

## Chapter 25

“Ba,” he said on the pad, “do you know how many of the protectors live in the city?” He’d done a search, but all he’d found was the Protector’s recruitment site, which had a section explaining they didn’t divulge who had been one of them once they left the service.

“I know a few dozen,” she answered, “who served at the same time as me. Why are you asking?”

“Just something I came across.” He’d wanted to ask her what the protectors did with soldiers who misbehaved too much. Were they simply released into society, were they... he didn’t know. The protectors were secretive. There were no movies documenting how they worked, unlike with the enforcers. Any movies that put some aspect that could be interpreted as being Protector procedures had to put a disclaimer that nothing about it was based on actual procedures.

“Do you know a retired soldier would leave a body to rot?”

“They’re people like the rest of us,” she replied with a chuckle. “What we go through makes us used to following orders; unless we stay long enough to start giving them, but it doesn’t make us better people, or worse,” she added. “You think a retired soldier left one of the bodies you’re investigating?”

More like twelve, Marlot thought. “It’s a possibility.”

“I can check with the people I know. If it’s one of them, I’m pretty sure they’ll tell me and I can convince them to do their civic duty.”

“Thanks, I appreciated it.” Somehow he didn’t think anyone she knew would be able to do what this hunter did. He considered himself a soldier, and if he had been in the protectors, Marlot suspected he hadn’t left as part of being retired.

He considered hacking the Protector’s site, but thought better of it. Rumors were they did more than fight other nation’s armies; they engaged in cyber-attacks.

He searched the medical personnel database for the sheep who had treated him when he’d been gored in the woods. It had been the last time he and Trembor fought as a couple. There were too many sheep working as medics, and while she’d told him she’d been in the protectors, it wouldn’t be in her personnel file.

Could he narrow the candidates down? Protector service was variable, but the shortest term someone could be part of them was twelve years. That removed the youngest of the medics, which still left too many.

Hela’han knocked and entered. “Sir? An express delivery arrived.” She held the envelope for him.

“Thanks.” He took it, nothing the Revenue Bureau symbol in the upper left corner. He looked at it while she left. If there had been any doubt left the hunter was sending him the ID card and not the Revenue Bureau, this removed it. The Bureau didn’t send anything express.

He clawed one side open and tipped it over. The card fell out and landed face down. It was well used, scuffed and scratched. Marlot wondered if the owner had already noticed it was missing and ordered a replacement.

He picked it up and turned it over. Maybe this time he'd warn them of the danger they were in. He could pull their number from the information on the card, and it might help—he stared at the lion's face. He knew this face, this lion. How could he not? No, it couldn't be, there was no way anyone could have stolen his ID without him realizing it.

He called Trembor and got the cursed blocked message.

He ran out of the office, grabbing his jacket in passing. At his car, he slammed into it when the door refused to open. With another curse at the time this was costing him, he took his pad out again and unlocked it.

He pulled out of the lot, almost hitting another car in his hurry. The other driver screamed at him until Marlot bared his teeth at her and the gazelle quickly looked away. It did serve as a reminder he couldn't help Trembor if he got in an accident and slowed down to something more reasonable.

He scrolled through the numbers he had of Trembor's family, trying to think of anyone there who'd take his call. Take his call and let him speak. He was certain they'll all love to scream at him. Part of him was surprised none of them had shown up at his door yet. That Serene hadn't shown up. If she had, and didn't simply gut him on the spot, he might find out what was going on with Trembor.

He avoided an oncoming car as he looked up the number for the Watering Hole. There was one family member Marlot know who wasn't inclined to scream at him. The number he found rang and rang without switching over to a message center. He let it ring. Hopefully, if it didn't switch over, it meant there was someone there, even this early in the afternoon.

“Watering Hole,” a male finally answered, “we're closed.”

“L'nard?”

“Yeah,” the lion replied cautiously.

“It's Marlot, I'm—”

“Trembor's friend, I remember you.”

He was more than a friend, he wanted to yell at the male, but as part of Trembor's extended family, the lion might only be nice to Marlot while he worked, alienating him now wouldn't help.

“I need you to call Trembor. I have to talk with him now, it's important.” He noticed his speed and slowed down. He was lucky the traffic was light.

“I can't call him,” L'nard said after a silence.

