

Chapter 41

Afternoon was a busy time for Ezk'Eriel and his brothers at the processing store. Enough that except for the occasional chuckle, all was serious. Marlot caught the hyena's attention, then waited out of the way of the customers.

He looked around for the mink, but other than malnourished, he couldn't remember any details about his appearance. He'd shut down his pad and didn't plan on turning it on until this was over, maybe even after that.

He sighed. He was getting as paranoid as Harik. Only Marlot had reasons to be.

"Is he still here?" Marlot asked when Ezk'Eriel joined him.

"The crowd made him nervous, so I set him up in my office." The hyena led Marlot to the back, pausing in the kitchen to speak in a different language to his mother, the elderly hyena who turned the edible leftovers, that were part of how the store's clients paid to get their bodies turned into meat they could store, into the delicious food that was another source of income for the family.

She noticed Marlot and angled her body to hide what she was doing, her apron being wider than she was, helped.

"Mother's protective of her recipes," Ezk'Eriel commented as he headed down a hallway and opened a door. "If you end up killing him, do me a favor and keep the blood to a minimum."

"I'm not killing him," Marlot stated, then lowered his voice. "But what's his name?"

The hyena canted an ear. "Don't you know?"

Marlot sighed. "It's on my pad and that's not working right now." He took it out and handed it to the hyena. "Actually, do you mind holding on to it for me while I talk with the mink?"

"Galden," Ezk'Eriel said, taking the pad and eyeing it curiously.

The mink stood behind the desk when Marlot entered the office, looking nervous. He was as thin as Marlot remembered, but his fur had regained a bit of a sheen. He might not have taken as much of the meat as he should, but it was doing him good.

"You didn't have to come," Galden said, stepping back as Marlot closed the door and moved around the desk. The mink was scared, which he'd also been in their previous meeting. The homeless didn't have many moments of rest. "I'm not doing anything wrong. I just want the meat you said you can have?"

Marlot leaned against the wall. Ezk'Eriel's office was simple, the desk and a small cabinet with a variety of alcohols and memorabilia, which included a Hunt trophy. He hadn't known the hyena had played Hunt.

"You can have it after you've answered a few questions. Starting with why you want it all now?"

"I don't have to answer you," the mink replied defiantly. "You said it's mine. I want to take it."

Marlot breathed in the air. The defiance was an act. The fear was stronger now. "Where are you going to store it?" he asked, figuring addressing the logistics, rather than the legalities, would get him closer to answers.

“I’ll figure something out,” the mink answered, trying for dismissive and hitting worried instead.

“So you haven’t prepared for storing it.”

“It’s cold enough I don’t have to do anything!” the mink snapped.

“How are you going to protect it from scavengers? They’re going to be able to smell it for blocks.”

“That’s my problem.” He turned and looked for an escape, eyes fixing on the closed door.

Marlot had the power to stop this. The law was on his side. The investigation wasn’t over, and the body wouldn’t be released until then. The mink had forgotten the meat he was getting was a favor Marlot was doing him. It would be so easy to force the mink to tell him everything, whatever that was.

It was easy to fall back on old habits. Especially since the situation seemed to justify going hard on the mink.

“Galden,” Marlot said, keeping his tone neutral, “why the urgency. Your meat is safe in a cooler right now. You can come and get some anytime you want. No one but you can get to it. Once you take it out, you’re going to have to fight to keep it. You know the alleys better than I do. There’s no mercy there.”

The mink paced the length of the short wall, which had pictures of Ezk’Eriel and his family on it, one at a graduation ceremony. One was a diploma in a language Marlot couldn’t read. Galden eyed the door again.

“I can’t stay here.”

“You can go, the door isn’t locked.”

“Not here.” The mink motioned to the office. “Here!” he made a broader sweeping gesture. “It’s not safe anymore.”

“Galden, you don’t have a rating,” Marlot pointed out, his patience eroding. “It’s never safe for you anywhere.”

“No one was looking for me before!”

Marlot straightened. Not that he liked the implications, but at least this was progress. “Who’s looking for you?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve been hearing about people sniffing where he died. Going to the shops, the alleys, asking what happened, who was involved. Giving meat for answers.”

“What do they look like?”

Galden stared at Marlot in disbelief. “How would I know? I’m not stupid enough to go there when they’re looking for me! They probably look like you. Like they don’t belong. No one who lives in that neighborhood can give out meat.”

“Calm down, Galden. They don’t know who you are, and I’m not going to tell them.”

“They saw you talking with me!” the smells were shifting to panic.

“They saw me talking to someone, Galden,” Marlot said in as calm a tone as he could. If the mink bolted Marlot wasn’t sure he’d be able to stop him and once outside, Marlot wouldn’t be able to keep him safe. “At best, they might know I spoke to a mink, but no one knows it was you.”

“The enforcers have my name!”

Did they? Marlot fought to remember that day, but Trembor was who had been on his mind. The case had still been routine. He’d done it well, but he hadn’t tried to commit the event to memory. What did he know he could use to calm the mink?

“It’s my case, Galden. I’m the one who files the reports.” The mink didn’t know enough to catch the lie, but if the enforcer had included Galden’s name in any of the reports he’d filed, Marlot suspected the mink would already be meat. He respected Trembor and his belief in the enforcers, but Marlot knew too well how easily corruption seeped into the best of places. “I didn’t put your name in any of them.” It was on his pad, but had he added any details? Galden wasn’t a witness, he’d just found a body. Any claims would be filed after the case was closed.

The mink rested his head against the wall and wrapped his arms around himself. “It wasn’t supposed to go like this.”

