

Chapter 09

The stores facing the construction site matched the lower rating of the area both in how *well* they were maintained, and in what they offered; cheap electronics, used clothing, normal and protective, a grocery store had vegetables on display which were on their very last breath. The only places that did better were the drink shops, bakeries, and lone bar. The bar was closed, with the schedule showing it opened two hours after the drink shops shut down for the day. Which led Marlot to think they shared a customer base.

The buildings had also seen better days, with brickwork in need of repairs. Some had broken windows on the upper floors, indicating a lack of tenants and no fund for more than wood to cover the damage. The rare cameras he saw in shop entrances weren't connected to anything, not even power. Only a show of security.

Alleys between buildings had groups of people huddled together that scattered the moment he stepped into them. No signs of them living in these alleys so the area wasn't so low as to be safe for them to expect to survive a night. It said much that the locals would be willing to eat vagrants.

He hadn't spoken to the owners of the construction site. At this point nothing pointed to them being involved, and his authority as RI was enough to get him what he needed. He expected they'd picked this site because it had been cheap, and the people who lived here hoped it would provide work and raise everyone's productivity.

He'd confirmed with the site's foreman that the body hadn't worked for them, which meant he'd come there for another reason. The clothing marked him as one of the local more than a vagrant, so the shops were his likeliest destinations. Without a fence to keep people out, he'd probable decided to use it as a shortcut from one side of the block to the other.

He brought up the lab's processing queue and looked for his request, it was still far from being looked at. They needed more lab personnel; everyone agree with that, but no one did much about it. It was a productivity area on the lower side of things, so most aimed for research, which had better security, if not always better rating. Research was a fickle area where productivity was concerned.

He stepped into a shop at random, mainly to get out of the cold. This weather seemed set on sticking around. It sold used electronics, including pad that hadn't been wiped, he discovered by turning on the one on display. He hoped for the previous owner's sake they were dead, because he found personal information anyone with basic skills could use to gain access to their accounts.

The clerk looked at the picture, then shook his head. When Marlot asked about security, the rat indicated the camera above the door. When asked about working security he just shrugged. The vegetable store had one working camera, showing the inside, but the quality was too bad for him to make out anything, and by the time the lab got to it to try running any enhancement, he'd be done with the case. He exited it quickly, the scent of nearly rotting vegetables turning his stomach. He didn't like greens, but he knew what they should smell like.

The clothing stores were no better, and the first bakery was too busy for the clerks to even look at the picture. He had momentary hope at the protective clothing store, when the clerk took longer to look at the image, and then said he looked familiar, but she added that all wolves did to her, so he moved on to the next one, the drinks shop, where he did his best to enjoy a too warm glass of spiced blood and too cool pastry to justify staying in a warm place.

His pab buzzed.

“Trem,” he greeted his lion, beaming.

“Hey Marl,” Trembor replied sounding tired. “I hope you won’t be too disappointed, but I’m not going to be able to join you for the search.”

“That’s fine,” he answered, hiding his disappointment. “Is everything okay?”

Trembor was slow in answering, and tentative when he did. “Yeah, yeah. It’s...” he sighed. “Lunch didn’t go as I’d hoped.”

“Is Bo okay?”

The lion chuckled. “He isn’t the problem.” He paused and sighed again. “I just need to be alone so I can clear the scents out of my nose before I see my lawyer.”

“If you want I can go keep you company. This search is as useful as trying to catch a scent in a hurricane. It’s not exactly pressing.

“I—Thank you, but I just want to rest.” He let out another sigh. “You keep looking for your body’s killer. You have a business to keep alive.”

“Alright.” Marlot didn’t like how tired his lion sounded. “You know you don’t need to do this alone. I’m here for you, no matter what.”

“I know.”

Marlot waited for more. Any indication his lion was reconsidering. He hated the lack of scent. Having to only rely on the tone of a voice. “Do you want me to come over tonight?”

The answer took too long. “Can I get back to you on that after I’ve seen my lawyer?” there was a pause. “I want to Marl, but if it goes anything like lunch, I’m not going to be good company.”

Marlot bit back his reply, this time thankful for the lack of scent transmission. What did it matter how good company he’d be? Marlot just wanted to be with him. He’d help make him feel better. He’d take any kind of company from the lion over none at all.

“Okay,” he said, then had to wait for another wave of anger to pass. “I’ll wait for your call.”

“I’m sorry, Marl,” Trembor said, sounding exhausted. “I know all this comes at a bad time for us. I’ll find a way to make it up to you.”

Some of his anger melted away. “It’s okay,” he said, forcing the remaining doubt down. “Life happens. We’ll get through this.” Together, he wanted to add. We’re mates we should be together when you are dealing with it.

