him about how he could disconnect his computer from the network, and by the time he'd done what he remembered he could only hope he'd done it right. He didn't want to risk anything on the slate calling out. There were apps that could do that, Marlot had told him when he'd first seen his computer that first visit.

He hesitated once the slate was in. He could make believe he hadn't broken the law, he'd just hired a specialist to... he sighed. His delusion didn't go as far as he'd like. All it would take is someone asking why he'd gone around the city making withdrawals just under the notification limit and his excuses would falter. He accessed the slate.

The files were within folders, one for the kill location evidence, one for the body, one for Bo's person, his car, and finally another for Bo's house. That the kill location and house had their own folders was telling. Trembor expected Sleekcoat to claim something to the effect that Bo had lured the cub in his home and killed him there, which was ridiculous, with Herelex and Isenson there.

He began with the body. That should be the easiest to deal with since there was no

way Bo had hit the cub.

And the cub had been hit. Hit hard and often. Looking at the patterns noted by the medical examiner, Trembor saw anger in the attack. Whoever had done that... they hadn't been happy. The death had been caused by a broken neck, a blow from the back, a lot of strength, the examiner noted. The predator had to be among the larger species.

Trembor cursed on reading the cub had blood under his the claws of one hand, identified as Bolifen Goldenmane's blood. Looking in the folder with Bo's examination, he found pictures of three small cuts, the width of the cub's claws. Reading, Bo didn't have any explanations for them. His guess was he'd gotten them was hanging out with his friends, the name of whom he didn't give.

"Stupid, Bo. Don't protect them."

Bo's knuckles had no evidence he'd punched anything, but a set of hunting gloves had been found in his laundry basket, and that had strands of the cub's fur on it. Bo didn't hunt with gloves, even after breaking his hand, years ago, he refused to wear them. It took away from the purity of the hunt, he said.

"Of course, I wouldn't believe that scent either," Trembor grumble. Especially with Bo's fur inside the glove. The car had the cub's fur in the trunk, where Bo would have transported him back to his house. The body had been found on the preparation table in the kitchen, not yet cut or even bled.

Trembor had to search for how Sleekcoat had even become aware of the body. Bo's house had a garage, so he would have driven in before taking the body out—if he'd done this, Trembor reminded himself. If. He knew Bo hadn't. Regardless of the evidence, his brother wasn't a cub killer, even accidentally.

How Sleekcoat was informed of it was the same way most bodies were discovered. A call to the report line. Someone young, or female, or female sounding at least. They'd peeked into the kitchen window, saw the body. Called.

"Fucking convenient." Why had they been looking in? Looking to rob his brother's house? Why look into the kitchen? What did a would-be thief think would be of value there? It wasn't like they could carry out the preparation table. Like their father's, Bo's was a stone surface on hardwood support and legs. He'd invested good money in it. Like everyone in his family who had one. You didn't go cheap when it came to preparing your meat. Of course, the reasoning would be that the thief looked in the other windows first and this was just them being thorough.

The evidence was nearly overwhelming.

A car matching Bo's had been seen by a witness, but Trembor didn't worry about that one. Without corroborating pictures, Bo's lawyer would easily discredit witness testimony. The harder one was that Bo's pad had pinged one of the broadcast towers in the area. For that to happen, it had to be there, would be the argument.

How easy was it to fool the towers? Trembor didn't know, but it would be simple enough to borrow Bo's pad while he was with his friends, carry it while killing the cub, and return it afterward. The death had happened while Bo was at the bar, if his story was to be believed. There were no indications anyone at said bar had seen him, or that an

enforcer had gone there to ask. Bo's lawyer would have to see to it.

Not that Trembor thought anyone there would say anything, not if it was the friends Bo had hung out with were the ones Trembor suspected.

Trembor closed his eyes and let his breath out. He put Bo out of his mind as he went over the evidence and the story it told.

The predator had stalked the cub. The age was such the scent might have come across as adult in the thrill of the hunt. The cub might have been too scared to call out, say he was underage. He got one swipe in, then a precise blow broke the neck. He'd have taken out the ID and only then saw he was under-aged. Cub these days were notorious for carrying their ID in a pocket instead of on a lanyard for everyone to see. Dismay, anger, rage at having killed a cub caused the predator to lash out, striking the cub over and over. When he worked it out of his system, he put the body in his car and drove home to cut it up. No body, no crime. At least no tax-related crime. The Missing Person Bureau would be on this for a while, although with the circumstantial evidence, the predator would still be found.

Trembor saw only one problem with this story, Bo's cubs. They were in the house. He would never had put them at risk like this, and they would have seen the body in the morning. Of course, the angle here is that they want to protect their father. Trembor looked for what Herelex. His father had overslept, so they had to hurry. It had been cool meat as they got ready, a glass of blood on the dining table, which was separated from the kitchen by a door which Bo kept closed. So they might not have seen the body, and Bo's claim there was no body wouldn't be listened to.

That he'd overslept was odd. Bo's alarm was loud since he hated being late. He might be groggy, but he woke up on time every morning. Sleekcoat would claim he'd hunted late.

Trembor looked at everything there. How would he do this? How would he arrange everything so it looked like his brother was the predator who'd killed the cub? He'd already placed the pad in the area, and with the pad in hand, the predator could have borrowed Bo's car, making that part of the evidence. Put the body in the trunk, returned the car to the bar with the pad. Once Bo drove home, broken in, took the body out, hid it in the garage until everyone left for work, set it on the table, call it in.

The blood. How would he get the blood on the cub's claws? Bo overslept, did that mean he was drugged? It would be a way to get the blood, make the cuts. Had anyone drawn Bo's blood for tests? He saw no mention of it, and it wasn't standard procedure in cases like this.

Trembor now had a demonstrative way Bo could have been framed for the body. The why he didn't know, but he had no doubt who the who was, Bo's so-called friends had the means to do this. Trembor's problem was proving it, and doing so without revealing he had access to the evidence.

Series of death-39

Marlot snapped a picture of the ocelot Gorrek was making out with in the hall

leading to the restroom. That made nine? Ten males the lion was seeing? Although this one Marlot wasn't sure was officially one of Gorrek's boyfriends, but the way they were grinding against one another, he'd be soon.

Marlot wondered what the male seated at the table waiting for the lion to return would do if he saw this. Would he storm off, leaving the lion to pay for the meal, or would Gorrek somehow manage to sweet talk the tiger into letting this new male eat with them, and have the tiger pay for the whole thing.

Marlot had no idea how Gorrek did it. He could take a pissed tiger almost larger than him and turn them into an eager and willing person with a minute of talking. And it seemed to be all he did. His version of stalking his meals, since as far as Marlot could tell, Gorrek always had the males he saw provide his meals, and extra.

He ran the ocelot's picture through his newest version of this stalking program. He should rename it. It wasn't building a stalking profile anymore, it was... Marlot watched it run. He had no idea what it was yet, but Gorrek was forcing Marlot to get the program to work in different ways even more than Al'garinam did. At least the hare was killing what he was after. Marlot knew how to get his program to build body reference and correlation parameters to estimate the kind of people the hare would go after.

If Gorrek had a type, beyond male and willing, Marlot had yet to figure it out. He did seem to prefer felines. That wall of pictures was mostly that, and except for one wolf, and a fox, the males Marlot had seen Gorrek with were felines, but their body types went from muscular to lithe. Taller than he was, to shorter. It was like he just wanted to accumulate as many boyfriends as he could and cares little for the rest.

Could he mesh both Al'garinam's and Gorrek's profiles and see if anything about them overlapped? The hare wouldn't be a target for Gorrek's interest, that was certain. The lion was purely interested in predators. But their path had crossed once already, and the hare had to be keeping an eye on the lion to pick his moment. Among all the predators around Gorrek, the hare should be easy to spot, but Marlot had yet to see him.

Was it skill, or was Al'garinam simply letting Marlot stew? Once he caught the hare, Marlot would be certain to ask.

Marlot watch Gorrek exchange information with the ocelot, go to the restroom, while the ocelot took a minute to catch his breath and get his excitement under control. Would he walk close enough to the tiger's table for him to catch the scent? The ocelot had to have the lion's scent embedded in his fur at the moment, not to mention the scent of what they were doing. But the ocelot straightened his jacket and headed out.

So, how was Gorrek explain the ocelot's scents on him? There weren't enough de-scenting wipes in existence to remove what they'd been up to. The lion needed a shower with body wash. The lion exited the restroom, rejoined the tiger, who stiffened. They spoke, Gorrek acting dismissive, and the tiger relaxed as he nodded. Whatever the lion said, the tiger accepted.

Marlot was almost impressed.

The meal continued, finished. The tiger paid, had the leftovers, and the lion took that, heading to the restroom again, while the tiger left. So they weren't going back to the

tiger's place. No sex for him. The lion had gotten his food and didn't need anything more tonight.

Five minutes and the lion hadn't left the restroom. Ten and still no sign of the lion, or maybe Marlot had just missed him, he decided. There was a door at the end of the hall that led outside. If the lion had left that way, getting distracted by the prey walking by. He needed to consider going on a hunt of his own soon, his cooler was getting low.

This observation was over, Marlot decided, and he stood, pulling his jacket tighter against the cold wind. The weather was in that undecided period between warm and cold that made it too warm if his winter coat had come in and too cold if it hadn't, and it hadn't yet. A few more weeks and Marlot would be able to endure anything the weather threw at him for the winter.

He made notes of the prey who didn't move away from him as their path crossed. Too much confidence in a prey could mean a good meal soon. Of course, without stalking them to get enough information for his program, they'd remain potential, instead of actual meals. He'd be back in these parts, Marlot figured, since Gorrek seemed to enjoy the area. The next time he'd see if these prey worked nearby or were simply here shopping.

Marlot unlocked his car as he approached. The lot was smaller, and the only available spot was at the back, near the alleys. The working prey didn't want to park close to them and risk ambush. Marlot didn't care, he could—

He spun, grabbed the hand reaching for him, pulled the large male off balance, and slammed the lion's back against the car.

Gorrek smiled at him. "Well, your reflexes are good. I like that in a male."

"You like getting gored too?" Marlot snapped. "Because that's what could have happened here. What's the idea, stalking me?"

"I, stalking you?" the side of the lion lips climbed in a half-grin. "I am not the one who had been watching you for how many evenings now, five, six?" He ran a finger along Marlot's muzzle. "You don't have to be so indirect, you can simply come out and tell me you're interested, at this point you should know I don't mind adding a new partner to my...pride."

Marlot slapped the hand away. "That's not why I'm watching you."

"No of course not. A handsome wolf like you has nothing better to do than follow a lion like me around." The hand went around Marlot's side and pulled him closer. "Did you like what you saw tonight?" Gorrek licked his lips. "Did you wish it was you in place of the ocelot?"

Marlot pushed against the lion's chest, but this time Gorrek held him. "I don't care what you get up to with all of them," he said, cursing himself silently for enjoying being held and knowing his scent betrayed him. "And this isn't what you think, it's got nothing to do with you."

"No, of course not. You couldn't smell this happy because of good little me." He leaned to the side of Marlot's head and took a deep breath. "Tell me, did Trembor tell you how good I am?" Marlot stiffened. "All the way's I made him squirm and beg for

more?”

Marlot pushed against the lion hard, shoving himself out of his hold. “Don’t talk about him that way. And how do you even know about me and him?”

Gorrek’s ear canted. “Mating contracts are publicly accessible. It wasn’t hard to find it when I did a search on you, RI Marlot Blackclaw. Lifetime mating, I’m impressed, I didn’t know Trembor had that in him. He didn’t have that kind of dedication when he was younger. He left me, did you know that? Without explanation. One day he was just gone.”

Marlot swallowed. Maybe he should have looked into Trembor’s past. Maybe there was no reason why he’d walked out on him, other than it was what the lion did.

“I’d never do that to someone.” Gorrek reached and caressed the side of Marlot’s head. “Especially not someone I’d sign a lifetime contract with.”

Marlot took the hand and moved it away. “That’s not... we aren’t...” the lion’s grin infuriated the wolf. “What are you doing here?”

Gorrek held Marlot’s eyes for another second, then smiled, offering him the box he held in his other hand. “I figured you’d be hungry, after watching me *eat*, the way I did.” The lion looked Marlot over. “Or is it another kind of hunger you’d like me to satisfy?” He licked his lips.

“No. Definitely not. Wasn’t that ocelot enough for you? The tiger, the other lion, the two cheetahs? You want me to go on?”

Gorrek beamed. “Oh, you have been watching me. How did you see me with cheetahs? I didn’t think you could see in their apartment from the street.” He snapped his fingers. “The building across the road from theirs. Oh, how good of a view did you have to their bedroom? Did you watch my performance? Do you like brothers?”

“No,” Marlot exclaimed in exasperation. “What is wrong with you? I’m not watching you have sex. And I’m not interested in having sex with you. I’m not one of those males you accumulate.”

“Right, you wolves aren’t particularly comfortable sharing. One mate for a lifetime. But I can definitely make it worthwhile. I already have a wolf and he definitely hasn’t run off, even after he found out about my other partners. I’m just too good at pleasuring him.”

“Will you stop? I have no interest in you.”

“I beg to differ. No one uninterested spends that much time watching me.”

Marlot glared at the lion and almost told him about Al’garinam, about his life being in danger. But even if the lion believed a hare could be a danger, Marlot had no idea how the hare would react to his prey being aware of it. As far as he knew, none of them had. Would Al’garinam lash out? Target the males around Gorrek?

“Look, this is a misunderstanding,” Marlot said, doing his best to keep his breathing steady. “I’m not interested in you. Not that way. I’m doing research for a program I’m building.”

Gorrek chuckled. “Sure you are.” He offered the box to Marlot. “But I need to head home, I have someone waiting for me. So you take this. The restaurant does an

amazing job with meats and sauces. This might spoil you for anything else. Just like I will.”

Marlot rolled his eyes, his ears folding back, and the lion moved the box away.

“I’ll leave it here for you to do what you want with.” Gorrek placed the box on the roof of Marlot’s car and stepped away.

Marlot walked to his car, considered throwing the box at the lion, but grabbed it and dropped it on the passenger seat. He’d throw it away out of the lion’s sight. Marlot didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging Gorrek had gotten to him.

He pulled out of the spot, and the lion waved at him with a knowing smile as Marlot drove past him. He still had the smile as Marlot glanced at the lion in the rearview mirror.

Marlot did not like that smile at all.

Series of death-40

It took Trembor a few days to find the people he wanted to talk to. The attack had been a while ago, and while he remembered the survivors had been a tigress and a wolf, and that one of them was called Bartock, or Baftor, or Bradock, of something like that, it hadn’t been much to go on. He’d called in a favor with a friend and had her look for a hospital visit for a tigress or a wolf treated for clawing. There were a few over the days after they attacked him, but when he saw the wolf’s name he recognized it, Barkon. Then it had been a question of asking in the department. Barkon Longpounce had a record, theft and a few fights that resulted in productivity drop, but he was employed as a security guard now, at a gambling house.

This bar was the fourth in the list of places Barkon liked to frequent Trembor had gotten from the officers who’d kept track of the wolf before he found a respectable job. It was the worse of them. He’d thought the bar he’d met Jasber in had been bad, with its smells and trash, but at least there had been booths, tables, places to sit and try to enjoy the place.

This place had had tables and chairs at one point, if Trembor was right about what the broken pieces of furniture piled in one corner had been. Now it was the bar and space for people to fight. There were three of them going on as Trembor crossed the bar. A cry went up as one lean jaguar got to her feet, her opponent panting on the floor, and people exchanged money.

The jaguar grabbed a handful of the money, headed to the bar and ordered herself a large drink. People moved away, to the other fights, and the coyote on the struggled to get to his feet. Trembor saw no indication the fight had been organized.

Now that some weren’t focused on the fights, they noticed him, and how he was dressed. Trembor wondered if he should have dressed down before coming. His blazer, button-up shirt and slacks made him stand out among the ripped and dirty pants, the jackets over fur, and the body piercings. The looks he got were hungry, and Trembor wasn’t sure eating him was their plan.

“You lost?” the grizzled bear behind the bar asked. “The highway ramp is eight-

block that way.”

“I’m looking for someone,” Trembor replied.

“They ain’t here.”

“You don’t even know who I’m looking for.”

The bear leveled his gaze on Trembor. “They ain’t here.”

“His name is Barkon,” Trembor said, ignoring the implied threat in the bear’s tone. “He’s a wolf. He might be with a tigress.”

The bear sighed. “You looking to die? That why you came in here and bothered us?”

“No, I came here to talk. We began the conversation a while back, just looking to continue it.”

“And what do you want with dear old Barker?” someone behind Trembor said.

Trembor turned. The speaker was a scarred goat with a crooked muzzle and mean black eyes. On one side stood a tiger who looked barely out of predation age, but with enough scars to indicate he had to be older, a lynx with patterns shaved in her arm fur. On the other, a gray wolf, his eyes widening in recognition, a deer with broken antlers next to him. They were lean, angry, dangerous.

Trembor ignored the goat. “Hello Barkon,” he greeted the wolf, who was over his surprise.

“You looking to be food?” the wolf replied, looking at the others. The goat ground his teeth.

“No, I’m here to ask you to arrange a meeting with your boss, I’d like to talk with them about my brother.”

“Who’s this Barker?” the goat asked.

“Remember that job that ended up with Firstor being meat?” the gray wolf answered, nodding to Trembor. “That was him.”

“Are you his boss?” Trembor asked the goat, figuring he couldn’t be it.

“As far as you’re concerned,” the goat spat, “I am.”