“How was it supposed to go?” Marlot asked cautiously, trying to think ahead of the mink to understand where the comment was leading.

“Not like this!” The mink snapped as he spun, angry. “You were supposed to finish quickly. I’d get the body and no one would bother me.”

“Who told you that?” Marlot asked in surprise. “Investigations aren’t quick, and the more they age, the longer they take.”

“They did! Before he killed—” The mink froze, eyes wide. “I mean, he did before—” he looked around, the fear was back.

Marlot stepped to block the door. “Before who killed whom?”

“No one!” Galden retreated to a corner and Marlot resisted the urge to crowd him, to drive him to reveal what he was hiding. To abandon the door. A male like Galden didn’t survive this long without a lot of craftiness. “I told you, I didn’t see anything. I just found the body. That was what they told me to tell—” He whined, grabbing his head.

“Galden!”

The mink jerked, eyes wide, pupil dilated. He was at the breaking point.

“Calm down,” Marlot said, staying by the door, as far as from the mink he could. “Whatever happened, you aren’t in trouble. You need to breathe. No one’s after you here.” At least minks weren’t set off by the scent of a predator, being meat eaters themselves. “Let’s take this slowly. You said he died. You mean Hardir, right? The brindled-furred wolf.”

Galden nodded, still looking around for a way out.

“That’s good. You said someone killed him. Was it a tiger?” If this had been arranged, the way Galden seemed to imply, it would make sense the roommate was part of it.

The mink shook his head. “A wolverine.” He sounded calmer, but it was impossible to say if he was less terrified.

Marlot tried to recall if he’d come across a wolverine as part of his investigation while letting Galden calm further. When the mink pulled the chair and sat behind the desk, Marlot decided he was ready for more.

“Why don’t you tell me what really happened? From the start.”

Galden nodded. “It started like I told you. I was heading to the partially finished

building for protection against the cold because the shelters were full. I surprised them there, and they almost bolted, but the wolf called me over. The wolverine wasn't happy about me being there, but he didn't do anything when the wolf asked for my help. All I had to do was call in his body once his friend had left. Act like I'd come across it by accident. He said that once you were finished, that I'd be able to get the body. He even told me what to do to make sure I got it. It was food, so I said yes."

"Did he say me specifically?"

The mink shook his head. "He said once the investigator was done."

Marlot relaxed. He was getting tired of people targeting him to get their weird stuff to happen. Then his mood soured. Hardir had died in his territory. That couldn't be a coincidence.

"The wolverine, do you know who he is?"

Galden shook his head.

"You said they were friends, was that the sense you got of their relationship?"

"The wolf said the wolverine was his friend," the mink said, "and before they noticed me I overheard the wolverine grumble that only a friend would agree with what they were doing."

Marlot finally had his killer. Now he just had to find him, and it would be Vlein's job to determine how much the tax was; based on the paperwork Marlot still had to fill out. It didn't explain everything. Like why leave the body lying there? If Galden hadn't come across it, would they have hoped someone else reported it, or would the wolverine have called it in?

Then he realized the reason for leaving the body was obvious. Without a body, Marlot wouldn't have contacted Hardir's mate, so she wouldn't have known to contact him about the package Hardir sent her. That he'd also sent one to his daughter showed the wolf was rather cold in his calculations, but it had gotten the job done.

All Marlot had to do now was find the wolverine and... what? Close the case? Wash the scent of everything else he'd discovered out of his fur? Would Vlein even let him walk away if that was what Marlot wanted? It wasn't his job, he was an RI. He wasn't Vlein's go-to investigator.

Not that he intended to drop this. He wanted to know how deep this went. On top of being the killer, the wolverine had to know something more. At least why Hardir had felt the need to do this the way he had.

And that left Galden. Now that he'd told him the truth, Marlot didn't need him anymore. The mink wanted to be on his own, and he had the right. Galden knew the danger, since people were looking for him. But that felt too much like Marlot not caring beyond getting what he was after.

Too much like who imploded his relationship.

"If I find you a place to hide until this is done with, will you stay there? I'm not going to stop you if you want to take the meat and run, but I can't ensure you'll be safe if you do that."

"Who'd even take me in?" the mink asked in disbelief.

That was the question. Marlot didn't have that many people he could call on. Harik, for all the rooms he had available, would never allow a strange predator in his house. The mouse was on edge anytime Marlot was there, and they'd known each other for years. The others of his tech-head friends didn't have space.

Bahamel would agree. With her children moved out, she had space. Maybe she could even help Galden get back on his feet, if the mink could survive her gruff way of dealing with people.

Trembor? No. He'd help without hesitation, but he was still dealing with his problem. Marlot wouldn't add the risk of some criminal tracing the mink to his lion.

"I have someone," Marlot said, sighing. "I'm warning you upfront, she's gruff, but it's going to be a roof over your head, a warm bed, and if, somehow, they find you there, probably the best protector you could ask for. Just tell me if you want me to make the arrangements."

Galden took a long time thinking it over. "Okay," the mink finally said.

Marlot reached for his pad and remember it was off and not on him. "Stay here." He exited the office and located Ezk'Eriel and borrowed his pad.

Convincing Bahamel wasn't as easy as he'd hoped. She didn't have time for charity cases, and she enjoyed living on her own. She only agreed after he impressed on her the danger the mink was in, with a criminal organization who'd kept files from reaching her looking for him. Marlot ended the call with the impression she was hoping someone would come looking for the mink so she could bash in heads.

Before handing back the pad, Marlot placed another call. After this day, he needed to spend time with his lion.