“Yeah, we will.” Trembor didn’t sound convinced. Or maybe it was just the exhaustion, Marlot decided.

“You go rest. I have a bunch of clerk to question about someone who seemed to

blend in with the herd easily.”

“I love you, Marl.”

“I love you too, Trem.” Marlot hung on to the sensation those words triggered long after the lion ended the call.

He considered ignoring what Trembor said and driving to his place. His lion needed him, so Marlot should be there to comfort him, to make up for how he’d treated him. But wouldn’t ignoring what his lion wanted be exactly what someone like Gorrek would do?

Marlot hated that lion. Hated knowing about him in Trembor’s life. That some of his actions resembled that of that lion. But more than all, he hated how he now doubted his actions around his lion.

All he wanted to do was make sure Trembor was okay. To show how much he loved him.

He sighed. Trembor wanted him to keep working. So he’d do that and hope the meeting with the lawyer would make his lion feel better and they could enjoy each other’s company in the evening.

He braved the cold and cursed the forecast, which had said today would be warmer. He was never listening to them again. He made it through two more clothing stores before reaching another bakery. This one was better decorated, the customer slightly better dressed even one, an elk, was dressed in what looked like expensive clothing.

It had no seating inside, and the tables outside were unoccupied. They sold premade meals, and only offered the table because the space on the sidewalk came with the shop. The female behind the counter, took one look at the picture and gave Marlot a name.

“Hardir,” she said, turning to prepare another meal, “Hardir Mixcoat. Yesterday’s special when we have any left, otherwise it’s slices meat in a sweet and sour sauce with greens on the side. My cheapest dish. He’s here most days, I don’t have a lot of customers as regular as he is. Most here buy from me when they can’t get a hunt done. That and prey. I have a lot of green meals.”

He entered the name in Stalker 1.0 via the program on his pad. A name would make a lot of difference, now it would know who to look for. Find social circles, it might even pull an ID number it could track. He couldn’t get that legally, but people were far too careless with where they used their ID. One unsecured system—and in this area there had to be plenty of those—and he’d have that. With the ID, the case was as good as closed.

Unfortunately, having a name to go with the picture didn’t make the rest of his walk-about more successful.

No message from Trembor once he was done, one from Ezk’Eriel, letting him know the mink had been by for another meal. He’d asked to be informed; Galden’s precarious rating meant that if he missed a meal, Marlot might have lost his witness. He couldn’t do anything about it, but knowing it had happened meant he wouldn’t waste

time looking if he needed to speak to him again.

On his way to his car he went over his other bodies. He didn't want to sit around waiting for Trembor to contact him. It would mean having to fight against himself not to go to the lion's house, and that was a fight he knew he'd lose given enough time. He pulled the closest precinct location, and drove there to speak with the officers who had canvassed the area. He didn't expect to learn anything new, but all he needed was stay occupied so he wouldn't rush to comfort his lion against his stupid wishes

Chapter 10

Trembor looked up from the pad to his garage door. He hadn't wanted to cancel on Marlot, but his wolf would be able to smell something had happened and he'd find a way to discover what, then he'd act to protect him. It was sweet how protective his wolf was, even if it was also a little condescending that he didn't take into account Trembor was capable of protecting himself. But this was different. His wolf would be risking his own life by getting involve, and Trembor had to make sure that never happened.

He looked at the time, still a few hours before his meeting. Enough time to track down a meal and prep them. After the meeting he'd take the leftover to his buyer. He chuckled as an alternative came to him. Why not prepare his lawyer? Fill his cooler and ensure he was caged at the same time? Of course he'd have to add tax evasion to his crimes, because there was no way he could afford a lawyer his father had picked to defend him. And then he'd have to explain to Torim why he'd done it. 'I deserve to be caged' didn't sound like something his father would be willing to swallow.

He stepped out of his car. He wasn't dressed for a hunt since he hadn't known his brother would have the mole waiting for him.

"Trem," his brother called as a car door slammed shut. "Wait up."

Trembor closed his hands before his claws extended. "Go home, Bo. I'm not in the mood."

"Will you calm down?" his brother reached him before Trembor made it to the door, and he considered decking him. He hadn't hit one of his brothers since the days of play-fighting, but Bo was pushing his luck.

"Calm down?" He snarled. "After what you fucking pulled? You told me you wanted to talk. I though you'd finally come to you senses and you were going to let me help you extricate yourself out from their grasp. Instead that was about pulling me in with you."

Bo raised his hands and took a step back. "It's not like that. You're the one who needs help, so I reached out to the people I know can help."

"What part of anything that mole said sounded like helping me was her intention?" Trembor demanded.