“I need to talk to your boss then. Whoever has their claws in my brother. I want to discuss what’s going to be needed to get them to set him free.” If they’d done their research on his family, it would be a credible enough excuse for him to want to talk. If they hadn’t Trembor had to hope they’d believe a brother would come to his sibling’s rescue, no matter how tenuous their relationship might be.

The goat chuckled, then laughed, which caused his subordinates to laugh with him, and some of those in the crowd watching. “I’ll negotiate with you on their behalf,” the goat finally said.

“That’s not what I’m here for. I need you to set up the meeting, that’s all.”

The goat stepped to Trembor. “You don’t get it, lion. You’re on my turf. You deal with me or no one at all, and if you’re lucky, I might let you get out of here with only losing that nice-looking mane of yours.”

“Your turf,” Trembor said, “but you still report to someone higher.” The nervous flick of the ears was all the confirmation Trembor needed. “So this is really their turf.”

You just manage it for them.” The people behind the gambling house had a longer reach than he’d expected, but thinking about it, it wasn’t surprising; they had to come from somewhere, and lower on the criminal ladder made sense. “So, I need you to get a message to them. Will you do that for me?”

“I might listen,” the goat replied, “if I decide to leave you your tongue.”

Trembor nodded and took the gloves out of his jacket’s pocket before taking that off and handing it to the bear. “If anything is missing out of it, I am going to take it out of your hide, is that clear?”

The bear studied Trembor, glanced at the gloves, then nodded, taking his jacket and hanging it on a hook behind the bar.

“So, who here has the lowest productivity tax?” Trembor asked, putting the gloves on. They were stiff, brand new. He’d bought them earlier in the day, figuring a fight was bound to happen with the kind of people he was looking for. They were similar to his training gloves in that they prevented his claws from extending—he didn’t want to spill blood—but these were weighed, to give his strikes more force.

“Why’d you care?” the goat asked.

Trembor smiled. “Because that warthog I had the last time ended up being more expensive than he should have been, for the kind of lowlife you and your friends are. I’d rather not have another surprise expense like him this time.”

“You threatening me?” the goat asked.

“No, not you, I figure you’re the more expensive of the bunch, what about you Barkon? Anyone among your friends less expensive than you, or are you who I’m eating tonight?”

The gray wolf glanced at the young-looking tiger, and Trembor smiled at the anger the tiger directed at the wolf. It was nice to know he could engender fear in some of these people.

“Kalek,” the bear said. “You wreck my bar again, and I am skinning you if the lion doesn’t.”

“Stop shedding over this Amar,” the goat replied. “It’s just me and my boys, we’ll make sure we don’t wreck anything more. What do you say, lion? You think there’s enough meat on those bones to feed the five of—”

Trembor struck the goat in the face hard, then jumped over the falling form to give himself space. He turned and kicked at the tiger who’d been the fastest to react. The weight in Trembor’s modified shoes gave the impact more force, and the tiger was on the floor. He blocked the deer’s punch, which left him open for Baron’s claws—they had no problem shedding blood.

His knee struck the wolf in the stomach, the heat of a cut at his back made him kick out in that direction, blocking another punch from the deer as he turned. The lynx held her stomach. The goat was back on his feet, his muzzle broken and bleeding. He threw himself at Trembor, how grabbed the deer by the arm, and pulled him in the way. The impact sent them both down. Trembor kicked the wolf in the face as he attempted to get to his feet, then it was him, the lynx, and the tiger. He stepped quickly, dodging

blows and swipes.

They were young, and like young felines everywhere, not keen on cooperation. Trembor maneuvered them to be in each other's way, then kicked the lynx on the side of the head hard. Down she went. The tiger turned to run, and a kick in the back sent him in the bar, where he stayed down. That would explain his lowered value in the wolf's eyes.

The deer was on the floor, unmoving as the goat stood before Trembor. He hadn't thought their impact that hard, but maybe the deer was fragile. The goat looked at the unconscious people. "You think you can come in my bar and hurt my—"

Trembor punched him hard in the face, sending the goat stumbling back to the bar. He straightened, but before he stepped forward, the bear grabbed him and turned him around.

"Your bar?" he asked, growling. "This is my bar." He slammed the goat's head on the surface and let him fall to the ground.

Trembor eyed the bear.

"What, you going to take me on for taking your kill?"

"If he's dead, you're paying for him," Trembor replied.

The bear's ears tilted back. "He's not dead. That head of his is all bone. Too stubborn to get killed that way."

Trembor nodded. "Are you going to give me grief over this?" he indicated people regaining consciousness on the floor.

"Nah. You tried to do this nicely, I reckon. Kalek and his bunch are the ones always causing problems, and you just earned me enough I'll be able to replace the furniture they broke last time. Pay up, everyone."

It was nice one of the people here had expected Trembor to win this. He crouched next to the gray wolf and rolled him on his back. Barkon's eyes grew wide with fear.

"Relax," Trembor said. "I'm not killing you. I haven't killed anyone. Tell your bosses, the real ones, this is a goodwill gesture. Tell them I want to talk about my brother. Actually talk. They can set the meeting place, and they know where to find me when they're ready. You got that?"

The wolf nodded and Trembor stood.

Bear smiled as he counted the money he held. "You're not getting any, you didn't bet."

"I just want my jacket. I'm done here."

The bear reached back and get it to Trembor, who put it on, then went through every pocket to ensure everything was there. The bear lost his smile in the process. Trembor shrugged before leaving. Like there was any way he'd trust him not to have stolen from him.

Series of death-41

His pad buzzed, and Marlot hesitated before bringing it to his ear. Gorrek Shiningpelt, the display read. "Hello," he answered.

"Good morning Mister Blackclaw. How was the food?"

“It was edible,” he replied. It had been good, but the only reason he’d eaten it was because he wasn’t sure what the reaction would have been if he’d driven to the lion’s place and given it back. The cougar living there didn’t seem to know about the other males Gorrek was seeing. The other option had been to throw it away, and Marlot didn’t waste food. So he’d eaten it.

“Edible,” Gorrek said with a chuckle. “You must be quite the discriminating eater.”

“Not really. Meat’s meat. What can I do for you, Mister Shiningpelt? Did you see the hare I mentioned to you?”

“Hare? Oh, no, I haven’t seen any hare with fingers light enough to lift my ID. How light are your fingers?”

“Excuse me?”

The lion laughed. It was deep, throaty, rich, and Marlot found himself smiling.

“Maybe we can meet after work, and you can show me what you can do with those fingers, you know, other than lift my ID.” The accusation was light, in jest, but Marlot lost his smile.

“I didn’t take your ID,” Marlot stated.

“I believe you,” the lion replied in a tone that contradicted him.

“Why would I have returned it?”

“Marlot,” the lion purred. “Don’t play it that way. I’m not offended, I’m impressed really. No one’s ever gotten my attention this way, but you have it now. You can stop stalking me and move on to catching me.” In the pause, the lion let out a soft moan. “I will make it worth your while.”

“I’m not—” Marlot rubbed his temple. “I’m not stalking you. I’m waiting for the thief to strike again.”

The lion laughed. “Let him come, I’ll catch him for you.” Gorrek lowered his voice. “I can’t wait for you to come for me.”

“I am not—have a good day, Mister Shiningpelt, I have work to do.” He disconnected the call to the lion’s laughter and returned to the report he was filling.

* * * * *

“The body’s a raccoon,” the ermine in uniform told Marlot, reading from her pad. “In her fifties based on the visuals. Not sure this one’s for you thought. Her pants are ripped, I think she was raped.”

Marlot nodded. “She’s still dead, so the killer’s still my responsibility. If the examiner confirms rape, I’ll let vice know, they might have something that will help me.” He looked down the alley where the body had been found. Near a lightly traveled street, dark with a turn within a hundred feet. Perfect for snatching someone and being out of view. Ambush was the mark of several types of predators, sexual or otherwise.

He looked over the street for anything that could help. This was a low productivity area, the buildings were poorly maintained, mostly lodging. Someone at a window could have seen something, but Marlot didn’t expect any of them to come forward. The Enforcer would canvas the area, and maybe he’d get lucky.

Someone waved on the other side of the cordon, and Marlot frowned at the dark-maned lion standing among the watchers. He smiled when their eyes met and motioned for Marlot to join him. With a shake of the head, Marlot headed in the alley to look the body over.

* * * * *

“...and the examiner will probably confirm the death was due to the gash on the side of her head, which matches the shape of the brick next to it.” He paused the recording. Took a picture of the brick. “The frost would indicate the brick wasn’t moved, so she probably fell on it, rather than being hit.”

“Doing my job for me?” the red frog asked, approaching, rolled tarp under an arm. Jaxca was bundled in a thick jacket with the lined hood pulled tight over his head, leaving on his eyes and end of his red muzzle visible.

“It’s not that cold yet,” Marlot commented, smiling.

“Get shaved, Marlot, then tell me how it’s not that cold yet.” Jaxca dropped the tarp and crouched next to Marlot. He handed him a piece of paper. “There was a lion in the crowd who wanted me to give this to you.”

Marlot unfolded it and read the address and time. Dinner time. The address was in one of the better parts of the city. Not where the lion lived.

“Moving on?” Jaxca said, examining the head wound.

“No.” Marlot crumpled the paper. “I’m not—”

“None of my business,” the frog said.

Marlot pulled his pad and sent Gorrek a message. *Not happening.*

“I agree with your assessment, barring other injuries; this is what killed her. The cold weather is going to make the time of death imprecise. What does your nose tell you?”

Marlot shrugged. “The scent isn’t that decayed, my guess is sometime in the night, I’d say six hours, but it dropped below freezing around nine last night, so it could be twelve hours and I wouldn’t tell the difference.”

Jaxca unrolled the tarp. “I should be able to narrow that a bit. Is she ready to be moved?”

“Yeah, I got everything I’ll get from the scene.” Marlot helped Jaxca move her on the tarp and then carry her to his car. Gorrek was nowhere to be seen, at least.

* * * * *

The box on his porch, at the door, was marked with the name Zerto’s. A search online told Marlot it was the restaurant at the address Gorrek had had Jaxca give him. There was a card on top of the box. Looking around for the lion, he took it and read it.

Since you couldn’t make dinner, I had them deliver your plate. I hope this will be more to your high standards.

He called the lion. “What are you doing?”

“Well, right now I’m busy with—”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

There was a muffled conversation. When the lion spoke again, the sound was

different enough Marlot figured he was in another room. “I am demonstrating to you I am a good provider. Was the meat to your liking?”

“I just arrived, I haven’t eaten yet.” He almost asked who the lion had had this meal with, because Marlot knew he hadn’t paid for this.

“You should hurry, the box is insulated, but it’s better when it’s really hot. Call me back after and let me know what you thought.”

“No. Gorrek, you have enough males to pay attention to already.”

“I am, but I don’t want to leave you feeling left out. I have enough love for all of you.”

“Gorrek, I’m not—”

“Marlot, don’t worry,” the lion said softly. “I’m not going to push. I know you’re in a sensitive time right now, with what Trembor did to you. Just know that I’m here. That I’m going to patiently wait until you see that I can be good for you.”

“Goodbye, Gorrek.” Marlot disconnected. How dare he bring Trembor into this? Like them having him in common was enough for a relationship. You didn’t build any kind of relationship on shared pain.

Maybe vengeance, Marlot thought as he grabbed the box. But he didn’t want to hurt Trembor. He just wanted ...

Marlot leaned against the door once he closed it. He wanted his lion back. He wanted to understand why he’d walked out. He wanted to be held. He opened the box and the rich aromas wafted out. Meat cut into thin slices draped over a variety of roasted vegetables, drizzled with a sour sauce. Marlot salivated.

This was far too fancy a meal for him, but meat was meat, he told himself, so he’d eat it.

* * * * *

He inputted the name in his program, ran it, and hoped it would survive. He was on version six of his profiling program, this was no longer a stalking program, Gorrek had forced him to make so many alterations that he figured once functional, he could ask it what cut of meat a predator preferred and he’d get a reliable answer.

The error message told him he wasn’t there yet.

A knock on the door and Hela’han entered, carrying a small box with a name Marlot couldn’t make out because of how fancy the script was. “This was delivered for you.” The trunk hid under her arm. “It smells like meat.”

He took it and the card she handed him, already knowing who this was from.

You didn’t call me back, it read. Did the meal measure up?

It had, but he wasn’t going to tell the lion that. He didn’t want to encourage him. Marlot didn’t need anyone providing for him. He could provide fine by himself. Once the elephant left the room, he opened the box. A small meal, meat rolled around a paste that smelled of blood and sugar. The card next to it read.

I expect you don’t stop for a midday meal, so enjoy this.

He pushed the box away. He wasn’t eating any more of the lion’s gifts.

* * * * *

The small meal had been more filling than Marlot expected, he thought as he walked through the crowd. The sweetened blood had been especially good, it had been whipped, so it had a velvety consistency more than a paste one.

He rolled his eyes. What was he doing, thinking about consistency? It was food, nothing else. Food the lion was bribing him with as if he was some partner for hire. No, Marlot corrected himself. Food one of Gorrek's partner had paid for. Did they even know the lion had gifted that to him?

He slowed his steps as he approached the medical clinic, a sense of something prickling at him. He looked around, trying to understand what he was feeling, caught sight of a black mane on the other side of the street, an expensive jacket. Had that been a smirk as their eyes met, before being obscured by a passerby?

Was Gorrek stalking him? Like he needed that on top of the food? He tried to find the lion again, but he'd vanished in the crowd. Marlot shook his head. He wasn't someone's prey, definitely not that lion's prey. He walked again, he didn't hurry, prey sped up once they knew they were being stalked because fear drove them.

Marlot pulled on his memories of his youth, the games he and his friends played. The times when they had stalked him through the town. It had hurt when they caught him, because they'd figured that for the game to feel real, there needed to be a cost to being caught. And Marlot had been afraid, even knowing they wouldn't hurt him to the point he'd need to go to the medical clinic. The idea his father might find out had been scary. And he'd gained an inkling of what prey felt.

It had helped him design the first version of his stalking program.

Now he took those remembered instincts and used them to control what Gorrek did; because once you knew how prey behaved, you also knew how the predator would react.

He picked up his pace, and the lion became visible out the corner of Marlot's eye, walking faster than the people around him. Marlot smiled. If he bolted in an alley, the lion would chase. Marlot knew the area, since it was where Jaxca's clinic was located. He could lead Gorrek into a trap, make him the prey, bring him down.

Ruin himself in the process. Gorrek was out of his price range. Of course, that wasn't what the lion was after. Marlot remembered how good it had felt to be held. He shook the memory away. He had no interest in being one among a dozen males the lion entertained.

He stopped before the clinic and moved only enough so the crowd didn't have to part around him. The lion kept walking, thinking he still had his prey's scent. Once he was out of view, Marlot entered the clinic, smirking. That would teach Gorrek.

Series of death-42

"I don't know how long I can stretch this," the woman on the other end of the pad told Trembor. "The judge who's been assigned to the case is hard on anyone he considers wasting his time. And the evidence is solid."

“I need more time,” Trembor answered, shutting down his system. “I’m doing my own investigation, I can prove he didn’t do it, I just need the time to conclude it.”

“Mister Goldenmane, I am doing the best I can, I am simply informing you that time is running out. The trial starts tomorrow. I’ll do my best to make sure we go through every detail, but as I said, the evidence is compelling. Whatever your investigation uncovered, you need to provide it to me soon.”

“All right.” Trembor let out a breath. “Give me three days. Give me that, and I’ll have something for you.” He disconnected. “Fuck.” His father had found Bo a lawyer, someone from the firm he’d worked at who had a good track record. Torin hadn’t said how she was getting paid. Trembor figured some of it would be with favors his father had accumulated over the years, but even then, she couldn’t be cheap. His father had worked at an excellent firm. If she said he was running out of time, it was because she’d tried everything she knew to try.

He needed to find a way to get that meeting to happen now. Maybe he needed to pay that bar another visit, even if it had only been two days. Follow the goat or one of his people?

He stepped out of the office and into the chaos of shift change, enforcers coming and going. Greeting him, wishing him a good evening. He heard Bo’s name mentioned, but ignored the questions, heading out. He didn’t feel like telling anyone his bother was screwed unless he got that meeting.

Trembor stopped on seeing the gray wolf leaning against his car. He looked around. He couldn’t be so stupid as to start a fight here, where trained people would come to Trembor’s defense.

The wolf stepped forward, his hands at his side, relaxed. “I’m not here to cause trouble.”

“You wouldn’t, except for you,” Trembor replied. Derimak slowed her walk, watching the two of them. Trembor shook his head, and she continued to her car. “What do you want?”

“To tell you that they will see you.”

Trembor relaxed a little. “When?”

The wolf nodded to the street where a silver luxury car waited. “Now.”

Now. Not giving him time to prepare anything. He patted his jacket to make sure the item Jasber gave him when they’d come up with this plan was still there. She’d insisted he always kept it on his person, even if he hated having it. The scent of nip permeated it and had drawn looks from the people in the precinct. Nip wasn’t illegal, but only a certain kind of people smoked it, and Trembor wasn’t one of those. He didn’t want people to think he was.

“Well?” the wolf asked. “You’re the one who wanted to talk with them. Were pretty fucking insistent about it.”

Trembor headed for the silver car and the wolf limped next to him.

* * * * *

When he exited the car, he wasn’t in a part of the city he was familiar with, or the

one he'd expected to be in. There was a definite lower-middle productivity feel to the buildings, old, but maintained. Apartments over stores. The people walking along were wary, like anyone in the lower brackets knew to be. All it took was a predator like him, well dressed and alert, and one of them became meat. In these neighborhoods, even predators were affordable.

