

Marlot's day did not progress as he'd expected, he thought, as the four males escorted him along the sidewalk.

First, Afirna had offered no protests about hacking the ID system to help Hardir's cub and its mother. When he'd pointed out the trouble she could get into doing this, she waved it aside with an "if they're going to punish me for saving a cub from serfdom, I'm not interested in working for them."

From her system, he contacted his home computer, only to find out that someone had tried to get into it. Without going home he couldn't be certain his security had stopped them and he didn't have the time. Before he was done with that, Harik had contacted him with the information he'd compiled based on the information the academy had provided.

A large number of them had surprisingly high productivity ratings based on how low it was when they left the academy; firmly in the high-middle productivity rating. For a handful of them to take control of their lives when confronted with the realities outside the academy was normal. For most of them on the list, to do it?

When Harik provided recent pictures, Marlot recognized a few of them as the people who escorted the walking dead to their 'jobs'. The ID system had each of them working as drivers for the same company, and Ukely was looking for links between it and the other companies they'd already linked to the criminal cartel.

From Afirna's Marlot headed to the house where the walking dead assembled before being escorted to their day job and instead of keeping watch on one of the walking dead, he followed the escort, hoping they would lead him to someone new, or higher in the organization he could then use to link to more pieces.

Which was when Marlot found himself with an escort of his own. Again he was annoyed at himself for not noticing them until they were on top of him. A buffalo, a tiger, and two bears. Even without the injuries the elephant had given him during the hunt, he wouldn't have been able to take them on.

So he let them escort him to a restaurant. One specializing in accommodating special feeding needs, according to the sign by the door. Inside it wasn't too busy, but with a few exceptions, the people there were frogs and reptiles.

The table his escort led him to was one of the exceptions. A mole worked on her pad, with a wolverine and bull standing behind her. Marlot looked the wolverine over. If he could get his information, it might be easy to set him up as Hardir's killer. He dismissed the idea, too many unknown, starting with what they wanted with him.

The mole looked up at him and indicated the chair facing her. "Mister Blackclaw, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, please have a seat."

"And you are?" He asked, sitting.

"Maoma Burrows, As you might have guessed, I'm in charge of the operations you have been sniffing around."

Marlot looked around. His escort had taken position around the table, and a row of empty ones created a buffer between them and the other customers, if that was what they were. Most of the lizards were on the small size, but a number of them had bright

and colorful skin, meaning they were poisonous. It might not be their bites that were dangerous, but he had no way to know and no desire to test it. Maoma was studying him when he returned his attention to her.

“I have to compliment you,” she said, “it has been a long time someone has put me in a position where I can’t simply threaten them to get them to do what I want. Where did you get the file?”

Marlot smiled. “An informant.”

She nodded. “And where is the file now?”

“Around.” Marlot motioned to the air around them.

“Normally this is where I would threaten you, your family, your friends.” The mole said flatly. “But you have very few of each, and those you do have would make my life even more difficult.”

“I prefer quality over quantity,” Marlot said smugly.

“I can still destroy them,” she said severely. Marlot didn’t comment, she wasn’t someone to be goaded. Still, he would love to see them try to take on Trembor. His lion would tear them apart without a second thought. “But, I’m hoping we can come to a different arrangement.”

Not a chance, Marlot thought. “I’m listening.”

“My experts have gone over what your hard drive contained, and—”

“Tried to,” Marlot corrected. She narrowed her beady eyes. “They tried to go over the content of my drive. By the time they broke through my security, they found there was nothing left for them to examine.”

“Scraps of code,” she admitted, “which speaks to your skill. I could use someone with that skill.”

“I already have a job, program’s just a hobby.”

She tilted an ear. “A job that doesn’t earn you anywhere near what your skill at programming could.”

Marlot shrugged, then fixed his gaze on her. “I like making sure the system works the way it was intended.”

“Even if you’ll soon have to make some hard decisions regarding how you do that work?” she asked, her tone too innocent for Marlot’s liking. “My understanding is that you’re running low on funds, trying to maintain your office and employee. What will happen to her when you have to let her go?”

“That won’t happen. My current financial situation will be resolving itself soon.”

“Will it? How certain are you of that, Mister Blackclaw?”

“Very.”

The knowing smile she responded with made Marlot uncomfortable. What did she know he didn’t?

“Let me save us time, Mister Blackclaw. I am offering you a choice position within my organization. You will not have to sacrifice your work for the revenue bureau to do it, and I will not even ask you to compromise it.” That knowing smile again. “Your skills as a programmer will be sufficient to justify what I will pay you. It means you will

be able to keep your office and employee regardless of what difficulties your day job might bring.”

Marlot nodded. “I appreciated that you’re being clear with what you want. It makes my answer simpler to give. No thank you.”

“Mister Blackclaw, I don’t believe you understand who I am.”

Marlot smiled. “I have a fairly comprehensive file that says differently. And unlike what people in your position are used to. I’m not interested in using it to blackmail you.”

She sighed. “I’d hoped that you would prove to be more reasonable than your mate, but it seems your flexibility with the law didn’t come with as flexible a sense of morality as I’d hoped.”

Marlot stiffened, and she smiled.

“Oh yes, I am well aware of who your mate is. In fact, I have been conducting similar business with him.”

“What kind of business?” Marlot asked, calculating his chances of killing her before the six bodyguards got to him. It wasn’t good, and he forced his vision to remain clear. He couldn’t lose it now.

“He intervened in my operations, caused the loss of some of my people, so I offered for him to repay their death by working for me, but he proved as difficult as you, although not as direct with his refusal. For a moment I actually believed we had reached an agreement. But his actions have made his decision clear. So I have taken steps to ensure he will not be a problem; that those steps also ensure your cooperation is simply an added bonus.”

Marlot forced his breathing to remain calm. The stress his lion had been under, the things he wasn’t telling him. Now it made sense. He wanted to be angry, but he understood why Trembor hadn’t told him. The idiot knew Marlot would go directly for the mole and rip her apart. The urge to do that right now was strong enough his claws were digging into his palm. The only thing keeping him from jumping over the table was the futility of the act. They were expecting him to attack now, maybe that was the reason for this, force him to lose control.

“What have you done to him?”

Her smile became a nasty thing. “Nothing permanent, yet. Let’s simply say that this little conflict between him and his brother has escalated to a point where your mate’s financial trouble might become insurmountable.”

He was still alive. Good. The wording meant they’d pinned an unpaid death on him. The family aspect had to mean Bo. That his brother was dead would affect Trembor, but Bo’s tax had to be high, Marlot didn’t know what he did, but he was successful.

He stood. “I’m leaving.”

“Mister Blackclaw, I don’t think you understand.”

“You have just told me my mate is about to be ruined, and that you’re the cause,” he growled. “If I stay here, one of us dies. If I die, there is nothing you can do to keep Trembor from coming for you. He was willing to take on a hunter to protect me.” *And*

*you clearly have no idea what I'm willing to do to protect him.*

She watched him, then nodded. "I advise you against doing something stupid."

He gave her a toothy smile. "You don't have to worry. You've made sure being stupid is the furthest thing from my mind right now."