

## Chapter 46

Marlot walked with the four “escorts” around him. Four of the biggest people he’d ever seen, with a buffalo who rivaled the elk he and Trembor had hunted a few nights before. He wasn’t sure if the two of them could take on one of them and survive. He certainly couldn’t. They were all dressed in casual attire that, in this neighborhood, made them fade in with the crowd. Marlot drew more attention in his black suit.

What bothered him was how he’d gotten to this point. Convincing Valerin Flats to help him had been surprisingly easy, which had made Marlot suspicious. Blackmailers weren’t usually so willing to work for someone who’d threatened legal problem on them to force their cooperation. Blackmailing a blackmailer is usually a bad idea. But the beaver had been enraged that a cub had had their lives stolen, that people were being forced into serfdom. He’d been willing to hack his way into everything to bring down the criminals behind it, and Marlot had been tempted to let him. If he was caught, it wasn’t like anyone would be able to trace it back to him, Marlot had been careful in hiding his the call to the Valerin.

What had stopped him was the potential for collateral damage. The beaver’s hacking history wasn’t that of a male who cared for who else was hurt by his actions, and stirring such a nest would spill out on a lot of people. All Marlot had had to do was imagine Trembor’s learning about it, and he’d ordered the beaver to stick to building an ID for this one cub and their mother.

Then had come Harik’s information. Everything he and his friends had found out about the names the academy adviser had given them. The mouse had had the file delivered to Marlot via a discrete courier, and he’d gone over it in a well rated network cafe.

A lot of the people on the list were in surprisingly high productivity jobs, considering even those who had graduate had had as low a rating as they could and still graduate. They were all firmly in the middle to high rating now. For a handful of people to realize how stupid they’d been to waste the opportunity the academy had provided and work harder one confronted with the realities of life was acceptable. But for most of them, over a few years to do it?

Then had been the pictures of those people. The gazelle Marlot had seen escorting one of the walking dead, the bear Grift had talked with while waiting to be driven to his ‘work’. The ID had the two working for the same company, as drivers, along with a two dozen others. That was another anomaly. The employment distribution among the people on the list was too narrow. It was as if those companies had stood outside the academy and been ready to hire those that were considered failures.

Or they were already within the academy, grooming them for the kind of work they’d do once they left, which included an official job at a legal company. Harik had indicated Ukely was in the process of looking for links between those jobs and the criminal cartel.

Marlot had then contacted his home computer to add a few names to Stalker 1.0 in preparation for he and Trembor’s next hunt. It was weeks away, but he wanted another big body. He worthwhile hunt, the pleasure of watching his lion prep the body. It had been wonderful how Trembor handled the knife, cleanly removing the hide, cutting the meat off

the bones. There had been something soothing in wrapping the meat as it was handed to him.

Then the satisfaction of a job well done, of pleasuring one another. He'd wanted another night like that, but that afternoon Trembor had called him and asked for space, and reluctantly, Marlot had given him. Last night, Marlot had been the one who had to let Trembor know he couldn't visit, as the work untangling the fraud was taking a lot more work than Marlot had expected. Trembor had understood, although Marlot had had the sense he'd been relieved too.

Tonight. He'd decided, he and his lion would spend time and Marlot would help him relax, and be there if he was ready to talk.

As soon as he'd been within his home computer, Marlot had known something was wrong. It's response was slower than it should. Finding the malware in it was easy, but that was all he could do remotely. He'd rushed home, more offended that someone hadn't done a good job of hiding their work than the intrusion itself.

Which was where the four males had been waiting for him.

It annoyed him that someone knew him well enough to predict his reaction.

They entered a restaurant, one of those mid-rated places that were popular with large families. He froze as soon as the door closed and he identified his lion's scent. He was scanning the place for him before it registered the scent was a few days old.

Large family, Marlot told himself, restaurant that specialized in serving them. That was the reason the scent was here. He wasn't familiar enough with the rest of the Trembor's family to identify their scents. This was just a coincidence, he told himself. Nothing else.

