

Chapter 23

Marlot wasn't surprised the pad was unregistered, but disappointed. He'd hoped the hunter had accidentally dropped it, rather than getting rid of it. A contact list and call and message history would have gone a long way toward figuring out who he was. The list of locations the phone had been at would have helped him narrow where he might be hiding, maybe help Marlot locate the next victims.

The only number in the list was Marlot's, the only location Shortfur's house. It hadn't even been enabled to connect to the network for updates. The hunter had turned one of the first time only minutes before calling him. Why he'd bothered entering Marlot's in the contact list, he didn't know. Maybe he was making a point of saying he was serious?

The pad itself was unhelpful; a generic model sold throughout the city. The hunter could have a case of them, using one per call to ensure no one tracked him. Marlot searched for the registry number and came up with the model number and manufacturer, two things marked on the back of the pad.

If he had the contacts within the enforcers, and was willing to bring them into this, they could track it back to the store it had been bought at, possibly when the purchase had happened. If the store had cameras, he might get a look at the hunter, but he doubted he was that careless. There was no fur caught on an edge of the pad, it had been wiped clean before being dropped. And that was if it had been bought. For all he knew, the hunter stole it from a store.

He ran the deep cleaning program on the pad, removing even unregistered apps hidden among the operating files. With that done, he stored it in a drawer. Now he had a backup, should he need it. It was always a good thing to have one that couldn't be tracked to him by any means.

Marlot accessed the camera network to see if Shortfur's neighborhood was covered before the project was terminated; it wasn't. Checking enforcer statistics, the area's crime rates were too low for it to have been a priority. He wished someone would realize privacy in public areas wasn't that big of a thing to sacrifice to make catching criminals easier.

He took out Shortfur's ID, wondering what he should do with it. Unless he wanted to claim the body as his own and pay for it, it was of no use to him. It could even incriminate him; if the RI investigating it could place him there. The lack of cameras played in his favor on that. Destroying it was an option, but that was illegal; not that anyone would be able to figure out he'd done it if pieces were found.

The simplest thing was to leave it somewhere along Shortfur's route, play up the 'she lost it' angle. He pocketed it. He'd do that on his way home.

He brought up Tracker 2.0. Was there a way he could get it to figure out the kind of predator who would pick all these people? He chuckled. Asking a program to give him a hunter's motive was asking too much. Researchers weren't even able to do that with certainty. But could it give him things they had in common? Things the hunter might be using to choose them?

How close to identical would those things have to be for his program to recognize them as the same? This was starting to feel like programming it to recognize personalities, and he wasn't sure it could do that. There were papers on artificial intelligence, but that had never been a field that interested him.

What could he tell they had in common? A quick look showed him they all lived alone, although two of them were mated and three had been mated. Dissolved contract. He forced himself to continue working through the pain. His mating contract hadn't been dissolved. It couldn't be, but that didn't help him when Trembor wasn't there.

None of them had cubs, and that felt significant. A lot of unmated people had cubs. Over a dozen the odds were one would have them if this was random. And Marlot felt a little better about the hunter if he thought he purposely avoided hurting cubs by his actions.

Did this mean the hunter had cubs of his own? Could hunters build families? Didn't that require more sanity than they had? How about the family they came from? Did they know he was sick? Had they tried to get him treated? He tried to recall his conversation with the hunter and wished he'd recorded it. He couldn't remember any mention of a family.

Did the counselors know they were treating a hunter, or potential hunter? Were they born this way? The research postulated that they weren't, but that they might have some predisposition to it that got triggered by some traumatic event.

Didn't that make hunters as much victims as the people they killed?

Marlot's ears folded back, and he put his head in his hands. Too much. There was just too much he didn't know. That no one knew.

When he caught this hunter; caught, not killed, he'd ask him about his past. Marlot wasn't a researcher, but he had questions he wanted answered; things that would help him if another hunter ever decided to target him as part of their little games.

What did he know? The hunter killed people who lived alone. It could be because it made them easier to kill, but he'd taken down tigers and badgers, not species known to be easy to kill. They didn't have cubs. He didn't differentiate between genders, or species, unless there was one he wouldn't touch; it would take many more deaths before he could work that one out.

Had the trauma happened when he was a cub? Was that why he made sure not to hurt them? Marlot's cubhood trauma hadn't done much more than make him insecure about liking other males and diminishing his interest in females to almost nothing.

He realized he was on the medical clinic's central site, typing his way around the interface and into the code. Maybe he could narrow his pool of suspects by finding those who had been treated for trauma as cubs.

He smiled, finding three exploits that were traps for hackers less skilled than he was. Two others he wasn't certain of, and finally one no one had known about.

You're such a tech-head, Trembor said in his memory, chuckling in amusement, and Marlot's fingers froze over the keys. He shook the memory away. He had to do this. He needed something, anything, to help him find the hunter so he could show Trembor

he could do this.

Only, here he was, hacking into a medical database. What would Trembor think of that?

He didn't have to know, Marlot told himself. He was good enough no one would ever find out. And if he did know, Trembor would understand. This was a hunter. They couldn't be caught by doing things the normal way. Ruxul had shown that, forcing every Registered Investigator to work together to catch him. Except this was Trembor, and Marlot was in the process of breaking the law.

"Forget him," He growled.

Only he was doing this for the lion, to demonstrate he could work within the constraints of the law.

What if he got Afirma to do the hacking for him? She was better than he was, so reduced the chances she'd be caught, but it would still be illegal. Hiring someone to commit an illegal act was by itself illegal. Would Trembor give him any leeway on this?

He snorted. It was Trembor. He'd gotten leeway because the lion loved him, and even then, he'd made sure Marlot knew he didn't like it.

He looked at the code, carefully erased any traces he'd gotten in this far, and disconnected from the site.

He could ask the enforcer's cyber-security division to do the work, he might even be able to convince them they didn't need to know why, but with how many people Trembor knew there, he'd find out, and Trembor would come asking. Marlot had the pad out. Any excuse for the two of them to talk was a good one.

Except... Trembor would demand to know why he was asking for records on cubs being treated for trauma, so Marlot would have to tell him about the hunter, and Trembor would tell the enforcers.

He rubbed his head. The hunter had made it clear he wanted this to remain between the two of them. He *might* be fine with Trembor helping, but more? What would happen if the enforcers got involved? Would the hunter run? Regardless, the end would be that Marlot wasn't the one to bring him in.

Unless Marlot chased him to whatever other city he fled to? He'd done that with Ruxul; but with him, he'd been looking for an excuse to leave Low Valley. Unless he could convince Trembor to come with him, he didn't want to leave this city.

And Trembor wouldn't go anywhere with him right now.

Would the lion wait for Marlot to return with the hunter caught?

Trembor had blocked him out of his life; that wasn't much of a sign he was willing to wait for anything regarding Marlot.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair. He didn't have any choice. He had to do this by the rules the hunter set, and those wanting Trembor back imposed.

He let out a tired curse and brought back the information on the bodies he'd accumulated. It was back to doing this the hard way. He couldn't wait to have Trembor back so he could start bending the rules again.