The wolf indicated the restaurant before them. The Sweet Tastes, the name was, in a script that gave it a foreign feel to it. The inside was peaceful, with large tables set far apart, each with space for at least eight diners. It was a family restaurant. Trembor remembered being in similar places as a cub. Treats for when he or one of his siblings succeeded at something. A top mark in a class, that first successful takedown. Their sixteenth birthday.

The wolf guided Trembor to the furthest table, where someone sat with three pads before her. A mole, Trembor realized in surprise. Standing behind her were two of the largest tigers the lion had ever seen, in impeccable suits. She ran a hand at the bottom of a screen, then typed something on it.

The wolf took the chair opposite hers and pulled it from the table.

"Not yet," she said without looking up. "Ling." She indicated Trembor with a nod. The tiger on her left stepped around the table and without waiting for Trembor patted him down. He took out his pad, looked it over, turned it on, which prompted for the entry code, turned it off, placed it back in the pocket. Took the wallet, looked through it. Put that back. Took and studied more carefully Trembor's ID wallet, placed it back. He reached inside the lion's jacket, pulling the pack in the breast pocket. It was a hard box without any markings. He flicked the top open and revealed the smoke sticks. He wrinkled his nose at the scent and looked at Trembor disdainfully as he closed it and put it back.

The lion had just dropped in the tiger's opinion. Nip user, those eyes said, slacker, no backbone. Soon to be affordable to anyone who took a liking to him, if they could stand the taste nip gave the meat. He returned to his position behind the mole without a word, but the mole also wrinkled her nose.

"Now you can sit, Mister Goldenmane," she said. "Please don't light up, this is a respectable establishment. If you're so stressed you need it, I'd recommend giving up whatever this is. You don't have the temperament to do business with us."

"I'm not here to do business," Trembor said, sitting.

Her small mouth curled in a smile. "You are here, therefore, you want to do business."

"I'm here for answers, nothing more."

She stopped typing and looked at him. Could she see him? Moles were reputed to be blind, which was why they didn't normally live in cities. They were too easy prey, or so Trembor had heard. He'd never met a mole before. But she was here, running thing, ordering people about. It spoke of a high productivity. Or did it?

"Are you the person in charge? Or just some figure they won't care if I eat?"

"You won't eat me, Mister Goldenmane, not if you care about your brother. And

for your purposes, I am the person in charge. I have the authority to enforce whatever business we conduct.”

“But you have a boss.”

“Everyone does, it’s the way our society is built.”

“What if they don’t agree with you?”

“Then I wouldn’t be the one you are talking with right now. Your brother was made my responsibility, that includes all business relating to him.” She types on a screen; ran her fingers at the bottom. “He has accrued quite the debt.”

“Is that why you framed him?”

“Ah, yes, that unfortunate incident.” More typing without looking. She ran her fingers at the bottom. “We did not do this.”

Trembor snorted. “You expect me to believe that? You’re criminals, my brother can’t pay you so you destroy him, that’s who you work.”

“And how will he pay us once dead? That is what will happen to him for killing a cub. That is not a crime someone survives. Only the desperate, or the sick, commit it.”

“My brother didn’t do this, and you fucking know it.”

“Language, please,” the mole said calmly. “There might be cubs eating here.” The tiger on her right leaned in and whispered something. “Still, there could have been,” she said afterward. “So please monitor your language, Mister Goldenmane.”

Trembor forced himself to calm down by remembering he wasn’t here to start a fight. He needed to play for time. The longer he was in her presence, the better the chances were he’d get what he was after, no matter what she said or did.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “What’s it going to take for you to stop this? Like you said, if my brother’s dead, you aren’t getting anything out of him.”

“If by ‘this’ you mean the court case. As I said, we didn’t engineer this, therefore, there is little we can do, not without the proper incentive.”

“Isn’t making sure he can pay you incentive enough?”

She typed something, ran her fingers at the bottom of the screen. “The expenses required to ensure this type of case gets resolved without creating a backlash that could fall back on my organization are high. Your brother already can’t replay what he owes.” She smiled. “Are you looking to take on that debt for him?”

“No,” Trembor stated, forcing the confidence in his voice. Ignoring the part of his mind telling him that these people did have the power to free Bo. Shouldn’t he do this? He could deal with the debt afterward, but at least Bo would be free and with his cubs.

Except they had set this up. Probably specifically to get Trembor in this situation. After all, if he owed them, what could they force him to do, with his contacts within the enforcer, with his father’s contact within the court system? It seemed far fetched even to him, but this might have been arranged to force his family into this deal. The Goldenmanes weren’t rulers, but his family was large and spread into a lot of businesses.

No, he was here for the evidence that would free his brother, nothing more. He glared at the mole, then felt stupid for it. She couldn’t see it. “I’m not indebting myself or my family to you.”

She nodded. “Then I’m curious as to why you are here. If you are simply desperate and need to lash out at someone, I suggest the legal system, which is what your brother has run afoul of, this time.”

Trembor was on his feet, hands slamming on the table. “I’m here to tell you to stop. You don’t want to go to war with me. I am going to destroy you.”

Her raised hand stopped the tigers in their tracks toward Trembor. Her chuckle had Trembor’s hackles up. It was not the reaction of prey facing an angry lion.

“Mister Goldenmane, if I go to war with you, I will leave a crater in this city, one large enough to include every member of your family, no matter how removed they might be from you. You would do well to keep that in mind when attempting to make threats against me.”

Not her organization, Trembor noted. She wasn’t counting on others to back her up. Her threat of destruction, no matter how figurative, came from what she could do, no others do on her behalf. He fought the urge to throw himself at her for the threat, the need to rip her apart to keep his family safe.

He told himself that his death here wouldn’t help free Bo. That part of her plan was already in motion, her death wouldn’t stop it. The information he’d gathered here was what would free him, and that meant he needed to walk out of this restaurant. He needed to walk out of it now because he wasn’t sure how long he could keep from killing her.

“So you’re not going to be reasonable,” he snarled.

“I am not the unreasonable one here.”

“Then we’re done.”

“Indeed we are,” she replied calmly. “I’ll have Barkon drive you back to your car.”

Trembor looked at the wolf, who took a step away from him. “You want to lose him?”

She considered the question. “I’d rather not. He’s still a good investment.”

“Then I’m going to walk,” Trembor turned and headed out of the restaurant, turned left, and stormed away. People gave him space, a lot of it, and he was thankful. He might lash out at anyone coming too close right now and he didn’t want to deal with the delay paying their tax would cause him.

* * * * *

The address Jasber told him to meet him at was an office building. Trembor had expected another bar. He entered and found himself looking at the list of companies on the board. She hadn’t told him anything more than the address.

“Mister Goldenmane?” a gazelle in a security uniform asked. He frowned at the man who took a step back. “Miss Braid said to head up to the twelfth floor, they are waiting for you.”

The elevator opened onto a reception, with another gazelle seated behind the desk. He smiled at seeing Trembor and stood. “If you’ll follow me.” Without waiting, he headed through a set of double doors.

Trembor followed into a large room with people working at computers, some spoke on pads, others had earpieces on. Whatever this was, it was a much larger operation than Trembor expected. Jasber had expanded since the days he tried to have her caged.

The gazelle knocked on a door, then opened it, motioning for Trembor to enter.

The office was plain, only a desk with a computer Trembor suspected would make Marlot drool on it, the hedgehog seated behind it and Jasber seated on the corner of the desk.

“How did it go?” she asked.

Trembor took the pack of nip sticks out of his pocket and lobed it at her. She handed it to the hedgehog who opened the bottom and pulled a black box from it.

“How come they didn’t know about it?” Trembor asked.

“Their security only scans for outgoing signals,” the hedgehog answered, connecting to box to the computer. “That’s how the enforcers work. Since you kept your pad off like I told you and this only captures and doesn’t broadcast, they didn’t realize what you were doing.”

“What if one of them looked in and noticed they were just half stick?”

The hedgehog looked up at him. “Who in their right minds wants to get any closes to any kind of smoke sticks than they have to?”

Trembor had to give him that one. More than once he’d wanted to throw the damned thing over the last days. “How long is it going to take?”

“This captured everything on,” he checked something, “eighteen pads, some of which look to belong to customers. It’s going to take me a bit to find the relevant information. You might want to head home and wait for my call.”

“No.” Trembor paced from one side of the office to the other. “I’m waiting right here. The moment you have the proof, I’m taking it to Bo’s lawyer.”

The hedgehog opened his mouth, but Jasber shook her head, and he set to work. Trembor eyed her suspiciously.

“Have you considered how it’s going to look when you hand him evidence these people orchestrated your brother’s current situation? They might be criminals, but this isn’t exactly legal either.”

“I’m not an enforcer,” Trembor answered. “All I have to do is tell her that an interested party gave me the information and it’s admissible. At worse, it’s going to cause delays while the accuser tries to prove it’s false, but since we’re going to give them actual evidence, it’s still going to end with Bo being freed.”

“It might still be best if we channel the proof through the enforcers, don’t you think?”

“I’ll take too long. They’re going to have to corroborate what you give them. Bo’s lawyer said we’re down to days. Unless there’s something on there clearly stating ‘I have set up Bolifen Goldenmane because I want to get my claws into his entire family’, it would be weeks before they could act on it.”

“About that proof,” the hedgehog said, and Trembor finally relaxed, only to tense

on seeing the expression on his face. “You sure they did this?”

“Of course they did. No one else has any reason to frame my brother.”

The hedgehog looked worriedly at Jasber.

“My brother did not kill a cub,” Trembor stated.

“I’m not saying he did, but I’m saying there’s nothing in here even hinting that they’re involved. He owes them, and a lot too, but if someone in that group framed your brother, it isn’t this person or anyone who was in that room.”

Trembor slammed his fist on the desk. “No. They did this! Dig deeper, there has to be proof.”

“Trembor,” Jasber said, forcing herself between him and the desk. “Of my brother says there’s nothing in it, then there’s nothing. He’s not some amateur, this is what he does, and he’s the best.”

“There has to be something,” Trembor snarled. “If there isn’t, Bo’s going to die!”

“Do you want there to be proof?” The hedgehog asked, and Trembor looked around the bison.

“What are you talking about?”

“I have everything, all their access codes, all the locations on the net where they hide stuff. If you want there to be proof they framed your brother, I can put it there.”

“You’re talking about planting evidence,” Trembor said.

“Yeah.”

“No, absolutely not!”

“Hey, I’m, just giving you options here.”

Trembor leaned on the desk. “They’re going to know.”

The hedgehog snorted. “No, they won’t. Like Jazz said, I’m not an amateur. I can put everything in without anyone realizing what I’ve done. We can slip a tip to the enforcers about it and once they see what’s there, they’re going to act on it quick. That’s going to mean freezing your brother’s trial for the few hours it’s going to take them to realize what they have, then they’re going to free him. Because I’m going to give them the name of who was dispatch to kill that cub.”

“They don’t work that fast,” Trembor said.

“You clearly weren’t in the cyber division. Those people don’t have the time to take days to act. In the few minutes we spent talking, I can erase every trace of this building, of the crimes that are being committed right now in the other room. If they are too slow, they get nothing. Trust me. Within two hours or them being aware of the evidence I’ll give them, the trail is stopped. Within a day, your brother’s free.”

Trembor paced again. This was beyond finding evidence his brother had been framed. This was breaking the law, regardless of if he knew they were guilty or not. He stopped by the wall. Looked at it, saw the limited time he had to work in. He needed more time. If he had more time, he could prove Bo’s innocence. With a snarl, he punched the wall. It didn’t crack or break; all it did was cause him pain. Like the time limit, it didn’t care about him. About what he wanted. It just was. He couldn’t force it out of his way.

So he needed to work around it. Make more time for him to get his proof.
“You’re certain they won’t find out you put it there?” He asked.
“Absolutely,” the hedgehog answered.
“Okay, do it.” The words tasted like ash. He was going to make it right. He wasn’t breaking the law, he was giving himself time to ensure justice prevailed.
He was going to throw up.
He was doing this to free his brother. To bring criminals to justice.
“What?” He whirled. He’d missed part of the conversation.
The bison and hedgehog exchanged a look, a guilty look.
“There’s the question of paying us,” the bison said, “this isn’t cheap work.”
“Just do it,” Trembor snarled, burying his disgust under anger. “Whatever it costs, I’ll pay it.” He wasn’t getting out from under this, he knew.
He was no better than the criminals he used to hunt down.
No, he told himself. This wasn’t for profit or to hurt anyone. It was to save Bo.
Who many of those criminals could claim that?
Jasber hesitated, then nodded to the hedgehog. “Do it. Trembor’s good for it.”
At least she didn’t look pleased with herself at having gotten her claws into him.

Series of death-43

Programing sexual appetites in his program gave Marlot a headache. Eating from the box that was at his doorstep when he got home wasn’t helping. The food was good. Good enough he was considering devoting some time, once this was over, to learning to bake. He wouldn’t go to this extreme. He figured getting the meat this tender was a lot more work than he was interested in putting into this new skill, but he was appreciating the play of flavors.

And that was the problem. Gorrek was spoiling him, and his program couldn’t account for it; unless Marlot marked the giving of food as a hunting technique. Which didn’t make sense, and unnerved him. If it was a hunting technique, Gorrek was putting a lot of effort into catching Marlot, and Marlot didn’t understand why. He reached in the box and found it was empty. The meat was good, but the portions left something to be desired.

He put a slice of meat in the heater and looked for spices in his cupboard. He knew he didn’t have any, but the search passed the time until the meat was ready. He ate leaning against the counter, warm plate in hand.

Al’garinam’s mode of operation seemed to be catching his prey alone and by surprise. He couldn’t assume that took place in the prey’s house. That was only where the body was found. No blood meant no easy trail to follow. And Marlot didn’t have access to the RI’s investigation to know what they had found.

Still, Gorrek was hardly ever alone. The lion always had at least one male with him, except for when he was traveling from work to whichever male he was visiting. The rare times he was around strangers was when he stalked a new male.

Which, right now, was Marlot.

He washed the plate. The advantage of having Gorrek stalk him was that Al'garinam had to be nearby too. All Marlot had to do was find him.

That thought kept him up far too late that night.

* * * * *

“Please don't run,” Marlot told the young wolf after he'd introduced himself. Hezer was a few years out of cubhood, he worked in a factory, and liked to surround himself with females.

The wolf bolted into the house.

He also enjoyed stalking those females without their consent.

Marlot cursed to himself and took off after the wolf. The house was small, a starter model similar to Marlot's a hall cutting it on two, living room on one side, food preparation eating area on the other, bedroom on each side and bathroom, then door leading to the yard.

Hezer was already out of the yard and into the alley. The wolf was fast. Youth, Marlot told himself, it was because he was young and had nothing to do with Marlot's age. Marlot turned into the alley after the wolf, only to hear a scream for someone to let him go.

Marlot froze. Two houses in a line held the wolf by the arm, and when he looked up at Marlot and smile his heart swelled. Trembor, just like before. And then the dark mane and darker fur registered, and Marlot was angry to be denied his reunion.

“What are you doing here?” he asked Gorrek. “Don't you ever work?”

The lion offered Marlot the wolf he held. “Is this yours? Work or food?”

“Work.” He grabbed the wolf, who tried to break out of his grip.

“Let go of me, you can't do this. I didn't do anything wrong.”

“You ran,” Marlot said without looking at him.

“Duh,” the wolf replied, “have you looked at yourself? I don't want to be eaten.”

Gorrek licked his lips as he looked Marlot over.

“Don't,” Marlot wanted the lion as he opened his mouth. “I don't have the time for you right now.” He looked at the wolf. “As for you. The only advantage I have over you is age. All I said was I was an RI, and you bolted. That doesn't proclaim innocence. Neither do the six females I spoke with, who told me how you forced yourself on them.”

“I didn't hurt them, they liked it,” the wolf replied defiantly.

“That part isn't my problem. You can explain that to vice. My own concern is about that female you killed.”

“I didn't mean to!”

“And you can explain that to the agent who will process you. I'm certain they will be oh so lenient with you.”

Gorrek smiled at him. “I like how assertive you are.”

“It's my job.” Marlot's ears folded back in annoyance. “And you should be doing yours, not bothering me.”

“Am I bothering you?” the lion asked innocently.

Marlot glared at him. “Thank you for catching him. Now I need to take him to be processed so I can move on to writing reports.”

“I’ll see you tonight then?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve fed you for the last few days, I think it’s only fair you return the favor.”

Gorrek canted an ear. “Don’t you think?”

The wolf chose this moment to attempt to bolt again and almost broke out of Marlot’s grip. “Fine.” He pulled the wolf closer. “My place.” He dragged the wolf away, doing his best to ignore the victorious smile the lion gave him. This was going to be a mistake, Marlot knew it. “Stop fighting me,” he told the wolf, “or you’re who I’ll be serving to the lion.”

* * * * *

Marlot unlocked his house as he felt the presence behind him. He cursed. He didn’t want to deal with the lion. Not now, not ever. He tensed as the hand squeezed his shoulder.

“Hard day?” Gorrek asked.

“Just a lot of reports to file. Anytime a case crosses over enforcer jurisdiction, it’s a lot of reports I have to write.” He pushed the door open. “Come on in.”

“You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic about having me here.”

“You’re pushier than I like,” Marlot replied, too tired to mask his annoyance.

“Right, you’re used to a different kind of male.” Gorrek gently pushed Marlot inside his own house. “I know what I like, and I’m not afraid to go after him.”

Marlot stifled the sigh and tried to get his brain into gear. Maybe he could make something of this. Learn more about the lion, find a way to keep a closer eye on him? But not too close, Marlot told himself. He was not going there with this lion. This was only about finding a way to catch the hare.

He hung his jacket and headed for the food preparation area, pulling two portions of meat from the cooler and placing them in the heater.

