

Chapter 44

Marlot woke to motion in the bed but didn't move. Trembor whispered a few seconds later, on his pad, with a niece or nephew. His lion had explained, at one point, that there was something resembling an order to the calls, but Marlot hadn't paid attention.

He could stay in bed; Trembor would return once he was done with his calls. He might not even bother with his entire morning routine of exercises after the night they had. And the wolf waiting in his bed. He grinned at the memory. At least they had cleaned the kitchen among everything else they'd done.

The evening had chased whatever stressed his lion. Trembor worked hard at hiding it, and the scents of the kill, the blood, then the sex had helped mask most of it, but Marlot had had his muzzle in the lion's fur even before they were naked. Trembor was keeping something from him. The possibilities were too many for Marlot to guess, from the fear of his family finding out they were together again, the trouble with Bo, the legal case, or any other thing Trembor felt he needed to handle on his own, despite their conversation.

His lion wouldn't change overnight, as much as Marlot wished it was so. Just like Marlot's desire to demand Trembor tell him everything so he could go out and remove anything that stressed him hadn't left, just because he'd realized he had the bad habit. When Trembor decided he needed the help, Marlot would be there. Until then, he would respect his privacy.

A pad buzzed somewhere in the house, and he ignored it until he remembered Trembor was already using his, so it was Marlot's. He's received a message. Who would contact him at this hour? Who was even awake, other than him and his lion?

He grabbed the pillow on Trembor's side and put it over his face to scream in it and instead breathed in the scents and immediately calmed. Trembor was a responsible male. As much as they'd both enjoy a day in bed—a day of sex—he'd remind him Marlot had work to do. That message was certainly about that.

He settled for groaning his protest in the pillow, then got out of the bed and on the hunt for where his jacket, and therefore his pad, had ended up. He was confident he had it on him when his lion began prepping the body.

He instead found his lion in the living room, doing stretches, naked. "No, that's perfectly fine," Trembor said, his back to Marlot, "you don't have to do everything your sister says, Gan." He bent down and Marlot swallowed as the motion tightened the ass and sent the tail up. "Just be polite and tell her you don't want to play with her today."

Trembor straightened, balanced on a leg, and raised the other, exposing his balls, and Marlot hurried to the kitchen. While his lion was talking with cubs was not the time to sneak behind him and bury his muzzle in the crack. Push him down and make him roar. He looked at his erection.

Once he was done with the morning's call, then it would be time to make the lion roar. Then again tonight, and tomorrow morning, and the next and... He grinned. They were going to fall asleep from exhaustion every night until they were old and their fur thinned.

His jacket was on the counter, splattered with blood. He'd have to stop home and change. Especially with the rip in his pants and the blood, it had soaked... He found the

pants in a corner and discovered they had received more than just the blood from the cut. Had they used them to clean up the blood on the floor? There had been a lot of stop-and-go when they distracted one another.

Leaving a few sets of clothing here was going to be required going forward.

The message was simple. *The list is ready.* And originated from the academy. No spending the day in bed making his lion roar. He should have left his pad turned off and have the advantage of not knowing the day had started. He dressed and flaked dried blood as he returned to the living room. Trembor had his claws on each side of the scratching post and looked like he was trying to pull it out.

“No, Baw, your brother doesn’t have to play with you. I know he’s the only one there until you get to the academy, but he’s his own person and you have to respect that.” He let go of the scratching post and slid down, his feet gliding apart on the carpet until the lion’s legs were stretched along the floor, then he bent forward, again sending the tail up and making Marlot wish he could tell to the day to go fuck itself while he did the same to his lion.

He touched Trembor’s shoulder.

“Baw,” the lion said severely, “I’m going to give you a minute to seriously consider what you just said.” He tapped the earpiece and smiled at Marlot.

The wolf motioned to the lion. “Not only is this utterly indecent, but not even a feline’s body should be that flexible.”

Trembor laid his head on the carper and flicked his tail up.

“Trembor,” Marlot said indignantly. “You have a cub on your pad, have you no shame?”

The lion shook his head. “Not if it’s going to convince you to stay.”

Marlot sighed. “I still have a killer to find, and figure out how to build an acceptable productivity report on someone who lived without an ID for five years.” He bent down to give the lion a quick peck and ended up lip-locked until he was out of breath.

“Don’t let the bureau overwork you,” Trembor said softly. “You’re an RI, not that bureaucrat’s personal fetcher.”

Marlot smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll have plenty of energy when I come back tonight.”

“Marl, you don’t—”

Marlot kissed him again and forced himself to ignore the lion’s worried scent. “I want to, Trem. We spent too much time apart already. I have to let work take me away, but nothing else, okay?” He left before Trembor could formulate any kind of protest.

