

### Chapter 33

Marlot stared at the screen, trying to understand why Stalker 2.0 had crashed. He'd simply added parameters to the prey species that would allow them to stalk predators, or anyone, really. Stalker 2.0 didn't seem to like that. Somewhere in its coded guts, Marlot had coded prey in such a way he simply couldn't attribute them predator behavior.

A knock at the door pulled him away.

He noticed the envelope Hela'han held before she mentioned it, and he nodded. This was faster than he'd expected. It had been only a few days since Al'garinam had Trembor tied up. Maybe not killing an intended prey hadn't satisfied his need? The research wasn't strong on how the hunter's need to kill was governed. Maybe he'd counted on Marlot killing him there, and now they were both paying for it. Although, if that was the case, why hadn't the hare stayed and forced Marlot and Trembor to kill him? If he'd been in a better place when they talked, he'd have asked.

"Thanks," he told her as he took it. He smirked as he didn't see the Revenue Bureau logo in the corner. Al'garinam had stopped pretending it came from them. He turned the envelope over, felt the shape of the card in it. He considered destroying it. He'd told himself he was done playing the hare's games. There was no point in doing that anymore. Trembor had made it clear there was nothing Marlot could do to make him see reason.

What he should do was hand everything over to the Revenue Bureau. Tell them the hunter existed and wash his fur of it all. Only then he'd have to explain why he'd waited this long. He could excuse a few of them, but once that RI had come questioning him about talking to one of the victims, Marlot would have a tough time convincing anyone he didn't know what was happening.

He sighed and opened it. Even if he destroyed it. Even if he decided to never play the hare's sick game. Al'garinam wouldn't stop. Even if he stopped sending the card to Marlot, the bodies would keep appearing. Someone would make the connection, and they'd come asking why he hadn't told anyone.

Marlot had stuck himself in a position where he couldn't stop. The only way he was getting out of this with his fur intact was to finish it himself.

He caught the card as it fell out, and his heart stuttered as he saw the lion's picture on the card.

*Not again.*

As he thought Trembor was going to be the next victim, again; he noticed the mane was almost black, with hints of red, and his fur was more brown than golden. He relaxed and looked at the name. Gorrek Shiningpelt. He was a good decade older than Trembor.

He dismissed Stalker 2.0 and entered the name in the original version. Within seconds, the approximate value of the lion appeared and Marlot realized he had a problem.

His value.

The lion was upper management at a successful advertising firm. Some research told Marlot Gorrek's division specialized in reframing public image. The list of clients they worked with was long. No name he recognized. Another search showed many were in the entertainment industry. Marlot didn't care for movies, except Tiff's, L'nard's tigress.

He'd watched the show her first movie had been turned into so he'd have something to talk about with the bartender, and he'd found the utterly unrealistic science, the forced situation, the unbelievable interpersonal relationships, and the lioness co-star more entertaining than he'd believe possible.

He'd been disappointed to reach the end of the show in only a dozen episodes. It seemed few people enjoyed it as much as he did.

Her name wasn't on the list, so he picked on at random.

Charon Palestripe, a retired Hunt player who was now popular in advertising. Marlot watched the tiger in a fur wash ad, and he had to admit the male was attractive, if nothing else. His career had been good, according to the article he looked at, until an injury during a game forced him to retire early more than a decade ago. He'd remained in the public's eyes, but not for anything good. Reports of violence against his mate. Adopting a cub, then losing custody. A breaking of their mating contract so public that on reading about it, Marlot remembered some of it from the news back when he still lived in Low Valley.

Then nothing for almost a year.

Curious, Marlot dug deeper. The lawsuits were discreetly settled. The male did some time at a drug rehabilitation clinic, then volunteered at that same clinic, and homeless shelters. He used some of his wealth to start a re-greening project in the city. And on the heel of that the first advertising contract, playing off this new, wholesome, image.

If Marlot didn't know about the involvement of Gorrek's firm, he would have been impressed with the length the male had gone through to make amends. Now he had to question how much of it had been the male's decision and how much had been forced on him by the firm.

Then there was the value. That was the first thing his stalker program gave him, because it was the thing Marlot cared about the most. He needed to be sure he could afford the body.

Al'garinam didn't care about their value, since he wasn't planning on paying for them. It was why he needed Stalker 2.0. Which, unfortunately, wouldn't accept that prey could do the stalking. He could have it run as if the hare was a predator. He had enough of his victims Marlot thought it could build a profile, but he was already noticing errors in the test he ran. No two predators stalked the same way, and while there were more similarities than differences within the same species, how different would a hare doing the stalking be from any other species?

He was going to have to rewrite Stalker 2.0's code in its entirety. Marlot smiled, it would be fun.

He looked at the card. Only, he couldn't get lost in that. He needed to decide what to do about Gorrek Shiningpelt; about Al'garinam.

He couldn't get the program to work right now, he had to accept that. It wouldn't be done in a few days either. So he needed to push it back until the hare was dealt with. That meant he had to do this the old fashion way. If Trembor was still here, he'd hand over that part to him.

Instead, he called Grebor again and got the badger to give him the names of the people he remembered fighting the hare. Then spent a few hours calling them. They all remembered him. Losing to a prey was memorable, but the hare hadn't talked with any of them. Just like when he'd fought Marlot, they'd fought in silence. Once it was over Marlot had sat to nurse his pride while waiting for Trembor to arrive and the hare had moved on to fight someone else.

Not getting anything useful from the calls, he left to go to Gorrek's house. He'd hand in the ID and question the lion. Maybe he'd remember the hare. If not, Marlot would set up a location he could watch the lion from at a distance, and hope he could ambush the hare.