“Cozy,” Gorrek commented, looking around.

“I’m not in your productivity bracket, this is all I can afford.”

“It’s nice, intimate.”

Marlot turned to find the lion close.

“I like intimate,” Gorrek said.

“I thought you like crowded,” Marlot replied. The lion tilted an ear. “How many males do you have? Thirteen?”

“Nineteen,” Gorrek said. The lack of hesitation surprised Marlot, as did the fact there six males he hadn’t found. Or did the lion consider Marlot one of those males?

“And how does it work? This pride of yours? They all know about another? They’re all okay with sharing you?”

“Most know.” Gorrek took a step back and leaned against the table. “Those who are more comfortable believing I love only them, well, who am I to shatter their illusions? We don’t have to talk about the others if you’d rather it be only you and me.”

“I already know about them. I doubt you can convince me I’m the only one.”

Gorrek smiled. “But you’d be willing to let me try?”

“No.” How had this turned into the lion thinking Marlot was interested? He wasn’t. “I’m just trying to understand how you can make it work. From what I saw, your males don’t all care about each other.”

The lion considered it. “Right, Ormoul and Narian, those were who you saw me have a meal with. I was introducing them to one another, they’ll get comfortable, they both love me, so they’ll make it work.”

“And you’d expect that of me too, I take it? Get to know all your males? Get comfortable with them, do you expect me to have sex with them too?”

Gorrek stepped to Marlot, his scent enveloped the wolf, the desire, the heat, the musk. “Have you been loved by more than one male before?” the lion’s voice was low, husky. “Have you been loved until you think you can’t stand it anymore and then receive even more?” Gorrek’s muzzle caressed the side of Marlot’s head, breathed him in.

Marlot swallowed, he had trouble thinking. He wanted to touch the lion, the have him touch him, to—

The heater dinged.

Marlot cleared his throat. “Meat’s ready.”

Gorrek sniffed him. “I would say so.”

Marlot pushed the lion away with an eye roll. “I need to eat.” He pulled the plates out of the heater and handed one to the lion who looked at it suspiciously.

“I expected something a little more,” he hesitated, “sophisticated.”

Marlot grinned. “You’re the one who decided I had sophisticated tastes. This is the extent of my baking.”

“I suppose this is a base that can be built on,” Gorrek said, starting on the meat.

“It’s not much of a base, any lower, and I’d be serving this out of the cooler.”

The lion shuddered. “Meat has to be warm.” Marlot watched the lion eat, mildly surprised at the lack of protest. “I might like my meat baked with sauces and vegetables, but I can eat it however it’s offered.”

Marlot nodded and went back to eating. “If I agreed to this,” he motioned between the two of them. “If,” he insisted at the lion’s grin. “What would you expect from me?”

“To enjoy my company, to share pleasures with me.”

“The others?”

“If what you want is to only be with me, that’s what you’d get.”

He’d have to spend time in the other’s company if he wanted to be certain of close to the lion when Al’garinam struck. Marlot tried to work out how he felt at the idea of having sex with multiple males. Wolf thing or not, he’d never even considered it before. Trembor had been the male for him. The only male for him and his lion hadn’t ever hinted their arrangement would require other males.

This wasn’t a mating arrangement, he reminded himself. It was surveillance. It was what he had to do to catch a hunter, bring him to justice. Show Trembor he could do this. Except Trembor didn’t want him; he’d made that clear. So why shouldn’t he enjoy

another male's company? Multiple other males?

He noticed his place was empty, and Gorrek was watching him, his plate also empty. "Sorry," Marlot said, taking the plate. "I didn't mean to go silent."

"It's okay, I'm guessing this is a significant decision for you."

It shouldn't be, Marlot told himself as he washed the plates. He was free to enjoy whoever he wanted. Trembor wasn't a concern anymore.

Gorrek wrapped his arms around Marlot, pressing against his back. "It's okay, we'll take this at whatever speed you're comfortable with."

The lion's musk enveloped Marlot again. The desire was heady. The lion wanted him, wanted him badly, the scent told him that, as did the erection pressing against him. Marlot trembled in the arms. He whined slightly as the lion licked the side of his neck, at the hand rubbing his stomach.

He deserved this. Marlot deserved to enjoy being touched, being pleased. He deserved the lion grinding against his ass, nipping at his neck, the hand undoing the tail strap. He wanted this. He wanted golden fur against his black, to feel Trembor's claws on his stomach.

"Stop." Fuck, why did he have to intrude like that? "Stop," he repeated, and the lion whispered that it was okay. Marlot could feel the erection against his fur now. He shook the lion away, grabbed his pants before they fell. "I'm not ready." He said, turning, eyeing the lion accusingly.

Irritation crossed the lion's face, was brought under control. His pants had fallen to his knees, his erection was slick. Engorged.

"I'm sorry," Gorrek said, grabbing his pants and pulling them up. "I got carried away. You're so..." he trailed off. "Sorry,"

"It's okay, I..." now it was Marlot who couldn't continue. He deserved to enjoy having someone touch him. He cursed Trembor for taking that from him. He cursed himself for still wanting his lion, instead of the one who was offering himself. "I'm just not ready." Gorrek nodded, and they were silent.

Marlot tried to come up with anything to say to do. He even tried to make himself reach for the lion, to force the contact, the intimacy, as a way to defy Trembor.

"I guess I should get going," Gorrek said in the uncomfortable silence. "I have work tomorrow."

Marlot smirked. "Work? Or stalking me?"

The lion leveled a steady gaze on Marlot. "I'd say I'm done stalking, wouldn't you?" the seriousness jarred silence, but the lion smiled before Marlot questioned it. "Now it's just about letting you come to me." He reached out, caressed the wolf's cheek, then turned and left.

Alone after the door closed, with only the memory of what had almost happened, Marlot wondered what he was doing. Gorrek was in danger, and here he was, what, falling for him? This was only supposed to be about being around for when Al'garinam struck, but there was something about the lion. It was like he knew Marlot, what he needed, wanted. Did the male have some program that had compiled what to do to get

Marlot weak at the knees for him?

The hare had better make his attempt soon so Marlot could throw him at Trembor's feet and write that lion out of his life and move on to one who wanted him.

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that, wolf. Tell yourself you want to move on. Maybe you'll finally believe it."

He showered, taking care of the need Gorrek had awakened there, but as much as he tried, the lion he imagined always had golden fur, instead of brown.

Series of death-44

Trembor pulled out his pad as he paced, checked the time, growled, and put it away. He knew he shouldn't let his impatience get to him, for the sake of Herelex and Isenson, who were watching him for indications of how they should behave. He was stressing them out more than himself.

"Is dad coming home?" Isenson asked, seated on the couch, legs pulled to himself, tail wrapped around his feet.

"He is," Trembor replied, and his nephew brightened. Herelex, in contrast, eyed Trembor suspiciously. "He is," he repeated. "They're just running late. Probably got stuck in traffic." Except it was close to midday.

Things had moved faster than Trembor expected once the enforcer received the tip about whatever evidence the hedgehog had put in the criminal organization's server. A day after Bo's trial started, it was stopped based on that new evidence, and this morning he'd been released.

Before anyone could stop him, their father was on his way to pick up his son, and Trembor was concerned that was the reason they weren't back yet. He'd wanted to go along, if only to make sure neither ate the other. But his mother had convinced him he'd be more useful watching Bo's cubs since everyone else worked. And since it had been his mother, Trembor had agreed, and now he was fretting about finding out he'd lost a family member.

He called his father and got his 'I'm driving' message. Torim had messages for every occasion; a remnant from before he retired and considered it disrespectful to only have one generic message for his client to listen to.

His father's last message had been to inform him they were leaving the courthouse, and that they would stop for food on the way. That thought kept raising his hackles. How long could their father not lose his temper when one on one with Bo? How long could Bo?

Was the delay because they were still eating, or because one of them had become the meal?

He forced himself to sit. The pacing was just powering his stress and his mind was going in dark places. They wouldn't eat each other. Torim had just stopped to let Bo have a piece of his mind. This was the first time since finding out about Bo's gambling problems their father had been alone with him. His brothers had made sure to act as

buffers between them.

Trembor groaned. Bo was so dead.

Herelex eyed him suspiciously, Isenson with worry.

“Are you two hungry?” Trembor asked. Bo’s cooler was stocked. He had to give his brother that much. Even with his current troubles, he still put his cubs first.

He received shakes of the head. Yeah, he wasn’t hungry either.

He called Torim again.

“Hello Trembor,” his father answered, sounding tired.

“Dad! Where are you?”

His nephews sat up.

“I’m at one of the parks, cooling off.”

“The talk with Bo?” Trembor headed to the far bedroom, Bo’s bedroom, and closed the door. Hopefully, his nephews would get the message and stay in the living room.

“It...didn’t go well.”

Trembor refrained himself from pointing out he already knew that. “What happened? Is Bo with you?”

“I lost my temper, Bo stormed off.”

“You let him storm off? Dad! How could you do that? With the trouble he’s in, what if he’s gone right back to a gambling house?”

“He won’t do that. I made it quite clear what I’ll do to him if he dares gamble again.”

Trembor had trouble finding his voice. Was his father serious? He’d scowled Bo, and he expected him to do as he was told? Did Torim think Bo was five still? Had his father forgotten how addiction worked?

“How long ago, Dad? How long has Bo been on his own?”

“I don’t know, half an hour, forty-five minutes?”

“Damn it, Dad! Don’t you realize how dangerous it is to let him go off on his own?”

“Do not take that tone with me, Trembor. I am still your father, and Bolifen is old enough to know what he needs. He’s probably simply walking off the anger as I did.”

Except That Bo had been released on falsified evidence, and while the enforcer might not know, the organization now targeted had to suspect. He cursed. Could they have gotten their act together this fast and gone after Bo?

“Dad, I need to know where you were when Bo stormed off. He hasn’t made it home yet.” His father gave him the name of the park and Trembor located it. On foot, it made sense Bo wasn’t here yet, even if he’d headed home directly, but his brother would have wanted to see his cubs, should have wanted, if the argument hadn’t stressed him so much he’d needed his fix. Were there gambling houses nearby? Nothing closer than Bo’s house.

“Dad, I have to go. I need to find Bo before—” he stopped. He couldn’t put whatever trouble Bo was in on him. This was something Trembor had caused. He

disconnected before his father commented and called Bo, only to get his message center. With a curse, he left the bedroom, surprised his nephews weren't listening in.

He cursed again. He nephews. He couldn't leave them unattended.

"Herelex, I need you to watch your brother." He was an adult within the family. It would have to be enough until Torim arrived.

"Is dad okay?" Isenson asked and Trembor stopped. What should he tell them?

"I don't know," he answered, deciding to stay as close to the truth as he could. He'd always prided himself on being honest with the cubs. "He and your grandfather got in an argument and he stormed off. Torim doesn't know where he went, and Bo's not answering his pad. I'm going to look for him, and Torim is headed here. If your father is in trouble, I'll get him out of it. For now, I need the two of you to wait for Torim. All right?"

Isenson hugged his legs tighter.

"We'll be okay," Herelex said, sitting next to his brother and putting an arm around his shoulders.

Trembor still hesitated in leaving them, but they needed their father, and he couldn't find him staying here. With a quick message to Torim, for him to come look after the cubs, Trembor headed to his car to start his search.

Series of death-45

The call came late in the morning, and Marlot finally managed to get himself in gear after a morning of being distracted by thoughts of Gorrek, the feeling he was betraying Trembor, his annoyance at that lion intruding where he had no business, and wishing he could talk with the golden furred male. He even tried calling him; he was still blocked.

The house with the body was only a few blocks from Marlot's, the closest body to his house, he figured, the area was borderline middle-low productivity range, fighting to cross the line with each coat of paint on the houses, with each added decoration on the barely mowed lawn. Marlot looked at the numbers of herbivores assembled on this side of the line and wondered how the lawns could be this bad with all of them around, before catching the thought as speciesist.

He showed his ID as he stepped under the tape. "What do we have?"

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

"Funny, 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 was in pretty bad shape."

Marlot headed inside as an officer left. "Anyone else in there?" he asked her.

"No, I'm the last," the doe answered. "The first sweep came up clean on blood, or anything really."

Marlot stiffened. No blood could mean Al'garinam, but this wasn't Gorrek's

house. He reminded himself the hare wasn't the only one who managed to kill without shedding blood. Marlot did it on most of his hunts.

The inside had an air of disuse. The eating area had a table with two chairs, old, cracked. The living room was empty. Marlot turned to the officer before she closed the door.

"Is the house abandoned?"

"I don't know, I think so." He motioned to the kitchen and living room. "The whole house is like this. The body is in one of the bedrooms."

"Do me a favor and ask the neighbors. It'll be faster than waiting on a search to pull up the ownership." He sniffed the air, even that smelled stale.

The small shower showed use; it smells of cleaner and someone had scrubbed it thoroughly. Nothing was left on the shelf, in the cabinet, on the counter. It told Marlot that however the death had happened, the killer hadn't panicked. They'd washed and gathered his or her things before exiting.

Again the hare came to mind. His bodies never had any evidence left around them from the little he'd pieced together. He'd just managed to convince himself it couldn't be Al'garinam when he saw the body and any doubt fled.

"Fuck."

Gorrek was sprawled on the floor of the only bedroom, still wearing the clothing he'd had on when he left Marlot's house. He crouched next to him. Had Al'garinam followed him to Marlot's house? This seemed to indicate he had. Both of the lion's arms were broken, a leg and the neck. He put gloves on and looked through Gorrek's pockets. His pad was there, locked. His ID wallet, with a few bills. Marlot hadn't taken the lion for someone who still used hard currency.

Why?

What had happened to cause the hare to do things differently? Marlot had only seen one body, at a distance, but he'd managed to snag a look at two more, from RIs with poor security on their computers. None of those showed this level of violence. There had been a fight, but it had been quick, then the death by broken neck. No...Marlot looked at the damage. This almost qualified as mutilation compared to Al'garinam's usual neatness.

Had Gorrek put up more of a fight than the hare expected? That seemed doubtful, as far as Marlot knew the lion did none of his own hunting and trained only enough to maintain his physique.

The only thing Marlot knew for sure was that any chances of a relationship with the lion were now gone. "Too bad, I would have liked to see where it would have led."

"Where what would have led?" someone asked.

Marlot jumped up, nearly tripping on Gorrek's body as he turned. Jaxca chuckled in the room's doorway.

"You got here quick," Marlot commented, steadying himself.

"No clients, no traffic. I can come back in a bit if you need more time along with the body." The frog smiled.

“I haven’t recorded my observations yet,” Marlot replied quickly. Did it matter? He knew more about Gorrek than could be recorded here.

Jaxca’s smile broadened. “Observing? Is that what you were doing? I will say that while a relationship with a body isn’t as satisfying as with someone living, they argue a lot less.”

Marlot shook his head. “I’m not—I wasn’t—”

“None of my business,” the red frog said, schooling his face into a semblance of seriousness. “I’ll hang back until you’re done.”

Marlot pocketed the lion’s pad and took out his. “The body’s name is Gorrek Shiningpelt, lion, forty-seven. Cause of death is, on first observation, due to a broken neck, to be confirmed by the medical examiner. The body shows sign of violence, to be determined if it is pre or post-death.” He tried to think of what he could add that that wasn’t from everything else he knew about the male. “Preliminary report from the enforcers didn’t indicate the presence of evidence in the house. A more thorough check will be done once the body is removed.”

Despite the incongruities, Marlot knew this was Al’garinam’s work, which meant he could not officially investigate the hare, so long as he could find a way to bring him up as a possible killer. Maybe one of the lion’s multiple boyfriends had noticed a hare hanging around? Or would be willing to say they had? All he needed was for one of them on the record.

He stood and looked for Jaxca, who had vanished. Had he taken so long the frog had to leave? Sound from the entrance drew Marlot. Jaxca returning with a gurney.

“No stairs, so this is going to be faster. Are you done?”

“Yes, there’s nothing on the body that serves as clues.”

“If the epidemic of broken necks isn’t one by itself,” Jaxca commented, unlocking the gurney and lowering it.

“What do you mean?” Marlot took the tarp and spread it next to Gorrek’s body.

“He’s my fourth unclaimed body dead by broken neck.” The frog grabbed his legs and Marlot the shoulder and they moved it. “It also feels like there’s an increase in unclaimed bodies..” He raised the gurney. “Is that a season thing?”

Marlot shook his head. Had anyone else noticed a pattern? If one examiner saw enough of Al’garinam’s bodies, could they connect them? He’d have heard if someone had noticed a hunter on the prowl.

“Where were the others?”

“There was one in Trembor’s territory,” Jaxca answered. “One in Devwor, you know her?” Marlot shrugged. He didn’t consider he knew any of the other RI, except for the lion. “And the first was in Jestom’s.”

“That’s over how long?”

“A few months,” The frog said after thinking.

“Might just be coincidences, by now the other killers have probably been caught.” He doubted, more like hoped, Jaxca didn’t keep up with the other RI’s progress. He shouldn’t know the status of the bodies, since once he was done examining them, they

would be sent to the RI's freezer since Jaxca's clinic wasn't equipped to keep bodies long term.

He followed the frog out, letting the officer by the door know they could process the house. He watched the crowd, looking for the hare, now that he knew he was the killer. He saw some, but the coloring didn't match.

"RI Blackclaw," the ermine called. "I was told to ask about the house. Some of the neighbors confirmed someone lives here, but they don't know who."

He'd have to wait for the property records then. In the meantime, he had males to question. How many had Gorrek said he was seeing? Nineteen. One of them had to have seen something, or at least be willing to say they had, if only for the satisfaction of seeing Gorrek's killer have to pay his tax.