"She said she can take care of your case."

"Don't lie to yourself, Bo. That's got nothing to do with helping me. And you didn't even know about it, that look on your face made that clear."

"That look was because you sounded like you'd already given up."

Trembor gritted his teeth to keep from replying. His brother had heard him admit to his crimes and he was acting like he shouldn't be punished. He glared. If he'd been smarter about it, he would have demanded Bo left before any talking happened. Like Cerek said, everyone in their family shared Torim's stubbornness, and now Bo was another one determined to keep justice from being enforced.

"Look," Bo said, "working for them isn't that bad. It's not like they've asked me to break any laws or anything."

"No, they just got you to get me to sit down with one of them."

"I asked them, Trem."

Trembor snorted. "Don't kid yourself. What are you going to do when the 'ask' you to introduce them to Harezik?"

"They won't do that."

Trembor started at his brother. "I can't believe you're that naïve. Harez works for the city's financial division. Do you have any idea how valuable that would be for your 'friends'? I'm just an RI, and they want me."

Bo sighed. "You're being paranoid. What can they have you do, anyway?"

"Are you joking?"

His brother shook his head.

"Bo, if they kill someone in my territory, he goes in my freezer until I find the killer. There is no time limit on how long it stays there. They could kill people they can't afford. They could kill City Leader Sharphorns, and no one would be able to do anything about it until I've closed the case. And they'd make sure I never closed it. The only person who'd suffer is me. My productivity would tank, but if they also have someone within the city finances? I can imagine how applying pressure to the bureau to keep me working wouldn't be too hard."

"They don't do stuff like that, Trem. You've been watching too many vids. They're just business people who function in an industry the rest frown upon."

"They are criminals. The only thing anyone gets from working with them is a lowered rating."

"Oh, get off your hill, will you? I'm trying to help you. Maybe if you weren't so fucking stiff you'd see this is a good thing. Or is this about someone other than you helping our family?"

"Stiff? You're seriously going to call me that because I don't want to work with some criminal—"

"You already have, you hypocrite!"

"I did that for you!"

"And I'm doing this for you!"

"No, you idiot, you're doing it for them!"

Bo threw his hand up. "Oh course, the great Trembor is the only one who sees things clearly. Age and all that. And he never needs help. That's why our moms had to step in between you and your boyfriend before he killed you."

Trembor stiffened. "I have never claimed not to need help," he growled. "When I

want help, I ask for it.”

“Sure,” Bo said mockingly, “just like—”

“You don’t fucking know what you’re talking about! I told them I had to get away from Gorrek! I told them I didn’t know how! I broke down like a cub in my mother’s arms. I had to watch Serene’s disappointment. I had to look dad in the eyes and admit I’d been wrong.”

“Fine, I’m wrong, like always,” Bo spat. “You’re even able to break down and still be fucking better than the rest of us.”

“Then fucking try, talk to dad. Tell—”

“Dad’s got nothing to do with this!”

“He’d got everything to do with it!” Trembor yelled back. “If you’d swallowed your fucking pride and listened when he told you you were digging yourself in too deep with your gambling—”

“He yelled at me!”

“Because you never fucking listen when we talk!”

“Maybe I would, if one of you talked reason instead of always trying to shove your belief down my throat! I’m only one year younger than you, how about you all start treating me like an adult?”

“How about you start acting like one?” Trembor demanded.

“I fucking am! I’m dealing with my problem without anyone’s help!”

“And you’re fucking dragging me down with you!”

“Fuck you!” Bo turned and headed for his car. “You want to be all noble and get caged on that shining hill of yours, you go right ahead. I’m done trying to help you.”

“I didn’t ask for you help!”

Bo laughed bitterly. “Now that’s hypocrisy if I’ve ever heard it.” He got in his car and slammed the door.

“You were going to be killed for predation of a cub, you idiot,” Trembor growled, as the car pulled away. “I’m just going to be caged.”

He cursed and got inside, out of the cold. He’d give Bo time to calm down, then call him and find some way to get him to see reason. Their situations were nothing alike. A worse, Trembor was looking at a few years in a complex, possible work details. There was only so much Flattooth could do to him. None of it was worth getting cozy with criminals.

Bo seemed too eager, too comfortable with the idea of working for them. Maybe it was because the finance world just had less crimes for his new friends to take advantage of, but he thought it was more likely they simply hadn’t worked out the best angle to use his brother with.

He looked at his shaking hands. More anger than cold. He couldn’t hunt in his state, and by the time he calmed down it would be time for his lawyer to arrive. He might as well do the best he could of that time. He headed for the shower for a long and relaxing one.

He’d go hunting after his meeting.