

Series of death-35

Gorrek Shiningpelt's home was understated, for someone as successful as he is. The neighborhood catered to small families, with homes large enough for five or six to live, and yards where the cubs could learn to stalk one another. It lost a bedroom, possibly two, by having part of the house converted into a garage. Like the other houses, this one was painted in calm colors, browns, and greens with some blue highlights.

Marlot parked his car in the visitor spot in front of the houses, locked its door, and headed for the entrance. The grass was trimmed and perfect. Shiningpelt either spent a lot of time, or a lot of money, caring for it. He buzzed the door and there was motion on the other side, along with a raised voice from deeper.

The door opened and a muscular cougar looked him over. He wore a white shirt and pants. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Gorrek Shiningpelt," Marlot answered. He'd debated identifying himself as an RI and decided against it; this wasn't his territory, and he didn't want to have to explain his presence to the RI covering it if he couldn't catch Al'garinam before he killed Shiningpelt.

The cougar looked over his shoulder. The hall seemed to reach all the way to the back, and Marlot didn't see anyone. "What is this about?" the cougar asked, a slight tremble in his voice.

"I received his ID card by error, and I'm returning it." He'd decided on the truth on the way here. There was nothing to be gained by creating an elaborate story, especially not with someone who dealt in creating stories for a living.

"Oh, finally," the cougar whispered with a sigh. Extending his hand. "I'll give it to him."

"I take it he's been a wreck with it?" Marlot couldn't help smiling and he took it out.

The cougar winced and looked over his shoulder again. "Something like that," he whispered.

"I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to hand it to him myself, I have a few questions for him."

"Are you with the enforcers?" the cougar voice was neutral, but his face and his scent were hopeful?

"No. I'm an RI, but this isn't my territory. As I said, I got his card by mistake, I'm just trying to solve the mystery of why I've been getting so many of them and I'm hoping he can help."

The cougar's expression cracked and Marlot thought he saw fear in it before it was changed into a pleasantly neutral expression. "Alright, if you'll come with me." He led Marlot to a living room, limping on the way there. Stalking injury, Marlot decided. "I'll tell Gorrek you're here."

Marlot only noted the chairs, couch, and screen absently, what caught his attention were the picture frames on the wall. Forty, fifty of them? All of a dark-furred lion with his arm around the shoulder or the waist of another male. They had to go back at least

two decades, by how young the lion looked in some of them. The other males were all muscular, and the look of adoration on the faces of those looking at the lion when the picture was taken made Marlot miss Trembor.

A raised voice made Marlot look away. “What did I tell you about answering the door.” A deeper voice. Gorrek. “What if that had been some predator here to eat me, what would you have done then? Maimed as you are.”

Marlot winced, the male was definitely on edge. How long had he been waiting for his card?

“But he brought your ID,” the cougar replied, softly enough Marlot had to strain to hear.

“And you saw it? You know for a fact he had it?”

“He took out a card,” the cougar replied. Marlot thought he heard his voice tremble.

“But did you see it was mine?” the silence stretched. “Why do I even—” another silence, then a sigh. “I’m sorry. You know I didn’t mean that it’s just that I’m a wreck, and you go and do something stupid like answer the door without first checking with me.”

“I’m sorry.” The cougar sounded like he was crying.

“Don’t cry, you know I hate it when you cry.” Another long silence. “Stay here and I’ll see to that. You said he was a wolf, right? I’ll see to him, and then we can talk about this bad habit of yours to just invite anyone into my house.”

Marlot looked at the pictures on the wall, his ears burning from eavesdropping on what should have been a private moment. Shiningpelt’s personal life wasn’t as perfect as the house the neighborhood seemed to indicate.

Whose life was? Marlot thought as he remembered Trembor walking away from him.

“Davan tells me you received my ID.”

Marlot jumped and his ears folded back. How had the lion moved so quietly? He turned and his breath caught. Shiningpelt was shirtless, his muscles defined under the brown fur, and the lion tensed them slightly under the attention Marlot gave him. He wore gray canvas pants, not too tight, but they outlined his package quite well. When Marlot shook himself and looked back up.

“You have good taste,” Gorrek said with a smirk. Marlot did not answer that, instead, he handed over the card. The lion turned it in his hand. “And it was sent to you, instead of me?”

“There’s a glitch in the revenue’s re-issuing computers. I’ve been receiving one of those every few weeks. It’s how I’ve become aware that a pickpocket is going around stealing IDs.” Marlot took out his phone. Confident it was a believable alteration to the truth, after all, Al’garinam had to be a good pickpocket to get the IDs.

“Why would anyone steal IDs? It isn’t like they can use them, or even access my information with it. I thought it’d just fallen out of my wallet the last time I used it.”

Marlot turned the phone to show him the pictures. “It’s what most of the victims

think, but more than one remembers a hare having around them at the time. One even took this picture, but they didn't realize this was who probably stole their ID at the time. Do you recognize him?"

The picture was from Grebor's gym, Al'garinam was fighting a wolverine, he was standing low in preparation for the next attack. It was one of the better pictures he'd obtained from talking to the few who'd remembered the hare.

"And you're not with the enforcers?" the lion asked, taking the phone and studying the image.

"I'm an RI, but I cover another territory."

"Don't remember him, but it's not like I pay attention to his kind." He offered Marlot his phone back. "But you're saying he survived that fight?"

Marlot reached for the phone. "It's a training gym. No one dies there."

The lion took his hand and held it as he placed the phone in it. "Don't you think one of the predators there put him out of his misery? Why else does one of them show up at one of our gyms to fight?"

Marlot gently pulled on his hand, but the lion didn't let go. "He's been seen after this fight, so I'm guessing no one took pity on him."

The lion smiled at Marlot. "I guess we're not really the types to pity those weaker than us, are we?"

"I guess not, and he's kind of wiry," Marlot added, feeling nervous for some reason. "I don't know how edible he'd be."

"And there are much tastier treats out there, aren't there?"

"Yeah, there is." Marlot pulled on his hand a little harder, but the lion's grip was firm. "I'm going to need my hand back," he said, chuckling nervously.

"Why? What would you do with it, if I gave it back?" the lion licked his lips as he spoke and Marlot had no trouble hearing the implied 'to me' in there.

"Aren't you with someone?" Marlot asked, and it seemed to break whatever spell the lion was weaving.

He frowned. "What does he have to—" Gorrek looked Marlot over again, seemed to take him in fully. "Of course. My apologies. I didn't mean to imply..." he trailed off, smiling again. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you with catching this thief, but thank you for bringing my ID back. If there anything else?"

Marlot shook his head, and himself, trying to understand what had happened, other than the obvious, as the lion let go of his hand.

"Then I have someone to attend to." The lion motioned to the living room's exit.

Marlot stepped toward it, then paused, noticing a framed picture among all the others. It was Gorrek with another lion. Both were young. So young that Marlot initially doubted it was him, but the golden fur, the light brown mane, the love in those eyes as he gazed on Gorrek, who had his arm around his waist possessively. Marlot had had those eyes directed at him, before he'd walked out and left him alone.

"Ahhh," Shiningpelt purrs softly, "I was right, you do have good taste." The lion ran a finger over the picture. "He was wonderful. I was sorry to ever let him go."

Marlot swallowed as a shiver ran down his spine. Suddenly, he didn't want to be in this house anymore. In fact, he wanted to be as far from this lion as possible.