How was that going to be divided? He wondered. The survivor's benefit went to the bodies' family, but was any of those male registered as family? He hoped none of them were dependent on that because Marlot suspected each would get little, if anything at all.

Series of death-46

The park was large; the kind of place that, while not officially a no predation zone, had very few instances of predation. Families enjoyed time there with their cubs, playing, wrestling, eating. Some might have seen Bo and his father argue, but they wouldn't have paid attention. Even in an idyllic place like this, arguments happened.

He found his father scent at the edge of the park, by the parking lot and followed it back, losing it a time or two as it crossed families' scents, before reaching the place where his brother's was also present.

He shouldn't be the one doing this, the part of his mind that kept him following the law said. Once his brother hadn't made contact for a day, he could inform the enforcer and the missing person bureau. They would look for him.

Only by then, Trembor pointed out to himself, if Bo hadn't contacted anyone in his family, it would be because he was dead, and he wasn't going to let that happen. It was one thing for someone to become meat. It was another to be killed as revenge for what Trembor had done. And if the enforcers looked for his brother, it would give them a reason to look into the evidence the hedgehog had planted, possibly determine it was a fraud and then Bo would be back in court, only Trembor would be in a cell and unable to help his brother.

So he told that voice to shut up and followed his brother's scent.

His brother had meandered for a while, the anger in his scent lessening, the stress increasing. Once he'd headed back to where their father had been, then gotten angry and changed direction.

"Good going engendering an air of support, Dad," he grumbled.

Bo kept away from the families, which made his scent easy to track. He wandered for a while, and he thought that when Bo stopped by a tree might be when Trembor had arrived at the park. Someone joined him, male by the scent. But Trembor didn't have

Marlot's ease at identifying species; another benefit of the course the wolf took.

This other male's presence calmed Bo, and they walked together until they reached the parking lot, on the opposite side from where Trembor had parked. Any empty spot where the vehicle had been. Trembor could just make out his own car, which meant he would have seen what was parked here if he'd known to look for it.

How long had Bo left with this male?

Trembor had spent a good hour tracking the scents, but he'd encountered Bo's halfway, so no more than thirty minutes. He called Torim.

"Dad are you at Bo's place?"

"Yes," his father answered.

"And since you're not telling me Bo's there, I'm guessing that's not where he's heading." If Bo had gone gambling, Trembor wasn't sure anyone would manage to keep their father from gutting Bo. Maybe Serene, but it was questionable if she'd protect Bo, or help Torim at this point.

"He isn't, why did you think he'd be?"

"More like hoping. I tracked his scent back to the parking. He met someone along the way and it smells like he got in that male's vehicle. I thought he'd given him a ride him, but he'd be there by now."

"Traffic could be bad," Torim commented.

"Not that bad. I guess they could have stopped for a meal."

"If home is where Bolifen's going," Torim said, to which Trembor didn't answer. "Is there anything else you can do?" his father asked as the silence stretched.

Was there? "I don't know. I don't know the make, so I can't ask anyone to look for it." And if he did ask, he was back to the question of what would happen if he involved the authorities. "Have you tried calling him?"

"Yes, it goes to his message center."

"Until Bo wants to talk to us, I'm not sure what we can do."

"Trembor, I'm sorry I lost my temper and sent your brother running. I should have let you pick him up." Torim fell silent. "I just wanted to have a talk with him, without anyone to keep me from telling your brother the kind of trouble he's heading for if he continues like this, but that son of mine is so obstinate, then we were shouting at one another and I needed to get out and cool off."

He is your son, Trembor almost said. The two of them had the same obstinate stream, which was why Trembor and his brothers had worked hard at causing interference.

"There's no point in chasing a gone scent, Dad." Trembor turned to head to his car and paused as something caught his attention under the closest picnic table. "All we can do now is wait for Bo to decide what he wants to do. If he calls me, I'll let you know."

"Alright, I'll bring Herelex and Isenson home with me. Until we know what your brother's doing I think it's best they aren't alone."

"Good idea, bye Dad." Trembor disconnected and reached under the table, pulling the white envelope.

Trembor Goldenmane, was written on it and in blocky script. Feeling along it, the content was a card. He smelled the envelope, and the only scent on it was that of the male accompanying Bo. The scent was fresh too, only a few minutes old, not the thirty he'd expected.

He took off a glove and carefully used a claw to pull it open. Tipping it over, Bo's ID card dropped in his other hand.

Trembor's stomach dropped as he looked around for any clue as to where the vehicle went. His brother would never have willingly relinquished his ID card. No one would.

Of course, there were no indications of where it had gone. It had left before he'd gotten here, even if it had done so by a minute, it was enough to disappear forever.

Except, Trembor realized, as he noticed the stores on the other side of the street lining the parking lot. Except someone's security system might have recorded it without realizing it.

Of course, Trembor didn't have the authority to force a store owner to give him access to their security recordings; that was purely an enforcer right, and even they needed a signed warrant. But most people got their knowledge as to what RIs could and couldn't do from vid shows, and those didn't care much about the reality of the job, so he could hope no one would question why he was asking for them, or at least would accept that it was for a case he was working.

Series of death-47

"Yes?" the cougar said, only cracking the door open. Marlot hadn't expected him to be this nervous.

"I'm Marlot, RI Marlot Blackclaw, I was here the other day to hand over Gorrek Shiningpelt's ID."

"I know who you are." The cougar looked around Marlot. "Gorrek isn't here. I thought he was with you."

"No, he left after we ate."

"And was he to your liking?" the cougar asked with a hint of disgust in his voice.

"What?"

"Did he taste good? Or did he eat you?" he clarified.

Marlot stared at the cougar. "We didn't have sex."

That surprised the cougar. "Right, he's still respecting you."

"Can I come in? We have to talk."

"Gorrek left specific instructions I'm never to let anyone in again without his permission."

The cougar was going to live a lonely life, Marlot thought, before getting his mind under control. "It's about Gorrek."

"I still can't let you in. If you're planning on having him to yourself, good luck, the guy's insatiable. If you're angry about what he did to you, just consider yourself

lucky you—”

“He’s dead.”

The cougar’s face fell. He covered his muzzle with a hand, the other being in a sling, and stepped back, in visible shock. Marlot used the opportunity to slip in and close the door behind him.

The cougar looked at him, eyes brimming with tears, “Are you sure?”

“He’s a body on my medical examiner’s table right now, so yes I am.”

The cougar had his arms around Marlot’s next, crying opening now. Not entirely certain what to do next, he wrapped his arms around the cougar.

“Thank you,” the cougar whispered. “Thank you, thank you. It’s finally over.”

Marlot stiffened and kept himself from asking his immediate question. The cougar moved away, drying his eyes with his working hand, which, Marlot noticed, had two crooked fingers.

“You probably think I’m crazy for being happy he’s dead.”

“I’m more curious. I had the impression you and Gorrek were mates.”

The cougar snorted. “You’re not his mate, you’re his plaything.” He turned and limped down the hall. “Come on, I have something to show you.” His limp seemed more pronounced than during Marlot’s previous visit.

As he passed the living room, Marlot looked at all the pictures of Gorrek with other males. He searched out Trembor’s before remembering it wasn’t visible from this angle; it was next to the living room’s entryway.

The kitchen was large, with a skinning table that felt unused. Marlot realized the sense came from the lack of scuff marks on it from blades being used.

“That thing’s never been used for as long as I’ve lived here,” The cougar said. “Gorrek wants others to prepare his food for him. And nothing homemade either. Only the best for that lion.”

“He ate what I made,” Marlot replied, trying to understand the cougar’s behavior. It was as if he didn’t like Gorrek and just endured living with him. “And you don’t get more basic than my cooking.”

The cougar opened a cabinet and took papers from it, wincing as some fell out and he reflexively tried to grab them with his injured arm.

“Thanks,” he said as Marlot picked them off the floor. “And I’m not surprised he didn’t complain, he’s in that ‘demonstrate how perfect for you he is’ phase. I am surprised he didn’t bed you. He doesn’t usually wait.”

“I told him no, I’m not ready for sex yet, I have,” Marlot trailed off. “I had a bad breakup.” He motioned to the cougar’s sling. “What happened?”

“Gorrek,” he answered flatly, spreading the papers on the table and looking through them. He handed one to Marlot, a hospital bill, broken fingers. “He did that to me two months into our ‘relationship’ after I casually mentioned I was a better hunter than he was. Slammed a door closed on my hand three times.” He showed Marlot the hand with the crooked fingers. “These two never healed right.”

The next three were for a broken leg, an arm, and the cougar’s muzzle. They were

over six months old, and the cougar was still looking through papers.

“I don’t understand,” Marlot said as the cougar handed him another hospital bill.
Broken ribs.

“Gorrek did all of those to me.” He sat, stretching his injured leg.

“Why?”

“Because I said something he didn’t like; because I did something he didn’t approve of. To put me in my place. I stopped keeping track of the reasons after a few months. I just did everything I could to never say anything or do anything without his says so.” He rubbed his leg. “That was for letting you in.”

“How long?” Marlot took the other papers and searched through them, medications, mostly painkillers, some for mange. He looked at the cougar. His fur looked fine.

“That one’s for another of his mates. The stress got to him bad, and he started losing fur in patches. Gorrek couldn’t imagine it was his fault, so it had to be mange.” The cougar shook his head. “And I’ve lived here almost a year now.”

“Why did you stay?”

The cougar glared at him. “You think I wanted to?” He raised his hand, indicated his leg. “How the fuck am I supposed to hunt, feed myself? Gorrek made sure I had to depend on him.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Sure you don’t. You ever been stuck in a situation where everything conspires against you?”

Marlow shook his head.

“Then don’t judge me. I tried to get out, but he tracked me down, brought me back, was so sweet and sorry for mistreating me for a few days. He always had reasons, never meant to hurt me. And I was stupid enough to believe him, so I stayed. Then he broke my hand, and he stopped even pretending he was sorry. Smiling at how I had no choice but to stay with him now, if I wanted to eat.”

“The others?” Marlot had trouble reconciling the Gorrek who had been in his house with the description the cougar gave, but if he treated everyone he saw this way, could his death be at one of their hands?

Marlot tried to imagine how he’d react to being treated like that, to being abused and injured just so he wouldn’t be able to leave. Even the council back at the commune had never been that overt in how they controlled him. They simply made sure the didn’t know he had options.

He’d be angry, he knew. Had been angry once in the city and he found out the kind of authority an RI had. If someone like Gorrek tried to cage him he’d be so angry he—Trembor’s eyes appeared in his mind, cold, angry. They’d argued, screamed. Marlot hadn’t understood how his lion could be that angry over what? What has he done? Taken advantage of an exploit on his pad to shut it down?

“I expect he did,” the cougar said, pulling Marlot back. “At least with those who’ve been with him the longest. Although how he managed to keep them coming

back, I don't know, but he did. You didn't leave Gorrek, he got bored with you." He looked at the ceiling, frowning. "He's ever only mentioned three males who left him. And from what I understood, the only reason he couldn't force them back was that they had a family to keep him away."

"Who were they?" Marlot suspected he knew one of them, but he needed to be sure. It would explain his reaction.

The cougar shrugged. "I can show you their pictures in the trophy room, but I don't know their names."

"Could you?" Marlot stood, followed the cougar to the living room. Trophies, that was what the pictures were. Not reminders of good times, but of conquests. Males Gorrek had claimed.

"This one," the cougar pointed to a picture of the lion with a tiger. "That one," one of him with a lynx. The cougar turned and headed for the hall, tapping the picture with Trembor. "And this guy."

"Do you know how long he was with Gorrek?" Marlot asked, trying to keep himself breathing.

"No, I didn't ask about any of the others. He mentioned those three onetime when pointing out I couldn't stay away, since I don't have the kind of family they do."

Marlot chuckled. Who had the kind of family Trembor did? How had Selene not gutted this Gorrek for mistreating Trembor? How had she not done that to Marlot? Trembor had told her not to, he was certain of it. His lion didn't let others fight for him. He faced them, or shut them out, on his own.

"Fuck," Marlot whispered.

"Do you know him?"

Marlot nodded. Gorrek had mentioned how Trembor left him. Had specifically said abandoned him. Had cast himself in the same position as Marlot, the victim of Trembor's unexplained behavior. Except Gorrek hadn't been the victim, and Marlot...he too had given Trembor a reason to leave.

"I have to go." He didn't want for the cougar's response. He needed to get air, to get away from this place.

He got in his car and slammed the door on what he'd seen there. Had learned. He had his pad to his ear; he needed to tell Trembor how sorry he was. To beg for forgiveness for screwing up so badly. The recorded message informing him he was blocked answered him.

It hurt, but there was no accompanying anger this time. Trembor was justified in cutting Marlot out if he'd thought he was going to be hurt the way Gorrek had.

As he looked at his pad it buzzed, Jaxca.

"Hey Jaxca," he answered, forcing his voice steady. "What do you have?"

"I have a lot of broken bones," the frog answered. "I could tell this body had received violence when I saw it, but the level of it wasn't apparent until I could feel his limbs and shave him to see the bruises. This male was basically tortured before death. This was not accidental. You need to be careful. The male who did this will not be easy

to take down.”

“Okay, thanks.” It was doubtful any of the males Gorrek saw did this then. None of them had jobs that gave them the knowledge to torture someone in such a way.

“One other thing. That talk about an epidemic of broken neck got me looking at the x-rays from the other bodies I examined, and the next were broken in a way nearly identical to this one. I think you might have a hunter on your hands.”

Marlot closed his eyes. “Have you informed anyone?”

“You’re the first since I’m examining your body. Once I’m done with it, I’ll call the other RI’s whose body I examined; let them know. The odds are if I have four, other examiners have seen some with the same cause of death.”

“I’ll tell them,” Marlot said, “so we can start coordinating, compare notes, the other RIs will have copies from their examiners.” The lie came easily. He didn’t even have to think about it. Just say something that made sense in the situation. Had he done that with Trembor? He didn’t think so, but if it was this easy to alter facts in his head, would he even realized he’d lied to his lion?

“Okay, I guess that’s faster, I’ll make sure every file’s on hand, in case one of them is missing information. I’ll have a full report for you in a couple of hours.”

“Thanks, Jaxca.” Marlot disconnected.

It was over. In a day at most, Jaxca would wonder why no one had called him for more complete files, and he’d find out Marlot hadn’t talked to any of them. Then they’d ask Marlot about it, and he’d be found out as having kept the existence of a hunter to himself. Would they consider him an accomplice?

How pissed would Trembor be at him?

“All I wanted was to show him I could do this the right way.”

Fuck, he could even lie to himself and not notice it. He hadn’t done any of it the right way. If he’d been serious, he would have told the Revenue Bureau, the enforcers, let them take over and ensure AI was captured.

His pad buzzed. Property Record was calling him.

“Hello?” He answered, wondering what they wanted.

“RI Blackclaw?”

“Speaking.”

“I have the result on a property search you requested.” The speaker gave an address, and Marlot realized what this was about. “It was purchased a year and a half ago by a Nikal Swiftall, all taxes have been paid on time since then and the insurance is up to date.”

“Any information on the buyer?”

“I’m sorry, that isn’t something we have. I can tell you what bank was used to pay for the house if that will help.”

Marlot noted that. “Thanks.”

Was it worth looking into this anymore? In two days at most, he’d be in a cell, if he was lucky. He could just imagine RI Swiftkill’s reaction when she found out he’d withheld information. She might get to him before the enforcers.

Having nothing better to do in the meantime, he entered the name in the public database, limited the search to residents of the city, and ended up looking at the face of a hare.

A face he recognized.

“No fucking way.”

He used his RI ID to get into the restricted database to get as much information on Nikal Swiftall as he could.

Retired, his employment read. Discharged after four tours with the Protectors. The Protector didn't give out many details, but they indicate he'd been deployed three times. That meant either three wars, which was unlikely, since Marlot thought things were peaceful recently, or sent back to the same war after returning home for one reason or another.

Time in the Protectors explained Al'garinam, or rather Nikal's fighting skills, but not why he kept fighting. Marlot would expect that after seeing combat, all he'd want was some peace and quiet.

Then the implications sunk in.

Al'garinam had killed Gorrek in his own home.

He was on the road and headed to that house. There had to be something there the hare had forgotten, some clue that would let Marlot track him down once and for all.

Let the Bureau and the enforcers track him down, he corrected himself. He'd confirm the house belonged to Nikal, and that Nikal was the hunter, and then he'd hand everything over to the proper authorities.

He was going to do things the right way for real this time, regardless of the consequences to him. Maybe it wouldn't get him Trembor back, but it would show him he was nothing like Gorrek.

Series of death-48

Trembor found a properly angled security camera on the third story he checked, and his identification as an RI was enough for the owner to give him access to the computer and access to the feed, which, the sheep informed him, went back twenty-four hours. More than enough for what he needed.

The program took him a few minutes to work out, Marlot would normally deal with this, and this wasn't intuitive to work with. He rewound it a few minutes, then accidentally far more than that, with a van, and what he thought was the tail-end of his father's car.

Being more interested in who Bo left with than what took place when he arrived, Trembor rewound the feed to something closer to the present and watched himself holding the envelope.

Going back by increments of a minute, which seemed to be the shorted the program did, he vanished; then a gray van was there. And was still there twenty clicks later, and another twenty. He decided that had to be who he left with and returned the

feed to him with the envelope. Three clicks ensured he'd see Bo arrive, he figured, and instead watched the van sit there for a full minute before someone exited the driver's side, put something under the picnic table, get back in the van and drive away. A few seconds later, Trembor arrived where it had been parked.