He’d started his car when what he’d done sank in. He bit off the curse. Getting angry wouldn’t solve anything. He’d realized he’d trampled over Trembor’s desires. Now he had to apologize and give the lion his power back.

I’m sorry, he sent, I didn’t mean to take for granted you’d want me to come back.

The response came faster than he’d expected. *I want you to come back.*

Marlot ignored how painful his grin was as he drove off.

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Marlot sat in the network cafe, drinking whatever his cup was supposed to contain as

he looked over the file the adviser had handed him. The list of names came with the year they'd enrolled, the one when they left, and an indication if they had graduated or not, as well as what their ratings had been.

He'd intended to kill two prey with one swipe by working on the file while watching the area where the body had been found, hoping for the wolverine to make things easy on him and walk by, but the file told him little. Their ratings were on the low side, due, if the pattern with the current students Marlot had had the adviser look into remained, to spending more time on illicit activities than studying. The adviser had included teacher comments on the worse of them.

He'd have to compare both files through Stalker 1.0, ideally, but while he had gone home to change and not seen any sign someone had broken into his house, he wasn't risking it. 3.0 was safe at Harik's and he'd avoided contacting the mouse on his pad.

The morning crowd had lessened to the point he could see the other shops, clothing, electronic, cheap eats, the bakery, and drink shops. This was a lost scent, and he knew it. He'd called Bahamel to speak to Galden and see if he remembered anything about the wolverine, but he hadn't, so Marlot didn't even know if he was local to the area.

He sent a message to Hela'han to check how she was doing after the previous day's scare, and Jesdan responded she was getting better, but she couldn't return to the office yet. Marlot assured him that was fine.

Even if she'd been ready to return, Marlot didn't expect to be in the office today, so he would have told her to stay home and enjoy her time with her male.

He went back to looking at the area. The only thing that led him to believe the wolverine was local was that he'd noticed the people in Hardir's building didn't go far, and the wolf seemed to come to the shops here, so this was the most likely place the wolf and wolverine had met.

He finished the cup and asked the clerk about Hardir, showing him the picture. He didn't recognize him. He went to the shop next door, which sold used clothing, and did the same, with the same result. At another drink shop, and one server thought she remembered him, so Marlot asked about a wolverine, and she didn't know about him. It was the same at the next shops. If they vaguely remember Hardir, no one recalled ever seeing him with a wolverine, or with anyone for that matter.

In the next drink shop, he got himself a warm glass of spiced blood along with a slice of sweetened meat cake as he asked about Hardir, and then the wolverine.

"Do you mean Kaspel?" the ferret asked as she added the spices to his glass.

"Is he a customer?" he asked, finally hopeful.

"He works here. He and that wolf spent time talking every so often." She placed his glass on the counter. "Actually, the last few times I don't think he bought anything, just came and spoke with Kaspel."

"Can I talk with him?"

"He's not in today." She took a slice of the cake out of the display case.

"Can I get his address, then?"

She bit her lower lip as she entered his purchases. "I don't think I'm allowed to do

that.”

Marlot smiled, showing his ID. “Then please get your manager.”

The thin gazelle was more than pleased to help him, and Marlot was on his way to see Kaspel Thickpelt while enjoying the surprisingly flavorful drink and cake.

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Kaspel lived three blocks from the shop, on the other side of an invisible rating line that meant the buildings on that side were better maintained, and cost more to live in. The building had apartments for people living alone; a mix of studio and one-bedrooms. The wolverine lived on the seventh floor, the building manager said, in one of the few units that had an office, along with the bedroom. He paid on time, via electronic transfers.

Marlot buzzed the door and a wolverine in old, paint-splattered, fighting pants and worn shirt, opened it. The scents that exited the room were mainly that of chemicals, paint. Defiance flashed in the male’s eyes, but it left as he deflated with a sigh.

“It was bound to happen,” Kaspel said, and stepped out of the way. “Come on in.”

Marlot stepped into a living room cluttered with colored canvases. On some, the colors could be people, buildings on others, or maybe trees?

“Ignore them,” the wolverine said. “They do nothing for my rating, but I can’t stop trying.”

“You aren’t surprised to see me,” Marlot said. The male hadn’t even asked for his ID.

“Hardir didn’t think you’d work it out, but you guys are known for getting the killer. His plan required leaving his body to be found, even without the mink showing up. Then I saw you asking after him around the shops.” He shrugged. “You were going to end up here, eventually.” He maneuvered around the paintings to a door on the other side. “And it’s for the best. As little as they eat, I can’t keep feeding them on my salary.” He opened a door.

