

Chapter 40

Marlot snapped a picture of the ocelot Gorrek was making out with in the hall leading to the restroom. How many did that make? Nine? Ten males the lion was seeing? He looked at the ocelot's picture. Did this one count on one of Gorrek's boyfriends? He glanced at them grinding together. If he wasn't now, he'd be soon. He filed the picture to add on Stalked 2.0 once he got a name. With the lion getting meat from all the males he was involved with, Marlot was at a loss on how to get the program to track the lion's 'hunting' patterns.

He looked to the table, with the tiger waiting for the lion to return. What would he do if he saw the two of them making out in almost public? Would he storm off, leaving the lion to pay for the meal? Would Gorrek talk him down? Let the ocelot join them and still have the tiger pay for it all?

Marlot didn't know how the lion did it. He could take an angry male larger than himself, and with a few words turn them into someone willing to forgive anything.

He ran the ocelot's picture through a recognition program he had access to. If he'd had any run-ins with the law, he'd be there and it would speed up getting a name. How long could he consider Stalker 2.0 the same program as what he'd started with? Should he upgrade the name to 3.0? Gorrek was forcing Marlot to make even more changes to it than Al'garinam had. At least the hare was doing the killing, and Marlot knew how to get his program to look at that and come up with some form of predictive algorithm. If only he could get it to accept prey could hunt.

Even without it, Marlot had worked out the type of people Al'garinam went after, predators. With Gorrek, he couldn't tell if he had a type, other than male and willing. He seemed to prefer felines. What he remembered of the wall of pictures had a majority of them. There had been a wolf too, a fox. The males he'd seen Gorrek visit were felines, with a variety of body types, from lithe to muscular. Taller than he was, shorter. It was as if all he cared about was accumulating as many of them as he could. Build the largest pride possible.

Could he have Stalker 2.0 merge Al'garinam and Gorrek's profiles and not explode? It might give him overlaps that would point to where the hare could be planning something? Well, they already had one thing in common, both only sought out predators.

Something else stalking the lion gave Marlot time to think about was why he was still alive. This was the longer someone whose ID card he'd received had remained alive. The hare hadn't even come close, Marlot was certain he'd notice him among all the predators Gorrek kept around him. So was Marlot skilled enough to make this hard on the hare, or was he letting him stew? Marlot would be sure to ask, once he caught the hunter.

The lion and ocelot broke apart, finally. Marlot wondered how anyone who'd walked by the two hadn't just told them to stop. He hadn't thought this restaurant was the kind that allowed the type of near-lewd behavior. They exchanged information, and the lion headed to the restroom. The ocelot caught his breath and did what he could to

smooth down his head fur. The interaction had to have left him smelling needy. Marlot tried to recall if the ocelot was seated near the lion and tiger's table, it would be interesting to see the tiger's reaction at smelling the lion on the ocelot. But the ocelot headed to the coat-check and left.

Now, the question became how would Gorrek explain the ocelot's scent on him. There couldn't be enough de-scenting wipes in existence to remove the evidence of what they'd been up to. The lion would need a full body wash.

The lion returned and sat. The tiger sniffed the air and his fur fluffed up. He said something that had to be sharp, but Gorrek dismissed it, replied with a chuckle, and rubbed the tiger's cheek. The tiger calmed down, nodded, and they were eating again, the conversation pleasant.

It took the lion less than three phrases to calm the tiger; and one touch. Marlot couldn't help being impressed.

The meal ended with food left over, the tiger paid, the food was wrapped, and the lion took it, heading to the restroom again. Instead of waiting, the tiger left; so they weren't going back to the tiger. Marlot checked the time. Still an hour to go; that was usually enough for the lion.

After five minutes, Marlot wondered what the lion was up to in the restroom. He hadn't looked sick. After ten, he had to consider the lion had left by the back door for some reason. He had had his jacket, and the evening was on the warmer side. Maybe he'd encountered another male, and they were taking advantage of the privacy the restroom offered?

Thinking of Gorrek stalking some male reminded Marlot he needed to think about his own food. The body he'd bought off the moose wouldn't last for too much longer.

He gave Gorrek another five minutes, then he finished his drink and stood. Whatever was keeping the lion busy, this session of observation was done. Outside, he tightened his jacket. He'd been wrong, the temperature had dropped with the rising wind, Gorrek would have to hurry to his car if he didn't want to freeze, just as he would.

Marlot wished the weather would make up its mind. He'd dressed for the late afternoon warmer weather, with the forecast predicting stability. Instead, he was freezing. He couldn't wait for his winter coat to come in, even if it meant he'd burn up on the warm days.

He noted the prey he passed on his way to his car. Too many of them were overly confident in their safety. He just had to figure out which had good reasons to be, and which didn't. He didn't have Trembor's nose for it. His lion seemed—

He groaned. No thinking of the lion. He'd made it clear they were done, that there was nothing Marlot could do.

Maybe he should stalk a few of them, get enough information on them to get Stalker 1.0 running. A gust of wind reminded him he was freezing his tail off. Another day. When it was warmer. He'd be back in this area again, he was sure of it. The way the staff treated Gorrek, he was a regular there.

Marlot unlocked his car as he approached, starting it remotely. His car was at the

back, the lot having been full when he arrived. It would give it time to warm. He put his pad away as he sensed the hand reaching for him.

He spun, grabbed it, and pulled the large male off balance. He twisted him, pressing the lion's back against the closest car.

Gorrek smiled. "You have good reflexes, I like that in a male."

"You like getting gored too?" Marlot snapped, noting how much heat the lion generated. "Because that's what almost happened here. What's the idea, stalking me?"

