

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.”