The bear that was one of his escort prodded him to move and they led him to a table at the back. The few patrons glanced their way, concern on their face, but no fear in the air. This was something that had happened often enough they were use to it.

A mole sat at the table, alone, with a bulky wolverine and bull standing behind her, eyeing him without hiding their desire to rip him apart. Maybe this was why no one realized prey could kill. Criminals snatched them up, directed their instinct. Maybe even covered up for them to maintain the illusion prey was docile.

Or criminals were like the Protector and put the people working for them through intense training. *Don't go inventing scents, Marlot. You have enough to do with the real ones.*

The mole indicated the seat opposite her. "Mister Blackclaw, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. Won't you have a seat?"

Marlot studied the wolverine. He was a little bulkier than Grift, but if he could get enough information, it would be simple to make him Hardir's killer. It wasn't like there was much in the way of evidence indicating who the killer had been.

"You know who I am," he said, "I think it's only fair I know who you are."

"Maoma Burrows," she answered, smiling warmly. "As I expect you've guessed by now, I am the person in charge of the operation you've been sniffing around."

Marlot looked around. His escort had formed a wall between them and the other customers, not that they had to. The families were studiously looking at their meals, with the parents chastising any young cub glancing in their direction. He nodded at her. In charge

of this, yes. But she was, at best, a middle rung on this cartel's ladder. It would take a lot more work to get higher.

"I have to compliment you," she said, "it has been a long time since someone has put me in a position where I can't simply threaten them to get what I want. So I will try a gentler approach. Where did you get the file?"

Marlot smiled. "An informant."

She nodded. "And where is the file now?"

"Around." He motioned around them. If she was in anyway tech savvy, she'd understand the word and gesture.

"I would appreciate it if you were to give me all copies."

Marlot shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

She nodded. "This is where I'd normally threaten you, your family, your friends." The mole said flatly. "But you have few of each, and those you do have are in positions to complicate my life if I were to try it."

"I prefer quality over quantity," Marlot replied smugly and placing his hands on his lap to keep them from closing into fist. It was just a coincidence Trembor's scent was in this place, he reminded himself. She hadn't mentioned him as someone she could threaten, so she didn't know about him.

Right, he snorted mentally.

"I can still destroy them," she said, her tone hard. Marlot didn't comment. Even a middle rung female wasn't someone to goad without knowing what to expect in return. "But, instead, I would like to offer you a proposal that would benefit both of us."

"I'm listening," Marlot said, while wondering what she could think she had to offer him.

"My experts have gone over what was in your hard drive and—"

"Tried to," Marlot interrupted, hoping his guess was right. She'd have been more precise in her description of what they'd found if they'd managed to get to his programs before his security kicked in. Her narrowed eyes told him he'd guessed right, so he continued. "By the time they made it through my security, there was nothing left of the programs for them to examine."

"Scraps of code," she admitted. "Which speaks to your skill. I could use someone with that kind of skill."

Marlot shrugged. "I have a job. Programming's just a hobby."

She tilted a small ear. "A job that hardly pays what you could get for you programming. What I could pay you for it."

He smiled. "The satisfaction of knowing my work ensure the system our society if built on keeps running smoothly is enough for me."

"And will that satisfaction allow you to keep your office? Your employee? What will happen to her when you lose both?"

"That won't happen. My financial situation is going to be resolved soon."

"Will it?" she said, smiling knowingly. "How certain of that are you, Mister Blackclaw?"

“Very,” he replied. It was a coincidence Trembor scent was here, nothing more, he reminded himself again as he felt his claws dig in his thigh, his vision threaten to narrow.

“Alright, let me be blunt and save us both valuable time, Mister Blackclaw. I am offering you a choice position within my organization. I will not ask that you sacrifice your work for the Revenue Bureau, or that you compromise your ethics regarding that work.” She gave him that knowing smile again and fighting the urge to jump over the table was harder.

Coincidence.

“Your skills as a programmer will more than justify what I will pay you. This will allow you to keep your office and employee regardless of other difficulties you might face.”