The lion tilted an ear, smirking. "I, stalking you? I'm not the one who's been watching you for what, six, seven evenings now?" He ran a finger along Marlot's muzzle and lowered his voice. "You don't have to be so indirect. You can simply come up to me and tell me you're interested. At this point, you have to know I don't mind adding a new partner to my pride."

Marlot didn't immediately slap the hand away. He told himself he was distracted by soaking in the warmth the lion provided. Then had a vision of Trembor caressing him like that, and he slapped the hand away.

"That's not why I'm watching you."

The smile brightened. "Of course not. A handsome wolf like you has nothing better to do than stalk a lion like me." The hand snaked around Marlot and pulled him closer. Making him feel more than the heat coming off the lion. "Did you like what you saw tonight?" Gorrek licked his lips and Marlot felt how excited the lion was at this moment on top of smelling it. "Did you wish it was you in place of the ocelot?"

Marlot pushed back against the lion, but Gorrek held him. "I don't care what you get to with any of them." He said, directing his anger at the lion instead of himself for enjoying being held, for being curious as to the size of what pressed against his crotch. The lion had to be able to smell the effect he had on him. "And this has nothing to do with you."

"No, of course not. You couldn't smell this... happy, because of good little me." Marlot swallowed as the lion leaned in, little he wasn't. The muzzle pressed against the side of Marlot's head and breathed in. "Tell me," he whispered. "Did Trembor tell you how good I am?" Marlot stiffened. "All the ways I could make him squirm and beg for more?"

Marlot pushed hard and shoved himself out of the hold. "Don't talk about him that way. And how do you even know about him and me?"

Gorrek canted an ear. "The way you looked at his picture, I had to stalk around and find out why. Mating contracts are publicly accessible, you know. A lifetime contract, I am impressed. I didn't know Trembor had it in him. He never showed that kind of dedication when he was younger. He left me. Did he tell you that? Without any explanation, just walked out. He was there, then one day, he was gone."

Marlot swallowed, unable to look away from those bright golden eyes. Maybe he should have looked into Trembor's past. Maybe he'd have known what to expect that way, known better than to get involved. If he'd also walked out on someone like Gorrek, the problem was Trembor and there *was* nothing Marlot could do about it.

“I’d never do that to someone,” Gorrek said, caressing the side of Marlot’s face. “Especially not someone I’d sign a lifetime contract with.”

“That’s not—” Marlot stuttered. “We aren’t—” he cursed silently and gently moved the hand away. The lion’s grin infuriated him. How did he even know Trembor had walked away from their relationship? “What are you doing here?”

Gorrek held Marlot’s gaze, then smiled. “I noticed you didn’t order anything for yourself while watching me eat. I understand Registered Investigators don’t have a stable income, something about depending on getting enough bodies in their territories, or something.” He offered Marlot the wrapped package. “Watching me eat must have made you hungry.” The lion took a deep breath of the air between them. “Or is it a different kind of hunger you want to satisfy?” he licked his pips.

“Absolutely not! Wasn’t he ocelot enough? How about the tiger, the other lion, the two cheetahs? Do you want me to go one?”

Gorrek beamed. “Oh, you have been watching me carefully. How did you see me with the cheetahs?” His brow furrowed, then snapped his fingers. “The building across the street from theirs. Did you have a view of their bedroom? Did you see my performance? Do you like brothers?”

“No,” Marlot stated. “What is wrong with you? I’m not watching you have sex and I’m not interested in having sex with you. I’m not one of those males you’re collecting.”

Gorrek nodded. “Right, you wolves aren’t comfortable sharing. You’re the lifetime mating contract types, aren’t you? I would make it worth your while. I have a wolf in my pride, and he certainly hasn’t run off, even after he found out about my other partners.” The lion beamed. “I’m just that good at pleasuring him.”

“Will you stop?” Marlot said, exasperated. “I’m not interested in you.”

The lion canted his head. “I’ve never known someone not interested to spend the kind of time watching me as you do.”

Marlot glared at the amused lion. He almost told him about Al’garinam, about his life being in danger, just to wipe the smirk off his muzzle. But even if the lion believed a hare could be a danger, and Marlot had heard the tone when the male referred to prey, he didn’t know how the hunter would react to his prey being aware the stalking was happening. Would Al’garinam lash out at the males around Gorrek?

“Look, this is a misunderstanding,” Marlot said, doing his best to calm himself and bury his reaction to the male. “I’m not interested in you; not that way, at least. I’m doing research for a program I’m building.” Not a lie, he told himself. The data he was accumulating following the lion would help with the program, somehow.

Gorrek chuckled. “Sure you are.” He handed the package to Marlot. “But I have to get home, I have someone there waiting for me. Take this, the restaurant does an amazing job getting the sauce to soak into the meat. This might spoil you for anything else, but it is worth it.” The lion smiled and licked his lips, “Just like me.”

Marlot rolled his eyes, ears folding back.

The lion placed the wrapped package on the car’s roof. “I’ll leave this here. You

can take it or let whoever owns this car take it.”

Marlot considered the package as the lion walked away. He thought about throwing it at the lion’s back as he picked it up, but headed to his car instead. He decided he wouldn’t give the lion the satisfaction to see how much more he’d affected him, and he was going to throw the meat away when he was out of his sight.

He pulled out of the lot, driving by Gorrek, standing by his car, and waving at him with a knowing smile. When Marlot was out of the lot, he glanced in his rearview mirror and the lion was still there, looking in his direction, smiling.

Marlot didn’t like that smile at all.