It had been a relatively straight walk to the parking lot, so the driver would have seen him come. Known to put the envelope and leave. It didn't explain why he'd done that, or where Bo was.

He rewound it and waited until the driver dropped the envelope and turned to return to the van before pausing it. The image was grainy—the camera was old—but he could make out long ears. One of them partially flopped down. A hare.

He watched the hare get in the van, backed it, and drive away. He didn't see Bo in the passenger seat. He backed it one minute at a time, letting it run only long enough to tell if the hare of Bo were in the frame, and had to go back close to half an hour to see the hare become visible within the park, walking next to Bo.

They reached the van on the path Trembor followed. The hare opened the side door instead of the passenger one and Bo stepped in, followed by the hare.

That was unusual.

If Trembor had watched the hare with some random male, he could work out what they'd done for the time until they drove off, but Bo cared nothing for males. And there was the envelope. Was the drop of blood on it Bo's or the hare's? Did it serve another purpose than to ensure Trembor noticed it?

He couldn't shake the bad feeling. Could the criminal group be that quick to react to what Trembor had arranged? Was the hare one of their enforcers? The idea of a hare sent to retrieve a lion was hard to believe, but Trembor had watched Bo step in the van without any protest.

He called his brother, just in case, and the call went to the message center.

"This is just some random hare giving Bo a ride," Trembor told himself. He wanted to believe it. But the envelope? And the hare waiting until he saw Trembor in the distance to put it there? That spoke of intent. Until that, there had been a chance Bo had put his ID in an envelope for some strange reason, cut himself when doing so, and it had fallen out as he walked by the table.

"And even the production company that made that movie Tiff was in wouldn't buy this idea."

Alright. Reality could be strange, but was it this strange? Could he tell if this was planned or a random meeting?

He wished the park had cameras.

He went back quickly until the van wasn't there. That was ten minutes before his father's call. He was about to forward it when the car passed through the frame, followed by a van. The same van he was waiting for.

It could be a coincidence, had to be.

The van reappeared and parked in a spot that only let him see a sliver of the back. The hare walked into frame, crossed the street, and vanished on the left, only to reappear

a minute later. He studied the storefront, looked up at the camera, then turned to look over the parking lot. He crossed the street, vanished out of the frame, and moved the van to the parking spot it was when the hare and Bo returned to it. A spot almost perfectly centered in the frame.

As if that wasn't confirmation of intent, the hare stepped out and turned to the camera and waved.

Trembor's hackles went stiff.

There was no doubt now. That hare had wanted to be caught on camera. He'd wanted someone to see Bo get in the van, see him place the envelope. Had he known Trembor would be the one? More likely than not, since he waited until Trembor was approaching to put the envelope down. That indicated he knew Trembor had a way to get access to the recording.

That settled it. This was those criminals. They weren't happy he'd cleared Bo's name and were seeing retribution. He fought the urge to go to that restaurant and track down that mole. Getting to her wouldn't help Bo, it would just put him and his brother in danger. The first thing he needed to do was get Bo out of the hare's grasp.

He went back to the van as it drove by, and pausing and played it, until the sign on the door was legible.

Harotal's meat Distribution.

A search brought up a failing restaurant supplier. The hare would have bought, or stolen, the van for this purpose. He didn't bother with a search through the stolen vehicles. Even if it had been reported, he'd be looking through it for days before confirming it, and he had better things to do with his time.

Like figuring out where the van was right now.

The main tracking system he had access to—although technically he didn't right now, since this wasn't a case—was to input the van's tag in the system and have someone run a search through the street cameras.

His two problems, ignoring that this wasn't related to a case, was that he could barely make out the tag, and he needed to get someone to do the search without asking why.

The tag was in view of the camera, but the resolution meant he had to guess at the numbers. He knew there were programs to fix that, something about taking a bunch of frames and running algorithms. Marlot had explained it to him one time. One of the multiple times the wolf had tried to educate Trembor on the wonders of technology.

Marlot could get him the answer in a few minutes. He could probably also find out where the van was since he had no problem breaking the law.

Trembor looked at Marlot's name on his pad, with the option to unblock him under it. Marlot could help, but would he? What would be the price? Getting back together? Submitting to the wolf's desires? That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

You didn't leave me any choice.

How long until the violence started? Until there was nothing left of Trembor and the wolf just threw him away like a broken doll?

He put the pad away. He'd avoided that fate once. He wasn't going back to that, not even for his brother.

He needed to find a different way.

He studied the image, wrote down what the numbers of the tag could be, then placed a call.

"Registry," a bored sounding female said.

"Urion?"

"Speaking, how can I help you?"

"It's Trembor, we were at the academy together, we did a year of—"

"Trembor?" she sounded awake now. "Of course I remember you,. How have you been? I heard you became an RI."

"And I heard you transferred to Registry, how are you liking it there?"

"I spend most of my days bored out of my head, I love it. Much better than the stress of patrolling the street. How about you? How is life being an RI?"

"It can be a challenge, that's actually why I'm calling. I need to find a vehicle, but all I have is a company name, who might not own it anymore, and possible tags for it. I only have low-resolution pictures to work with."

"Give me the company name. Do you know when they might have sold it off?"

Trembor gave it to her. "No. Their site only shows they're losing clients, not what they did with the vehicles."

"Three years ago they had two hundred vans, they're down to twenty-three, definitely failing."

"You can see that? I didn't think you could access the list by company."

"Technically we can't, but it's pretty simple to reconfigure the search algorithm to take a field that narrows a search and makes it the principal search."

"I'm going to say I understand that and ask where do we go from here."

She chuckled. "Right, you were always more of the go-around and ask question type. No wonder you enjoy being an RI. Give me the first possible digits and ill see what comes up."

Did everyone but him know that much about computers and how they worked? He wondered as she worked. His father knew less, but comparing himself to Torim just made Trembor feel old.

"Got it," she said after he'd given her the seventh of ten digits. She read him the ten-digit number, which he wrote down. "How does that match with your possible last three?"

"Pretty much on point. Thanks. Are you still a fan of that Arkanian lettuce? I can have a few packages sent as a thank you."

"You don't have to, I'm happy to help, for old times sake." She gave him the make of the van as well as the registered infractions and current status. Officially it was parked in a holding lot until it was sold to pay off the company's debts.

"Thanks again, and I'll still make sure you get some. You deserve the treat." He placed the order and had it sent to her at the Registry. Let her herbivore coworkers be

jealous.

He placed another call.

“Tracking,” a male answered.

Trembor let out a breath to steady his nerves. “Jockon, it’s Trembor.”

“Hey Trem, how’s thing? You looking to find out where a certain someone his hiding so you can make him pay for—”

“You heard?” Trembor chuckled. “How? You’re in a basement in the furthers enforcer building. No one but you tech-heads go there.”

“You do know there’s this thing that was invented a few decades ago called a pad. Not only can you place calls with it, but you can send messages. You’d be amazed how easy it is to learn what’s going on in the rest of the world without ever having to get out of this dark and foreboding building.”

“And does Ylinder lets you stay hidden down there?”

Jockon’s voice was cautious when he spoke. “No, he doesn’t. You’re calling in that favor for hooking me up with him, aren’t you?”

“I need your help, yeah. My brother’s been kidnapped, but because of events around that, I can’t exactly go to the enforcers with it.”

“Is that the same brother who was in court?”

Trembor sighed. “Can you help?”

“I owe you, so I will do everything I can, but you know how supervised we are down here. The things we have access to means we could cause a lot of trouble if we did something unauthorized.”

“If this is going to get you in trouble, tell me no. I need a vehicle found, the sooner the better.”

“That I can do. Give me what you have.”

Series of death-49

Walking through Nikal’s home, knowing it was his house, gave it a different sense. There was purpose in the lack of personal items. This was the home of someone who didn’t dig his claws into the ground to stay in place. Was it something being within the protectors caused, or had Nikal joined because he couldn’t stay in one place?

The cooler was empty, no greens, no kind of vegetables left behind. One plate in the cupboard, one glass, one set of utensils, all clean. The table might have been found in the garbage with the chairs; they didn’t fit the immaculate look of the room. Or they could have been left over by the previous owner, and Nikal never bothered replacing them. The interviews the enforcers had conducted with the neighbors indicated none of them had even seen Nikal move in.

The empty living room was—Marlot paused.

The pain on one of the walls was fresher, shinier, and—looking at it closer—had been repaired. A hole, by the size, caused by something slightly smaller than Marlot’s fist, or a smaller fist, about the height someone like Nikal would punch.

He took out a light and shone it along the wall. He found eight more repairs, six at

fist height, two at kick height. The enforcers hadn't noted that in their reports, but they hadn't had a reason to think it was linked. What house didn't have repairs done to them?

But what led someone as seemingly controlled as the hare to strike the walls in the living room? Or any of the other rooms? Every room except the kitchen had repairs.

Marlot thought that many this was how he could seem so controlled when stalking and killing his prey. He unleashed all his anger in the house. Could someone this angry remain in the protectors? He wished there were more transparent. Getting Nikal's records there might explain what he was doing now.

His examination brought him to the bedroom where Gorrek's body had been. A body that unlike every other the hare had killed wasn't left in their own home, or damaged beyond just the broken neck or what could be explained as part of a fight. Nikal had unleashed his anger at the lion.

Marlot didn't know why, the only difference between Gorrek and the other bodies Marlot knew about, was that Marlot had interacted with the lion beyond returning the ID and stalking him to gather more information. And that Gorrek had a history with Trembor. As far as Marlot knew, no other bodies had a link to his lion.

The hare's behavior made little sense to Marlot. He behaved like a hunter in that he seemed to kill indiscriminately, but he put thought into who his victims were, too the time to steal their ID and have the replacement mailed to Marlot as a warning he'd picked that person.

Nikal wanted to be killed, but he wanted Marlot to do it. But he wouldn't simply lie down and let the wolf kill him. The stalking seemed to be part of it. Or was there more?

There was the meeting between Marlot and Trembor over the body of the coyote. The timing was suspicious since normally the hare only killed after Marlot returned the ID. Nikal had also called him afterward, angry that Marlot had wasted the opportunity. But an opportunity for what?

As much as he hated to admit it, Nikal was in control of whatever this was. He'd manipulated Marlot, gotten him involved against his will. Admitting that, the fact Gorrek had been left in this house had to mean something. Nikal had to have known Marlot would use that to work out who he was and come back to find...

Nikal had left him something in the house. It was the only explanation that made sense. The question what where would it be?

A search of the bed revealed nothing, not under it, not between the mattress, and there were no indications they had been cut and resown. The closet was empty without a secret panel. The other bedroom was likewise free of anything that explained Marlot's presence.

It was in the small bathroom that he found it. A panel had been cut behind the toilet and painstakingly repositioned and repainted to be nearly impossible to see. Marlot had almost left without finding it when the fact the hare had run the shower long enough the humidity soaked into the walls so it could be smelled once Marlot received the call about the body made him search it more thoroughly.

Behind the panel, he found a stack of folders, twenty-six of them. The first was of Kirmel Thickpelt. A quick search told Marlot he was dead. One of the early victims. The next one Arbine Thinderhoof, still alive, the search told him. Female, bison, security officer for the city controller's office. Well decorated, also from the protectors. Was that why Nikal hadn't killed her? Or was she a future victim?

The first twenty-three included the twelve bodies Marlot knew about and eleven still living people. He wasn't particularly surprised when the twenty-fourth file was about him.

Nikal had compiled a rather in-depth one, too. It included the newsie stories about Ruxul's capture, with them playing off Marlot as the vital part of it. The fact that City Leader Sharphorns had also played into it in the ceremony where he congratulated all the investigators who had taken part in the capture and subsequent death of the hunter had reinforced the illusion Marlot, the RI who'd traveled so far to end the hunter's predation, sacrificed so much; had basically been the one to end him. Marlot had forgotten how much had been written about his part in the operation.

Nikal also had files dating back to his time home, his parents, his sister, his work there for the council. Plain file, but indicating he'd found a way into their servers.

Nikal also had pictures of him and Trembor. Out and about the city, working, or simply enjoying each other's company. Marlot felt odd knowing the hare had been watching him for over a year. That one picture of him and the lion enjoying a meal after handing over a particularly difficult killer to track was that old.

A few pictures were of the two of them training, fighting at Grebor's gym. That perplexed Marlot. The pictures were on different days, in one Trembor had bandages from an injury, on the other Marlot had shaved fur on his leg showing he stitched a cut had required.

He couldn't recall the hare ever being in the gym while he and Trembor trained. Anytime Nikal was there it caused enough of a commotion, there was no way to miss him. Had he paid someone to take the pictures? Some of them might have been taken through the front window.

The next file was Gorrek; no surprise there, Marlot thought, and contained an extensive list of what injuries he'd caused to each of the males he was currently involved with. Gorrek had given the number as nineteen, seventeen of them had hospital visits for one injury or another the lion had clearly inflicted.

Marlot shuddered at the callousness and level of calculation required to inflict the right kind of injuries to ensure someone couldn't hunt for a while, while not crippling them permanently. With only a casual look at the list, Marlot was happy Nikal had killed Gorrek. A male like that was worse than any hunter because he kept his victims suffering.

The last file was Trembor's, and Marlot hesitated on reading through it. The level of details Nikal put in all of them meant he'd read things he wasn't sure he wanted to know about. But again, the hare had set all of this up for him, for some twisted reason.

The first pages were about Trembor and him, their partnership. It had been

unusual enough some newsies had reported on it, but it had faded quickly. There were more important stories than two RIs breaking protocol and sharing territories. Nikal had gotten their productivity reports, and Marlot felt annoyed. Those should be better protected.

Then came what Marlot knew he didn't want to see. Hospital reports. He forced himself to read through them. The injuries Trembor had suffered while being with Gorrek, ending with a two months stay in the hospital, and an injunction against Gorrek by Torim. The wording making it clear that if the lion ever got close to Trembor, he'd be eaten alive.

The last item in the file almost sent Marlot running in a blind rage.

The hare holding an unconscious lion by the mane, head up so his face was clear in the picture. Even once it registered it wasn't Trembor, he had trouble getting himself to examine the image. The resemblance was so close; one of his brothers. Marlot worried that someone had taken the picture; which would mean Nikal had an accomplice, but he noticed the remote in the hare's hand.

Why the picture was in the file was explained by the text written on the back. An address, today's date, and, *This is your last chance. You'd better hurry.*

He was running out of the house, inputting the address in his pad. He didn't even question how the hare had gotten into the house to add the picture and not left a trace of his presence. If Nikal had one of Trembor's brothers, the message was clear. He was after his lion.

Marlot wasn't going to let that hare touch his lion, even if that meant doing what the hare wanted and killing him himself.

Series of death-50

The address Jockson gave Trembor led him to a warehouse. Except for the van, which was parked against the building, in front of a door, the parking lot within the fence was deserted. The chain-link fence itself had placards at regular intervals proclaiming the site was off-limit, that it was closed during the legal proceeding. Seemed the distribution's financial problems went deeper than their site indicated.

He drove around the property, finding the delivery docks, the main entrance, and two employee doors on each side of the building as possible entrances. The fence had the main gate, a delivery one at the back, and two pedestrian ones, each with an electronic lock. He'd have to jump the fence since he didn't have the tools to cut through it.

The main door was out as an access point, the lock would be high quality, and it faced a busy street, as did one of the side. The dock was also out of the question; it was mostly hidden from the street, but not totally, and he hadn't seen a pedestrian door, just the large dock ones. Even if they were unlocked, rolling one to those open would warn the person, or persons, inside. He couldn't expect there to be only one person. He was up against an entire organization.

That left one of the two doors on the side of the alley; hidden from the street, but also the obvious place for anyone to enter. The smart thing to do would be to wait until dark and going in through the main entrance, take them by surprise. If only he thought they'd wait for him to do that. He couldn't risk Bo's life that way.

He parked in a lane facing the pedestrian gate access, then walked around the block to approach the fence from the dock side. They'd be watching for him to approach by the side, once by the building he'd be hidden from those inside watching for him and could make it to a side door.

He kept an eye on the traffic, waiting for a gab, then ran for the fence, climbs it, ignored his jacket catching in it as he went over and rip as he let himself fall on the other side. Once against the building he checked it. The tear went all the way to the shoulder. At least the pockets weren't ripped.

He carefully made his way to the corner, stopping there as he heard someone curse on the other side. He peeked around the side; a black wolf in a suit was fiddling with the closest door's lock. Unsuccessfully, by this cursing.

Trembor had an instant of irrational anger where he thought Marlot was in league with the criminals. It was the only thing that explained his presence here, it told him. It passed and was left tired. He didn't need the wolf getting in his way. He peeked again and smiled as Marlot looked ready to kick the metal door. His tech-head of wolf stymied by a simple mechanical lock. He could get so much humor out of this, if not for the fact Marlot had no business being here.

Trembor stepped around the corner. "What are you doing here?" he asked as the wolf jumped in surprise.

Series of death-51

Marlot settled his breathing as he stared at the lion. What was he doing here? Wasn't he inside, already lured in by Nikal? Or still trying to figure out where his brother had vanished to? Or had the hare told Trembor where he was hiding, like he'd done Marlot?

Suddenly, Marlot didn't care why. Trembor was here. He could tell him how sorry he was for hurting him, for treating him like he'd done, for anything he'd ever done that led the lion to think Marlot didn't love him with all his being. He opened his muzzle.

"Well?" the lion demanded, his voice dripping with suspicion.

Marlot swallowed. "I'm saving your brother." He wondered if that sounded as lame to Trembor as it did to him.

"You, saving Bo?" The words were filled with sarcasm. "And how do you even know he's in trouble? That he's here?"