Marlot nodded and forced his breathing to remain slow. “I appreciate that you’re being clear. It makes my answer easier to give. No thank you.”

“Mister Blackclaw,” she replied, her eyes narrowing. “I do not believe you understand who I am.”

He smiled. “I have a fairly comprehensive file that says otherwise,” Miss Burrows, he replied, freely exaggerating. “And unlike what people in your position are used to, I’m not interested in using it to blackmail you.”

“I would be very careful with the threats you make, Mister Blackclaw.”

“Not interested in blackmailing you,” he repeated slowly, annoyed that she wasn’t listening.

She didn’t relax. “I’d hoped that would be more reasonable than your mate,” she said, and the pain of the claws in his thigh kept him from reacting. “It seems your flexibility with the law doesn’t extend as far as I’d hope when it comes to your morality.”

Marlot couldn’t stop the growl.

She smiled, as if that was exactly what she’d been hoping for. “Oh yes, I am well aware of who your mate is. In fact, I’ve been conducting business with him as well.”

“What kind of business?” Marlot demanded. Needed all his willpower to keep the hunter vision from narrowing his sight to her, to the corpse he would turn her into. He couldn’t do it, because the six bodyguard would then tear him to piece and there would be no one left to protect his lion.

“Like you, in poked his muzzle where he had no business. Unlike you, his action caused the loss of my employees, so I offered for him to pay for the damaged by working for me. He proved as difficult as you are, although not as direct in his refusal. His actions, more than his words, have made his refusal clear. I had to set in motion events to ensure he will not cause me further problems.” She smiled again, the smile of satisfaction a predator had when the prey was cornered. “That those steps also ensure your cooperation is simply an added bonus.

Marlot’s breathing hitched and he was sure he’d drawn blood. She was the reason for Trembor’s stress. She was what his lion hadn’t wanted to tell him about. How dare he keep this from his mate? The pain intensified and force clarity. If Trembor had told him, Marlot would have gone directly for the mole without preparation, without care for the consequences. Only saving his lion on his mind. And he’d have ended up meat. Still might.

But now he knew the danger she represented, and it help keep his killing instinct in check, a little. He knew killing her wouldn't save his lion. Someone else would simply take her place and Marlot wouldn't be there to further protect Trembor.

He could smell the tension. The bodyguards expected him to attack. They were ready for him. Maybe this was the point. Rile him up until he lost control so they could claim they'd only defended himself when they explained to Trembor why he was dead.

He didn't care. She was threatening the one thing that mattered to him had made his lion's life difficult. Was the reason being together now had been difficult. He wanted her dead. Her blood flowing down his throat.

No! He mentally yelled. That isn't how to protect Trembor. He forced himself to make plans. To look steps ahead. Who needed to be removed. How, when. Anything to bring himself under control.

"What. Have. You. Done?"

Her smile turned nasty. "Nothing permanent, yet. Let's simply say that the conflict between him and his brother escalated to the point where your mate's financial troubles might become insurmountable."

Alive. Marlot latched onto the thought. Trembor was alive and unharmed. He took about the words, but it wasn't enough to prevent him from growling. Financial trouble meant an unpaid death, someone expensive. The only brother Marlot know Trembor had issues with now was Bo. His death would devastate his lion, but the tax? Marlot didn't know what the lion did for a living, but he'd noticed everyone in Trembor's family was successful. That meant a high tax.

Marlot stood. "I'm leaving."

"Mister Blackclaw, I don't think you under—"

His growl cut her off and bringing it under control was tough. "You just told me my mate is about to be ruined. That you caused it." He had to stop, fight the narrowing vision and he glared at her. "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 took on a hunter to protect me."

She watched him, then nodded. "I agree than time to cool down is a good idea, but I advise you against doing something stupid during that time."

He smiled, showing teeth. "Don't you worry, You made sure being stupid is the furthest thing from my mind." No, to pull this off, Marlot was going to have to be more clever than he'd ever been before.