

## Chapter 28

“What are you doing?” the wolf yelled, glancing at the hare behind Trembor. He could hear the labored breathing.

“What I’m doing?” Trembor growled. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?” The wolf held his side, he had claw marks here and there.

Trembor buried the concern under his anger. “It looked like you were about to kill an enforcer.” Something about that wasn’t right. His head hurt, his neck. Breathing was painful. What had happened?

“He’s not an enforcer,” the wolf said. “I promise you that. He tied you up.”

Trembor looked at the chair, the ropes on the floor. It seemed to confirm the wolf’s story, except they hadn’t been tied. He remembered looking over a body, someone entering the room, then... His head hurt.

Movement behind him, Marlot took a step to the side and Trembor moved to stay between him and the officer.

“He’s getting away!” the wolf yelled as the gray hare darted out of the room.

“Tough luck,” Trembor growled and ignored the pain it caused his throat. “Why are you stalking me? I made it clear I want nothing to do with you.”

The wolf stared at him, a shocked expression on his face. “What? Trem, I’m—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’m not stalking you,” The wolf snapped. “What kind of male do you think I am?”

The admission hurt, and Trembor used the annoyance at himself to feed the anger. “You fucking know what kind of male you are, this game of innocence you keep playing is getting on my nerve.” He swallowed to ease the pain. “If you aren’t stalking me, what are you doing here then? How did you even know where I was?”

“He told me you were here!” the wolf yelled, pointing to the bedroom door.

The enforcer had told him? Marlot had spies in the enforcers? Why did that even surprise him at this point? Had he set up the scene just to what? Get him alone, rescue him? The anger and fear smelled real in the room, but there were so many scents mixed together it was impossible to tell who felt what.

“You’re going to stop this! I am not playing this game anymore.”

“Game? You think this is a game?” the wolf asked, “that male isn’t giving me any choice! Don’t you get it, he’s—” he shut his muzzle so fast Trembor could imagine the sound, as if this was a cartoon from his youth.

“Yes?” Trembor asked, deciding to let the wolf explain. Maybe this wasn’t what it looked like? Maybe the wolf hadn’t intended for this—the wolf tightened his lips. Of course not. This was yet another attempt to manipulate him. “That’s what I thought. Get out.”

“Trem, please, I was trying to safe you.”

“Save me? Really? Is that what killing an enforcer was?” the gall of that wolf. “None of this is about me, it’s all about you, your fucking ego. You just can’t accept that

I'm not yours. That I saw through all this and got out. Your sick, Marlot. No get out of my scene." He narrowed his eyes. "Unless you have something to tell me about how the body died?"

"Of course not."

"Oh? You don't have that guy's ID for some reason?" Trembor grinned at him, waiting for how he'd explain that.

Marlot's expression darkened, his ears folding back. He took something out of a pocket and flicked it at Trembor, who caught it just as it was about to hit his chest.

"It's not that male's ID I got," the wolf growled.

Trembor turned it over in his hand. It was his ID. How had Marlot gotten his ID? When had he used it last? He knew the wolf hadn't been near him. The growl forms and he glared at the wolf. "How dare you drag other people into this sick game? Who did you force to steal this?"

"Will you open your eyes and unclog your nose? The smells are all here. That hare attacked you! I saved you. If not for me—"

"Stop it! If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't hurt so fucking much! No one else did this to me. It's you and your fucking need to own me. I don't know why you keep trying when it's clear I know what you're doing." At least Gorrek had stopped the moment it had been clear Trembor saw through his games. Oh, he'd played hurt for a while, but when Trembor stopped reacting to it, he moved on to easier prey. That lion had never been one to work too hard at something.

"Trem, what are you talking about? I don't—"

"Get the fuck out." Trembor bared his teeth, extended his claws. "Before I decide to gut you."

The wolf took a step back, eyes wide. He looked like he'd say something, plead again? Offer another lie? Instead, he backed up to the doorway, hands up, then hurried out and away.

He waited.

Trembor waited for the sound of the outside door to tell him he had finally kicked the wolf out of his life. He was finally free. The wolf had gotten the message, and he'd never have to deal with him again; never have to risk falling for his tricks.

He wrapped his arms against himself and tried to contain the pain. He wanted to roar. He felt like he'd just ripped his heart out. Why did being free hurt so much? "Because he convinced you the lies were real," he whispered. "You know that. Gorrek did the same thing." The pain would pass. It had with Gorrek, and the lion had had his claws in a lot deeper than the wolf had. Or at least it's what he told himself.

He noticed something on the dresser as he fought to slow his breathing. There had been nothing there when he'd looked the room over, he was sure of that. The fuzzy part was after he'd done that; once he was examining the body. Marlot hadn't been near the dresser. It was an ID, face down. He turned it and a rhinoceros' face looked back at him. Pavir Roughskin, the name said. It was his body's ID. The one he couldn't find.

The only one who had been close to the dresser had been the enforcer, the hare. If

he was the one who'd left it there, why did he have it in the first place?

He looked around the room. He wasn't sure what he was smelling anymore. He took out his pad and called Dispatch. "RI Goldenmane," he said once the line connected. "Can you tell me who was left at my scene?" he gave the address. The sounds still seemed hectic over there.

"That address isn't in the system. We're dealing with a riot in the financial district, it's possible it was misfiled."

"How about officer..." Trembor closed his eyes and realized the hare never gave his name. The hare had mentioned the others. "Hardchest, female, I don't know the species. Can you tell me where she is?"

"I don't have any officer by that name," the male said. "Are you sure of the name?"

It was the name the hare had told him. He wished he could recall the other one, but he hadn't been paying attention. That one would probably not be an officer either.

He looked at the ID in his hand. Was Marlot right? Was this some sort of setup? Had the hare done this? Or was all of this Marlot's game? This was the second body in his territory the wolf had shown up to. The first one still had nothing to point to the killer. He didn't want to believe Marlot would leave two bodies to rot like that just so he could pull Trembor back onto his claws.

He didn't want to.

"Trembor!" someone called from elsewhere in the house. Jaxca, he realized.

"Last bedroom," he yelled back. Then realized he was still on his pad. "Sorry," he told the officer. "And thank you for looking into this."

"Not a problem, RI Goldenmane."

He put the pad away and stepped to the body. The hare couldn't have done this. He was prey.

But someone had taken him down. He vaguely recalled fighting someone. Maybe they wore an enforcer's uniform?

"Did you know you have a mannequin by the back door?" the red frog asked. "I opened the door to ask him where you were and it topped over. Also, you don't have any officers setting up a perimeter. When the newsies get here, it's going to be chaos."

Trembor nodded. "The riot should keep them busy for a while."

"Are you okay?" Jaxca asked.

Trembor shook his head. If Marlot was right about this, what did it mean for the rest? Nothing, he told himself. The wolf had still hacked his pad, still tried to control him. To make him his possession. Even if this scene wasn't what it looked like. The wolf had still used it as an opportunity to regain control over him.

The wolf.

Marlot had been in the room.

"Fuck," he looked around as the frog waiting on him. His entire scene was compromised. "This is a mess."