"Nikal—" the narrowing of Trembor's eyes stopped him. How was he going to explain any of it and not just make things worse? "Well, you remember the hare?" He faltered. The anger in Trembor's eyes had gone up a notch. Had he already tried to

explain about Nikal/Al'garinam? Maybe in their accidental encounter at the coyote's house? "Can we postpone this discussion until after we've rescued your brother? You have plenty of reasons to be angry at me, but I don't want him to hurt because we take too long."

"We aren't rescuing anyone," Trembor stated. "I'm rescuing my brother. You're going home. You have no idea what you're getting involved in here."

"No, I have a pretty good idea," Marlot said and wished he hadn't.

"What is it with you and constantly getting involved in my life, wolf?" Trembor growled, stepping close. "You didn't have enough fun watching me do everything you told me to? Twisting me around your claws? Digging them deep into me? You have to come here and try to convince me you give a damn about me? About my family?"

Marlot swallowed. "I do," he said, only a came out so soft he wasn't sure Trembor heard. He wasn't certain he didn't imagine the widening of the eyes, only for them to be narrow again.

"Go home, wolf. This doesn't involve you."

"It does. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Trembor. It's my fault Bo was taken. It's my fault I have a crazy hunter determined to drive me to kill him, that he decided to use your brother for that." To use you, he wanted to say. To threaten you, Trembor, and drive me insane with anger.

"You aren't making any sense."

Marlot sighed. "I know. Hearing me say it, I do come across as the insane one, but I'm not going anywhere, Trembor." He raised his hand to forestall the lion's anger. "But he's your brother, so I'm going to follow your lead. Do things your way."

Trembor snorted. "Like you ever do anything other than what you want." He turned to study the door.

"Hey, that's not fair. I've had no problems doing things your way." Marlot moved as Trembor took a step back from the door. "You made—" the lion kicked in the door. "I was trying to go in quietly," Marlot commented.

"I don't fucking have the time or the patience to play games. With you or with them. If you aren't happy about it, you can leave."

"I'm going with you, Trembor," Marlot said, and followed him inside.

The only illumination in the hallway came from the open door, but reached the other one two dozen paces away. On the left and right windows showed offices, the ones against the outside wall had windows letting light in, showing desks with unfilled papers, computers, one had a mug on it.

"What happened here?" Marlot whispered.

"The company is going under," Trembor answered. "The building was seized by their creditors. Now they're in court fighting over how they're going to pay for everything. Makes for a perfect place for criminals to hide out until that's resolved." The lion tried the door, and it opened.

The space beyond it was vast, the loading docks were on their left, with empty shelves going to the ceiling, on their right was equipment Marlot didn't know the use of.

Windows let in enough light he could see far into the large space. Not that there was much to see. More shelves, more equipment. And offices at the back. One of which had lights on and he made out the form of a hare walking back and forth before them.

Marlot tapped Trembor on the arm and indicated the office. "He's there," he whispered.

Series of death-52

The form walking by the window was a hare; Trembor had no doubt about it, and the path to the office stairs was a straight line, without anyone watching it. It was definitely where they wanted him to go. That hare waving at the camera had gotten him here, but this was just too obvious. Even if he believed Bo was held in that office, he wasn't going there by the path they wanted him to. He turned right and followed the wall, looking into each room.

"Trem," the wolf whispered, following. "Nikal's up there. He's who has your brother."

"Then you go deal with him, if that's what you're interested in." Offices. He shone a light in a dark one and saw dismantled equipment on tables, tools next to them, and on pegs on the wall.

"Then why are you heading away?"

Trembor rounded on Marlot. "Because they aren't going to make it that easy, not after—" He closed his muzzle and glared at the wolf. He wasn't giving him the satisfaction.

"Who is this they?" Marlot asked, puzzled.

Trembor turned. "None of your business." More offices, some with packs of what had to have been meat. Quality control? Hopefully, the meat had been moved before the place shut down. That much food going to waste would be a crime.

"You know," Marlot said. "I can't help feeling like we're following the same scent, but getting different prey out of it."

"And of course, because I'm not smelling what you're smelling, I have to be wrong." The wall facing him had a door in it. Take it, or turn with the wall and head to the back?

"I didn't say that," the wolf replied, defensively. "I'm just trying to understand what you're doing."

"I'm looking for my brother." He turned the knob. The door opened, darkness beyond.

"He's up there, with Nikal."

"And that doesn't smell like a trap to you? The prey's just waiting there for us to walk up to it?" He looked over his shoulder at the thoughtful wolf. "Are you actually thinking about what I said instead of just running off and doing what you want?" Marlot looked at him guiltily. How often had the wolf just ignored what Trembor told him? He

had a decent track record, Trembor had to admit that, but when Marlot fucked up, he tended to fuck up big. And then count on Trembor to fix it.

“I just don’t think—”

“Marl,” Trembor said in exasperation, “unless it’s about tech, you rarely think.” He turned the light to the dark hall and entered.

“That isn’t fair,” The wolf said, sounding hurt.

It wasn’t. Trembor knew that, but having Marlot there, following him, not arguing, not dictating put him on edge. He liked having him there. Working with him. But he had to remind himself that whatever else this was, the wolf was bad for him.

These doors didn’t have windows in them. Small offices on his left, disused, and the light that spilled out from the outside windows when he opened one on his right blinded him so completely he couldn’t move for almost a minute. Was it worth checking them all? He turned to Marlot, and the wolf tilted an ear.

What was he doing? He didn’t need or want the wolf’s opinion. They weren’t partners. Trembor wasn’t the wolf’s thing to be told what to do.

But having someone to talk things over had been good.

He ground his teeth together and pressed forward. There was another door at the end of the hall. He headed for it. The offices weren’t insulated, and he’d hear anyone moving in them. He wanted someone to jump out of them so he could hit them. The longer this took, the more people he wanted them to have between him and his brother.

He cracked the door open and light spilled out. This time he let his eyes adjust as he opened it more. A large room looking out onto the front parking lot, empty cubicles everywhere. The main entrance. No sounds except what came from outside. No scent other than staleness.

Pocketing the light, he stepped in. A sign opposite this door indicated where stairs went up. He smiled, there was his way to that office. The second floor would connect to it. He headed for it, glancing at the cubicles, no computers, but the wiring was still there. Not even the remnants of a scent. How long had this place been closed?

He felt the tug at his leg and pulled away as something clicked. Then he cursed as something cut him.

“Trem!” Marlot was next to him.

Trembor shoved him away. “I’m fine,” he snapped. His pant leg was cut, but the line on his leg was shallow. If he hadn’t moved at the tug, the slice could have been deep enough to keep him from walking. He found the string he broke, attached to a knife shaped like a claw with a spring mechanism. It looked homemade, but well constructed.

Now that he knew to look for them, he saw more strings between cubicles. A way to deter him? Force him back the way he came and up those stairs?

“Okay, that’s it,” Marlot said. “I’m taking the lead.” The wolf stepped around him. “Stay behind, I’ll make sure they can’t hurt you.”

“What the fuck?” Trembor grabbed the wolf and pulled him behind. “I’m fucking well able to deal with this.”

“You don’t get it. He’s doing this to get to me. He’s hurting you because he wants

me to lose control.”

“Oh, of course, this is about you. I cut myself, but all this, it about you. You aren’t the center of the fucking world, Marl. Get over yourself. They’re just trying to scare me.”

“There aren’t any they, Trem, aren’t you listening? It’s a hunter who has your brother, and it’s my fault.”

“Right, because anyone who knows you would think that kidnapping Bo would be the perfect way to lure you into a trap.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“And I don’t fucking need you here. I never needed you, don’t you get that? That pitiful act isn’t working anymore. I can’t even believe I fell for it. I am not yours. I never was.”

Marlot took a step back. “I didn’t—” looking pained.

“Bury it. I’m not interested in smelling it.” Trembor turned and made his way through the strings.

“Trem, please. I’m sorry, I never meant to make you feel like—”

“I don’t care!” Trembor turned to glare at the wolf, broke a string, and barely moved in time to have another shallow cut. “I don’t need you running my life! You’re just a distraction.”

“Come on! Now you’re being unreasonable. I’m trying to help, I’m trying to keep you safe.”

Trembor stiffened. “Safe? You don’t want to keep me safe, you want to keep me for yourself. Well, I’m not yours!”

“I never said you were!” Marlot yelled. “Are you fucking hearing anything I’m saying? I am trying to help!”

“No, you’re fucking controlling me! You don’t give a fuck about anything else. Leave!”

“No.” The wolf crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Trembor.

For an instant, Trembor saw the lion before him. Glaring, ready to impress on him just how unhappy he was with Trembor’s belief he had any say in what was happening. The sting of his cuts became the pain of a broken leg.

Then Marlot was there again. And it was the wolf who was unhappy with him, ready to inflict pain because Trembor wasn’t doing what he was told. He fought the impulse to run. He glared back.

“You are never hurting me again!” Trembor turned and stormed away from Marlot, only marginally trying to avoid breaking any of the strings. Once at the stairs he stomped up them. Ignoring the wolf called after him. Shutting it out. It would only be orders to return or face the consequences. At the top, he crossed the doorway and slammed it shut. Slammed the wolf out of his life, permanently.

Series of death-53

Marlot Winced as the sound of the door slamming shut, still trying to find words

to get Trembor to come back. Trembor had just walked out on him again. The difference was that this time he understood why. He'd ordered him about, and then his lion got angry, Marlot got defensive and angry too. He sighed. He needed to talk with someone about that after the hare was dealt with.

He looked at the door, wishing the lion would come back. He should go after him, apologize, explain that he hadn't meant it. He was just stressed. But Trembor wasn't in a state to listen.

Marlot looked around the call center. He suspected the traps were there in case one of them entered by the main entrance. Maybe Nikal had counted on that. The door was probably unlocked, to make it easier.

He headed back the way they came. Did the hare think maiming Trembor would send Marlot in a blind rage?

It had gotten him to order the lion around; he reminded himself, so maybe the hare knew him well enough to know his triggers. He'd just been scared of losing Trembor, he told himself; he hadn't meant to come across as some domineering asshole who only wanted things done his way.

But Trembor's reaction had been way out of proportion. He should have understood how Marlot felt. If he loved him, he would have and he'd cut him some slack.

"And now I'm justifying," He grumbled, entering the dark hall, "The first thing after this is making an appointment with a counselor." He shone a light around, wishing the hare would appear so he could pound his head in before turning him over to the enforcers.

"Not that accommodating, are you Nikal?"

The warehouse on the other side of the other door was just as desolate. He looked through the floor to ceiling shelving and made out the elevated section where the office Nikal was holed up in, but couldn't see the window from this angle.

So, a direct approach to the stairs, or the sneakier way? Trembor was right in that the office was kind of an obvious place, with the light and the hare pacing in front of it. Now that he had no choice but to slow down and think it through, his desire to storm it was stupid, Trembor was right about it, but Marlot thought the lion had gone the very long way around just to frustrate him.

He followed the right wall, He'd approach from the back, see if there were any traps on the stairs and go from there.

He made it halfway to the back wall when he heard something break ahead and then clatter to the floor. The angry snarling made him run. He knew that voice. Trembor was in trouble. If the hare had hurt him, he was going to—

Marlot was crashing to the floor, where had that leg come from? He rolled. From the hare stepping out from between the shelving, you idiot, he berated himself.

"You just can't take what I arrange and make it work, can you?" the hare growled. He wore pants and a shirt in gray patches, to make him blend with all the grays in the warehouse, Marlot decided. "You just had to go and start arguing with the lion. Why

couldn't you two just kiss and make up?"

"And you hurt him." Marlot ran at the hare, aimed a punch that was blocked and then he was stepping back, the elbow in his stomach almost doubling him over.

"I was hoping to give you the motivation you needed to do what you need to do."

With a growl, Marlot threw himself at the hare, only to be caught and sent against the shelving, which resonated loudly. Or that could simply be the ringing in his head.

"And you're still attacking me with closed fists." Nikal stepped away as Marlot turned, needing the shelves to remain standing. "Open them, bare your claws. You know I will continue to endanger your lion if you don't kill me." He stood, relaxed; infuriatingly so.

Prey had no business being this calm when facing a predator like him. Marlot bared his teeth, opened his hands. He was going to show that overgrown farmer what happened to prey that annoyed him.

"Yes." Nikal hiss and smiled. Dropping in a fighting crouch.

Marlot closed his eyes and let out a breath. "No." He made fists. "I'm taking you in. I will not be how you kill yourself." He stepped away from the shelves, his balance under a semblance of control.

The hare sighed. "I thought this was it." He nodded to the back. "For all you know I have some deadly trap up there that's going to blow your lion to small pieces."

Marlot kept his anger under control. "Then I'll make sure you suffer before I hand you over. I already will, for involving him in this."

"I didn't involve him in this, you went and broke up with him. I just tried to help you two get back together."

"You set up traps to cut his legs out from under him! How's that helping us? And why do you even care?"

The hare's eyes turned cold. "I care because you two are the one good thing I've seen out there. Now come kill me so you can go rescue your lion."

"No, but if it makes you happy, I'll be sure to send updates on how we're patching things up to whatever work detail you're assigned to." Marlot stepped forward for his attack.

"That doesn't make me happy." The hare blocked, and the punched felt like it should have disconnected Marlot's head from his shoulder. He had to fight to keep his legs from folding. "Maybe I can incentivize the lion to do a better job." The punch sent Marlot off his feet. He saw the floor coming at him but didn't feel that impact.

Series of death-54

Trembor grabbed onto the wall, claws digging into the plaster, to keep from losing his balance and pulled his legs out of the hole by the section of the floor that fell away. He stared at it, catching his breath. What was this? Some horror house from a vid show? A bad one at that. Was he dealing with a criminal organization or some cub? He'd expected thugs trying to subdue him, instead he got knives on springs and dropping sections of floors.

He considered going back, had his hand on the door, but Marlot was there. Him and his 'I don't care what you want' attitude. He would have moved on, right? He wasn't down the steps, waiting for Trembor to come back, tail between his leg. Waiting to smirk and point out that again he was right. Marlot wasn't like that.

Trembor's hand shook on the doorknob. Fuck, *he* was the cub. Scared of some memory. Someone who had been out of his life for close to half of it now. Considering how Gorrek treated males, he was probably dead by now. Someone had had the strength to end him and the misery he brought on everyone around him.

He wished he'd been the one to do it, instead of locking the memory in the back of his mind and hoping to never have to think of the lion again. Hoping to never have to face anyone who resembled that.

He rested his head against the door. Why did it have to be Marlot?

"Damn it, Wolf," he whispered, "why did you have to dig in your claws so deep?"

He let go of the knob. Even if Marlot wasn't by the stairs, he was somewhere on the ground floor, and he was almost at the office. He'd get to pound someone's head in there. If no other part of the floor was rigged to fall out.

He stretched on the floor and looked under. Where the metal crossbar had been cut was still shiny, confirming it had been recent. He couldn't see cuts on the other bars. As infantile as this felt, someone had put work on it, having to climb the shelves to cut this section.

He backed up, ran, and jumped it. The other side held, fortunately.

He approached the office carefully, catching sight of the hare in the window, still pacing, more a barely distinct form in the low light than someone. Oblivious to the noise Trembor made, or trying to lull him into overconfidence?

Next to the window it peeked in, the looked and started.

The pacing form was just a form. A manikin set on tracks running along the outside window, to ensure anyone in the warehouse would see it. Trembor growled. This was like one of the games on the Survivor Experiment show, with clues and misdirection. This definitely felt more like someone playing a game than trying to impress on Trembor the magnitude of the error of his ways.

He tested the door, and it opened. Looking in, he saw no strings along the floor in the light from the bank of monitors against the wall where the door was. He flicked the office light, and it came on. If that had been the simple way to illuminate the manikin, then the monitor being on mean whoever set this up wanted to draw attention to them.

Marlot said something about a hunter.

This felt more like the work of someone like this than a criminal organization. Hunters were unhinged, to begin with, so imagining one of them would create a game out of stalking his prey felt more plausible. But that he'd involved his brother when he was after Marlot, as the wolf claimed? That was pushing credulity.

In the office, he could see the eight monitors showed various sections of the building, the image flicking every few seconds to show another part; the warehouse, the front, where he and Marlot argued. If the hare had been in here, he would have seen

them. The controls had a volume dial. He might even have heard them.

Which one of them had sounded the more like a cub?

He cursed, one of the screens had shown someone in a chair, he thought it was a lion, but the image had changed before he could focus on it. He looked through the screen, searching for it.

His pad buzzed, and he took it out. Marlot.

Did he want to answer him? Would he just order him again? He cursed. They were beyond that. He'd give the wolf a piece of his mind once this was done with,

"Marl, where are you?"

"RI Goldenmane," a young-sounding voice said, "It's such a pleasure to talk with you again. I was really sorry the last meeting didn't go as well as it could have."

"Who is this?" the voice sounded familiar.

"No? I guess we didn't interact long enough. How about this?" this time when he spoke he sounded older. "Officer Goldenmane, I, I saw something, a body, no, I don't want anything to do with it." This time it was the words with the voice.

"You called in a body. Bypassed the call-in line, called me directly."

"Time was of the essence," the voice was younger, but not as young as the first one. There was a neutrality to it, a lack of inflection, Trembor didn't like "and I really didn't want the enforcers to consider sparing a few people from the riot that coincidentally took place to secure the house. After all, it was an intimate meeting, not an all invite party."

"What have you done with Marlot?"

"Now that's the tone of voice I wanted to here, controlled anger. Second from the top, second from the right. It might take a bit for the camera to cycle back, but tell me when you see me."

A dark room, then a different angle of the cubicles, a row of shelving, then a hare in a room with Bo in the back, in a chair, head slumped forward. Before he could ask about his brother, he saw the wolf at the hare's feet.