“Then you know I have to take—what do you mean, feed them?” Marlot glanced around the room. More colored canvases, some blank, and in a corner, a silver female wolf was huddled in a nest of blankets, looking at him, terrified. She held an infant in her arms that shared her silver coloring, mixed in with a familiar brindled pattern. “Who are they?” he asked, but already knew at least part of the answer.

“Hardir’s cub and its mother.”

Marlot closed the door. “What are they doing here?”

“Hiding,” Kaspel answered.

“From?”

The wolverine shrugged. “The people Hardir wants exposed.”

Marlot leaned against the wall. The question of why Hardir would do such a thing had been nagging at him from the moment he’d realized he’d planned his death. Now he had the answer. “Do they know about the cub?”

“I don’t know. Hardir didn’t tell me anything about them, other than to hide them until it was over. I know she did the same kind of work he did. I don’t think Hardir knew about the cub until like days before he... I...”

Marlot banged his head back on the wall. He didn’t need the complication. He was an RI. He found killers like the wolverine and handed them over to the bureau for them to

figure out how they would pay the money they owed.

“Are you okay?” the wolverine asked.

Not even close, Marlot thought. “I take it neither have an ID?”

“She doesn’t. I don’t see how her cub would. It isn’t like she’d have given birth in a medical center, right?”

Was there even a system in place for this kind of situation? Marlot rubbed his face. How was Vlein going to bring someone back to life?

Marlot straightened. Would he? Better question, did Marlot want him to? If the bureaucrat did it, what safeguard would be in place to protect the mother and cub? How would Marlot bring them back to life? He couldn’t, he didn’t have that kind of power. He smiled.

“I need you to keep hiding them for a few more days.” What Marlot had, was knowledge of a commune with a system in place for the rare times when someone without an ID there wanted to rejoin society. Better yet, they were on the network, and even better, he knew a hacker in that community he could pressure into doing the work for him. He’d have to ensure her history fit both whatever skills she had and what she could have learned at the commune. He’d need an ID from there. Could he get Stomp to help with that? The buffalo had seemed like someone interested in justice.

The wolverine interrupted his thinking by shaking him. “Answer me.”

“Busy thinking.” Stomp, how much could he—

“I don’t care. What do you mean, hide them? You found me, you’re turning me over. They’re your responsibility now.”

Marlot shook his head. “I report them, and it’s a near certainty the people Hardir want exposed find out about it.”

“And that’s why you have to take them. I’m not going to be here to look after them, right?”

“I’m not taking you in,” Marlot said.

“Isn’t that kind of your job?”

“What are you going to be charged with, anyway? Hardir didn’t have an ID. That’s free meat.” At least until Vlein got his reports, but Marlot was the one writing them. “They can’t go anywhere until I’ve managed to create new identities for them, along with matching IDs.”

Kaspel stared at Marlot. “Isn’t what you’re talking about doing illegal?”

Marlot snorted. “And if I do the legal thing, she ends up as meat. I don’t even want to think of what’ll happen to the cub. Can you imagine growing up knowing nothing other than serfdom? Fuck.” There was no way that was the first cub to be born in this situation. Relationships happened no matter the circumstances. The smart ones would make sure no cubs came of it, but... by all accounts Hardir had been on the smarter side, and it still happened. Did the people behind this encourage it?

Marlot let out a breath. “I’m going to need a few days to arrange everything. If you need money to feed them, I’ll give you some. And don’t worry, no matter how it turns out with Hardir’s body, I’ll make sure you aren’t the killer.”

The wolverine narrowed his eyes. “You can’t do that, it’s your job to bring the killer

in, and that's me.”

“You'd be amazed at the amount of experience I have making sure the evidence supports who someone wants the killer to be. I ran away to this city to escape that.” Marlot took Kaspel by the shoulders. “Look. Unless you walk yourself into the RB and confess, they go by what I find. The lack of a killer is my problem, not yours.” And if he couldn't find someone deserving of being marked as Hardir's killer? He could simply leave the body in his freezer and take the productivity hit. He could afford it; more than the wolverine could pay whatever Vlein decided Hardir was worth.

“Alright. How do I get in contact with you if I need more money?”

Marlot handed him all the currency he had on him. “Hopefully that's going to last you until this is done. If it looks like it's going to take long, I'll come by with more. Now, you need to be careful. I'm not the only one looking into Hardir's death.”

“I know. He warned me about not talking with strangers.”

“Good.”

Marlot left and looked at the hall. He cursed. He'd just guided the people behind this to this building. He could make sure the manager revealed nothing, he hoped, but Kaspel couldn't be the only person he talked with.

He went to the first door and knocked, readying questions about a brindled wolf, while trying to figure out how he was going to get a hacker with a habit of keeping blackmail material to do everything Marlot needed him to.