“Look, I know you feel you have to take his side, but this is more—”

“That's not it,” the lion cut him off, sounding angrier than Marlot thought he had any rights. “And I don't appreciate the tone.” Tone? He hadn't — “Trem doesn't take family calls while he's working. We're all on a timed block list. His immediate family has override codes for emergencies, but I don't.”

Marlot cursed. “Is there anyone outside his family who'd have it?”

“People outside his family wouldn't be blocked, and you'd know who his friends are more than me. Trem and I are just cousins, not—”

Marlot terminated the call and cursed. He couldn't think of anyone. He was sure

Trembor had introduced him to some of his friends. He remembered enforcers the lion had been close to, but he'd already decided not to involve them, so even if he remembered who they were, he wouldn't call them.

He just had to hope He'd get to Trembor before the hunter did.

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The car skidded to a stop before the house and Marlot was out, running up the path toward the house before the engine finished shutting down. He banged on the door.

"Trembor, open up!"

He entered the lock code Trembor gave him, and the light on the lock remained red. Of course, the lion had changed it. Trembor wouldn't forget that detail. He banged on the door again, then listen for sounds.

Every body had been found in their homes, so if Trembor wasn't there he was safe. Unless some had been killed elsewhere and moved to their homes afterward, Marlot hadn't been able to remove that as a possibility since he wouldn't hack into the other RI's systems. Would he go after his lion where he worked? No, he couldn't go there, Trembor's office was inside a precinct.

Only, the hunter had said he'd seen Marlot go into Bahamel's office. That meant he'd been in the precinct. Only officers were allowed beyond the lobby.

Was the hunter an enforcer? Marlot hadn't considered that yet. Should he call them, if only to confirm that Trembor was there?

His pad buzzed; an unknown number.

His finger was over the decline icon when he recalled the other unknown number that had called him. He accepted it.

"Hello, Marlot," the calm, not quite male or female voice, greeted him.

"What have you done with him!" He looked around, trying to find anyone who was watching him. A few were, a wolf screaming on his pad was noteworthy, but they didn't have pads to their ear.

"And who might you be referring to?" the male asked, amused.

"You fucking know who! You sent me his ID, express even."

"Well, time is of the essence, I felt it was a good way to impress that on you."

"Is he still alive!" Marlot was terrified of the answer. And the fact the hunter took his time replying made the despair claw at him harder.

"He is."

Marlot could breathe again.

"For the moment."

"Why him?" Marlot demanded when he found his voice.

"Out of curiosity, does he know about our game?"

Marlot was at a loss again. "What? How could I tell him, even if I wanted to? You know very well I haven't been able to talk with him."

"But our game began before the two of you broke up."

"You mean the cards? Of course, he knows about them, you've been sending them to our office. If you wanted him not to know, you should have sent them to my home. Is

that why you're targeting him now?" Marlot asked, blood running cold. "Because he knows a little of what you're doing? Even I didn't realize what was going on then, you know that. He doesn't know anything!"

"That's not why I am going to take him," the voice said, sounding annoyed. "I'm insulted you'd think I'm that petty."

"Then why?" *Take him.* Future, he didn't have Trembor yet. That meant his lion might take down the hunter when he tried.

"Why," the hunter mused. "Consider him an incentive. You've been distracted by him and it's affected how you play our game. Maybe me removing him will help you focus?"

"You stay the fuck away from him!" Marlot yelled. "Do you hear me? If you even think of touching him, I am going to rip you apart."

"That's the spirit," the male said, so satisfied Marlot's anger vanished. "If I hadn't already sent you his card, I'd tell you he was safe, but unfortunately, this has already been set in motion, so I need to see it to its conclusion."

"He's not home!" Marlot yelled. "You can't do anything to him until he's home!"

"Hmm, you are right there. He isn't home." Before Marlot could breathe again, the hunter continued. "But he's about to be inside a home. That's going to be enough this time."

"No!" He yelled as the call terminated. "No!" he looked around. He couldn't do this. Not to him. Not—

His pad buzzed with a message. *But you've been a good sport, so I'm going to give you a chance to change the outcome, this once.* Another message followed it; an address.

He ran to his car plotting it into his pad, remembering to unlock it at the last moment, then he sped off; remembering not to kill himself trying to rescue Trembor as he almost sideswiped another car.