"What did you do to him?" he demanded, his words distorted by his anger. The hare waved before the image flicked to Trembor's back, looking at the screens.

"The more important question is what am I going to do with him. Oh, don't worry about your brother. He was just a way to get you here. I did consider threatening him, but as far as you'll go for your family, I think you'll go much further for a different kind of love."

The image was back to the hare as he prodded Marlot with a foot.

"I will kill you," Trembor snarled.

"Will you? I mean, you are a killer, but this isn't about feeding yourself. I thought your wolf had it in him, I mean he killed twice for you already, right? Have there been other times that I didn't uncover? You, on the other hand. What did you do for him?"

"Where are you?"

The hare sighed. "There's a shed at the back of the loading docks. We're in there, and I'd hurry if I were you, because I'm really tired of giving the two of you a chance.

Someone dies today, Trembor. You get to decide who.”

The call ended and Trembor ran out of the office and was down the stairs leading to the loading dock before he even considered there might be more traps on them, but he didn't care. Marlot was in danger and he wasn't losing him.

Series of death-55

Trembor ran for the building at the back, the only one there. That *shed* was a quarter the width of the dock area, and four full shelving deep, it was more of a smaller warehouse, and by the large open roll door, it must have been where the lift-trucks had been stored.

He was past caring for traps; he ran in, took in the partially disassembled lift-truck in one corner, the oil-stained floor, Bo tied to a chair in the opposite corner, and Marlot, unmoving on the floor at his feet, and ran for them, only to be intercepted by a hare dressed in a protector inspired set of clothing, tight shirt under a loose jacket and pants, all in a patch work of grays that was suppose to make them difficult to see under the right conditions.

Trembor didn't give the hare time to do more than open his mouth before he was close enough to throw a kick at him. The hare blocked, stepping back under the force of the impact, and smiled. He came back with punches that had Trembor dodging to avoid. Then blocked before surprising the hare with a punch of his own; all the training with Marlot and his mix of moves had taught him a few things.

The hare wiped his muzzle with his arm and grinned as he glanced at the blood on it. “Finally.” He threw himself at Trembor.

Trembor backed off under the ferocity of the attack, surprised a prey species was capable of it, let alone a hare, known for running instead of standing their ground. The hits had more precision than strength. The hare was smaller, leaner, much quicker. Trembor couldn't hit him as often, but each one did make the hare reel.

Trembor slowed his attacks, going for knockout blows; kicks to the head, debilitating ones; to the knees, while being more defensive. He needed to conserve his strength, if nothing else.

The hare cursed. “Stop holding back.”

“Why don't you just give up?” He dodged, put a hand on the floor, and threw both feet at the hare, but he'd already moved out of the way. “You can't win this.”

“You don't even know what my win parameters are.”

Trembor was back on his feet, and they circled each other.

“Something about getting Marlot to kill you.”

“I gave up on the wolf. On your wolf. But you, on the other hand, I think I can motivate properly.” He came at Trembor with a flurry of punch, which he blocked and dodged, but the few that got through; hit nerves that made his arm or leg tingle.

Trembor shouldered the hare, using his mass to put space between them. He glanced at Marlot. If he could stretch this, his wolf might wake up. Together they could take this hare down.

“I’m thinking you need to be reminded what’s at stake,” the hare snarled. “Which one of them do you want me to kill?” Trembor’s eyes snapped back to him as the hare took off running for Marlot and Bo.

With a roar, Trembor took off after him, threw himself bodily at the hare and they ended up on the ground. The hare almost got out from under him before Trembor had him on his back, arms pinned under his knees, and was punching him in the face.

“Don’t you fucking dare touch him,” Trembor yelled as his fists impacted. “Do you hear me! I will end you.”

The hare laughed between strikes. “I’ll do more.” He spat blood. “I’ll desecrate that precious wolf of yours. I’ll use him in ways you can’t imagine.”

With a scream, Trembor opened his hand as he wound back, unsheathed his claws, and brought his hand down on the smiling hare.

The motion stopped, accompanied by a grunt from the wolf holding his wrist in his hand.

“Don’t,” Marlot said. “Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

Trembor stared at the wolf, taking in his growing steadiness, the fact he was there, looking at him, smiling at him. How he’d missed that smile.

“He’s going to hurt you.”

“I heard that part, but he’s just goading you.”

“And how many times did you kill to protect me?” Trembor demanded, the anger returning. “Is that it? You’re the only allowed to kill for me?”

“I’m the one who breaks the law. You follow it. He isn’t meat, he’s a criminal. He has to go through the system, I doubt there’s going to be anything left of him with all the evidence he left lying around in his house.”

“It’s never going to happen.” The hare coughed. He sounded tired, resigned. “They won’t let it happen.”

“I’m tired of your stories, Mikal,” Marlot said. “You’re sick, there’s nothing more to it than that.” He smiled at Trembor. “Trem, I’m sorry for how I made you feel, for what I did.”

Suspicion flared in Trembor. The gentleness, the apologies. It was just.

“Fuck,” Marlot whispered. “What did I do?”

Trembor realized his face was scrunched, that his suspicion was plain to see.

“I never meant to be bossy, Trem. To make you feel less.” He pressed his lips together. “I met Gorrek.”

“You what?” Dismay had Trembor start to stand. How had Gorrek known? Was he coming back for him after all these years?

Trembor was thrown against Marlot as the hare under him moved, then they were fighting to remain standing.

“Not this time,” Marlot growled, and Trembor was left to catch his own balance as the wold ran off. After the hare, he realized, and then Trembor was running after both of them. The hare limped, and Marlot caught up to him, only to be nearly brought down by a kick.

Trembor was between them, forcing the hare back, and then Marlot was on the other side of the hare. The wolf smiled at Trembor, and with a nod, they attacked the hare together. Trembor did his best to monopolize the hare's attention, kicking hard and fast, letting Marlot take advantage of the openings he created to strike.

The hare was a better fighter than he'd let on, and even together, it was a few seconds before Trembor grew confident they'd keep the hare from escaping. More of his kicks made it past the hare's defenses. The hare's counter strikes were getting sluggish.

Trembor kicked the hare into Marlot's arms, and he only got out of the hold by slipping out of the jacket, then he had the wolf on the ground with a kick in the leg.

Trembor was on him with a snarl. It was his wolf the hare had hurt. Two kicks and the hare was reeling back, he dodged the one to the head but stumbled. Before he could regain his footing, Trembor swept his legs out from under him.

Marlot was on the hare before he was done groaning. "It's over, Nikal." He ripped the hare's shirt off and cut it into strips.

"Are you okay?" Trembor asked. "Your leg?"

"Hurts, but nothing's broken."

"Marlot, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to doubt what you said."

Marlot looked up at him and smiled. "I screwed up, I know."

"Did Gorrek hurt you?"

Marlot stared at him, looking stunned, then laughed. "No, he didn't. Nikal killed him and left his body in my territory, along with everything needed to get him for all the other bodies he left lying around."

"Gorrek's dead?" The idea the lion was gone left him—he buried the conflicted feeling. That male didn't deserve for Trembor to be unsure how he felt. He deserved what he'd gotten. Should have been someone's meal a long time ago.

"We can talk about it later," Marlot said. "I'd like to stop by your house once I've handed him over to the enforcers."

"I should help you."

Marlot nodded to the lion tied in the chair. "You need to see to your brother, take him home. I don't think you want him involved in this."

Bo. He'd completely forgotten about his brother among this. "If he tells the enforcer he was here, us leaving will cause you problems."

"Nikal's not going to talk about your brother." Marlot tied the hare's hands together, "Will you?"

Nikal sighed. "He served his purpose, it's not like I care what happens to him now."

"Getting Trembor here," Marlot said. "So I'd come too."

"It's not like the two of you were going to talk otherwise."

Trembor went to free his brother.

"I can't believe how hard getting you two to stop screaming and talk was." The hare continued. "The movies made it look so much easier. Get you two in the same room and you'll realize you weren't angry at each other, that it was the result of other stuff that

had happened to you.”

“Did you really base all this on movies?” Marlot asked.

Bo was tied with ropes which Trembor cut his a claw.

“I did this because watch you two gave me hope, then you went and fucked it up by breaking up.”

Bo groaned and looked up, eyes unfocused. He had no injuries, so drugged.

“It’s called life, people fuck up and we have to fix it.”

“But you weren’t!” The hare’s anger was such Trembor looked. Marlot had him sitting against the disassembled truck. “You both wrapped yourself up in your misery and just stayed there. It was pitiful. If not for me, you’d probably still be in your office, barely doing any work, pining away.”

Trembor helped Bo up, supporting the majority of his weight.

“I fixed that,” the hare said proudly.

“You do get this isn’t fixed, right?” Marlot said, looking at Trembor. “I can’t just say I’m sorry and it’s all okay. That isn’t how life works.”

Trembor nodded, but smiled at his wolf. He was right, but for the first time in a while, Trembor wanted to fix this. Maybe it was because Gorrek wouldn’t be able to reappear out of nowhere anymore, maybe it was that Marlot hadn’t shifted the blame. Or Trembor just didn’t want to be alone, and he’d take his wolf, as bad for him as he might be, over the alternative.

“Don’t you dare fuck this up,” the hare warned. “Not after the work I put into this.” He deflated as Trembor approached. “At least let me keep this one good act, okay?”

“That isn’t how this works,” Trembor said. “What did you give Bo?”

The hare shrugged. “Nothing you need to worry about. It’s going to be out of his system in a few hours. By the way, is he the only one this gullible, or is it a family trait? I can’t believe he didn’t even try the door when I told him it was broken and he had to enter by the back.”

“You were nice,” Bo slurred.

“And look where that got you. Considering who you associate with, I’d have expected you to give me more trouble, put up a fight, give your brother a show of me taking you down, get him nice and angry.” The hare sighed. “Had to settle for waving.”

“It still got us here,” Marlot said. “You should still have a medic look your brother over. Jaxca won’t ask questions.”

Trembor nodded and headed for the exit.

“I wish you’d kill me,” the hare said.

“This is over, you can’t threaten me anymore.”

“No for you, for me. You have no idea what’s in store for me.”

“I’ve seen the work details, I have a good idea.”

The hare snorted. “I told you, they won’t let that happen, you’ll see I won’t even...” And Trembor was too far to make out the words. Marlot would tell him, when they spoke later.

When they figured out where they'd go from here.

Series of death-56

“Are you sure?” Marlot asked, the traffic moving another foot. “There has to be something about who took him.”

“Sorry,” Afirna answered, her voice coming from the pad on the dash. “Everything is in order, the names on the transfer file exist within the legal system framework, but every thought I can find six other prisoner transfer they supervised, I can't find evidence they exist beyond the legal system.”

“The cage complex?”

“I went into that as deep as I'm comfortable, within the rules I need to play with, and I found security vids of Nikal Swiftfall being taken out of his cage by an officer, moved through the complex, then they enter a dead zone and I lose track of them until the officer walks out of another dead zone half an hour later.”

“Dead zone as if the cameras were down?”

“Dead zone as in there aren't any cameras there. Looking at the complex's blueprint, and the official security layout, there's a discrepancy that creates a handful of them throughout the complex. My guess is that if you go look, you'll find a system of passages hidden from view.”

“I go?” Marlot chuckled. “Like they'll let an RI into the cage complex.”

“Hey, you're a hero again. Have you checked the newsie site? Marlot Blackclaw, Hunter Stopper. Only person to have caught two of them.”

“Why do they insist on making it sound like I was the only one after Ruxul? Every RI in the city was hunting him. There were six or seven of us there when we finally took him down.”

“Not as dramatic. You know the newsies; if it ain't drama it ain't... I can't find something to rhyme with drama.”

“Can go in there and remove every mention of my name?” He reached the construction zone, with the workers tearing up the road surface on two of the three lanes in preparation for its resurfacing. He absently wondered if this would have been the kind of work detail Nikal would have been put on, or if he'd be considered too much of a risk to be allowed to work within the city.

“Unfortunately for you, burrowing my way into newsies server is completely outside what I'm allowed to do without a warrant. So you're on your own. Don't worry the city leader didn't personally thank you for stopping the one, in a few days they newsies will have moved on to something juicier.”

Marlot accelerated to the speed limit as soon as the zone ended. This was going to make him so late. “Thanks for looking into this Afirna.”

“Are you going to report the dead zones?”

“I'm not sure it would matter. If it's a tunnel system, then it's been there a long time, and it looked like the officers there know and use it. Also, I'm just an RI.

Explaining how I got the information would lead back to you.”

“What I did is pretty much legal, or at least within what I’m allowed.”

“I don’t think that’ll matter if the people involved take umbrage to me doing it. Thanks again.” He disconnected the call.

So Nikal hadn’t been entirely delusional. What was the saying? *It’s not because you’re crazy, there isn’t an entire secret organization after you?* He didn’t think that was it. Well, unless Nikal resurfaced, he wasn’t Marlot’s problem. And he suspected that wouldn’t happen. If Nikal’s fears were correct, they’d never let go of him again. No wonder he wanted Marlot to kill him.

* * * * *

The lion stepped out of the house as Marlot started off the path leading to it. They met at the bottom of the stairs leading to the small porch and smiled at each other.

“I’m—” Marlot began, then was enveloped in Trembor’s strong arms, held tightly against him.

The lion buried his muzzle in his neck. “I missed you so much,” he whispered.

Marlot wrapped his arms around the lion. “I missed you too.” He breathed in his scent, he never wanted to not have that scent in his nose ever again. “I’m so sorry, Trem. For pushing you away, for not realizing what I was doing, how much it hurt you.”

Trembor pushed Marlot until he could look him in the eyes. “Stop, I’m to blame here too. That Nikal was right about one thing, we both have trauma and we both wrapped ourselves in it. For every time I asked you to tell me what happened in that town, I could have told you what Gorrek did to me.”

“I couldn’t even tell,” Marlot said, he’d tried to remember any time together when Trembor had flinched at their contact, or even looked afraid.

“I buried him pretty deep once I got out. I had blocked it off until.” He shuddered. “Don’t apologize. I could have told you then, instead of running off.”

“Walking off.”

The lion rolled his eyes.

“I am sorry it took me days to come see you. That was not my plan.”

Trembor chuckled. “Been enjoying the spotlight. The newsies still run your interview every other hour.”

Marlot groaned. “Wait until they find out Nikal’s vanished.”

“Fuck, he escaped?”

Marlot shook his head. “I think his previous employer forcefully rehired him.”

“Employer?”

“A lot of stuff in Nikal’s identity was fabricated, I’m not even sure Nikal is his name, but his time in the protectors, I’m pretty sure that’s real. I can’t think of anywhere else prey would learn to fight the way he did.”

“So, he’s not coming back?”

“I hope not.” Marlot smiled and nodded to the house. “But this is about us, we could go inside to talk.”

“I have Herelex and Isenson while my moms talk with Bo at his place.”

“How is he? How are they?”

“Herelex’s tough, He’ll be fine. Isenson... He’s at that age where we start to notice our parents aren’t perfect. This is now how I would want him to find out his father’s flawed like the rest of us. He’s withdrawn, shaken. Hopefully, he’ll get out of it when he can spend time with his father.”

Marlot nodded. “Then we do this out here.”

Trembor chuckled and tilted an ear. “This?”

Marlot took the lion’s hand in his. “I screwed up, Trem, and I’m sorry. I made an appointment with a counselor to help me work through this habit of ordering you around I seem to have acquired.”

“Marlot, you don’t—”

“Let me finish, okay?”

“Alright.”

“I love you Trembor. I know that on a purely technical term I don’t have to do any of this, since we’re already mated and all that.”

“Lifetime, if I remember correctly,” Trembor said.

“And aren’t you regretting it now?” Marlot smirked.

“Not at all.”

“I’d like us to date for a while. I don’t want to jump right back in being mates, not with what happened. We need time to figure out if we can work, now that we know all this about each other.”

Trembor nodded. “I’d like that.” He looked over Marlot’s shoulder at the sound of a vehicle coming to a stop.

Marlow looked over his shoulder. The two cars were unmarked, but the three people exiting them were in enforcer uniform. “Fuck,” he whispered. Or could they’d find out he’d withheld Nikal’s existence for weeks while he hunted him. There was no way the newsies were going to not figure that out, and once they did, they had no choices to tell the enforcers.

He did wish it had taken longer. He’d wanted a real chance to patch things up with Trembor before this circus began. “Trem, I—”

The lion had a finger on his lips. “It’s going to be okay.” He looked at the approaching enforcers. “Arkal.”

The lynx sighed. “You know I’ve got to do this, Trem.”

“I figured.”

“Trembor Goldenmane, you are under arrest for interfering with an enforcer investigation. For hacking enforcer servers and planting false information with the purpose of causing a false scent trail. If you resist, you will be tracked and stopped.”

“I’m not resisting.” Trembor turned and placed his hand behind his back.

“Trem?” Marlot asked. He looked at the officer. “This had to be a mistake.”

“Fraid not. We have his hacker in custody.”

He reached to cuff Trembor, but he moved faster and took Marlot’s head in his hand and kissed him. Marlot grabbed onto him, kissing back, hard. Putting his confusion

in it, his fear, his anger. He was the one they were supposed to arrest.

“We’ll get through this,” Trembor whispered once he broke it. “I’m not losing you, got that?”

“Trem,” the lynx said, hint of a threat in his voice. “I’m sorry, but you either put your hands behind you, or I have to bring you down. You know how this works.”

The lion placed his hands behind his back, never looking away from Marlot until the enforcer pulled him away.

“I’m not letting this happen, Trem, do you hear me?” Marlot growled. “I’m not losing you again.”