

Series of death-49

Walking through Nikal's home, knowing it was his house, gave it a different sense. There was purpose in the lack of personal items. This was the home of someone who didn't dig his claws into the ground to stay in place. Was it something being within the protectors caused, or had Nikal joined because he couldn't stay in one place?

The cooler was empty, no greens, no kind of vegetables left behind. One plate in the cupboard, one glass, one set of utensils, all clean. The table might have been found in the garbage with the chairs; they didn't fit the immaculate look of the room. Or they could have been left over by the previous owner, and Nikal never bothered replacing them. The interviews the enforcers had conducted with the neighbors indicated none of them had even seen Nikal move in.

The empty living room was—Marlot paused.

The pain on one of the walls was fresher, shinier, and—looking at it closer—had been repaired. A hole, by the size, caused by something slightly smaller than Marlot's fist, or a smaller fist, about the height someone like Nikal would punch.

He took out a light and shone it along the wall. He found eight more repairs, six at fist height, two at kick height. The enforcers hadn't noted that in their reports, but they hadn't had a reason to think it was linked. What house didn't have repairs done to them?

But what led someone as seemingly controlled at the hare to strike the walls in the living room? Or any of the other rooms? Every room except the kitchen had repairs.

Marlot thought that many this was how he could seem so controlled when stalking and killing his prey. He unleashed all

his anger in the house. Could someone this angry remain in the protectors? He wished there were more transparent. Getting Nikal's records there might explain what he was doing now.

His examination brought him to the bedroom where Gorrek's body had been. A body that unlike every other the hare had killed wasn't left in their own home, or damaged beyond just the broken neck or what could be explained as part of a fight. Nikal had unleashed his anger at the lion.

Marlot didn't know why, the only difference between Gorrek and the other bodies Marlot knew about, was that Marlot had interacted with the lion beyond returning the ID and stalking him to gather more information. And that Gorrek had a history with Trembor. As far as Marlot knew, no other bodies had a link to his lion.

The hare's behavior made little sense to Marlot. He behaved like a hunter in that he seemed to kill indiscriminately, but he put thought into who his victims were, too the time to steal their ID and have the replacement mailed to Marlot as a warning he'd picked that person.

Nikal wanted to be killed, but he wanted Marlot to do it. But he wouldn't simply lie down and let the wolf kill him. The stalking seemed to be part of it. Or was there more?

There was the meeting between Marlot and Trembor over the body of the coyote. The timing was suspicious since normally the hare only killed after Marlot returned the ID. Nikal had also called him afterward, angry that Marlot had wasted the opportunity. But an opportunity for what?

As much as he hated to admit it, Nikal was in control of whatever this was. He'd manipulated Marlot, gotten him involved against his will. Admitting that, the fact Gorrek had

been left in this house had to mean something. Nikal had to have known Marlot would use that to work out who he was and come back to find...

Nikal had left him something in the house. It was the only explanation that made sense. The question what where would it be?

A search of the bed revealed nothing, not under it, not between the mattress, and there were no indications they had been cut and resown. The closet was empty without a secret panel. The other bedroom was likewise free of anything that explained Marlot's presence.

It was in the small bathroom that he found it. A panel had been cut behind the toilet and painstakingly repositioned and repainted to be nearly impossible to see. Marlot had almost left without finding it when the fact the hare had run the shower long enough the humidity soaked into the walls so it could be smelled once Marlot received the call about the body made him search it more thoroughly.

Behind the panel, he found a stack of folders, twenty-six of them. The first was of Kirmel Thickpelt. A quick search told Marlot he was dead. One of the early victims. The next one Arbine Thinderhoof, still alive, the search told him. Female, bison, security officer for the city controller's office. Well decorated, also from the protectors. Was that why Nikal hadn't killed her? Or was she a future victim?

The first twenty-three included the twelve bodies Marlot knew about and eleven still living people. He wasn't particularly surprised when the twenty-fourth file was about him.

Nikal had compiled a rather in-depth one, too. It included

the newsie stories about Ruxul's capture, with them playing off Marlot as the vital part of it. The fact that City Leader Sharphorns had also played into it in the ceremony where he congratulated all the investigators who had taken part in the capture and subsequent death of the hunter had reinforced the illusion Marlot, the RI who'd traveled so far to end the hunter's predation, sacrificed so much; had basically been the one to end him. Marlot had forgotten how much had been written about his part in the operation.

Nikal also had files dating back to his time home, his parents, his sister, his work there for the council. Plain file, but indicating he'd found a way into their servers.

Nikal also had pictures of him and Trembor. Out and about the city, working, or simply enjoying each other's company. Marlot felt odd knowing the hare had been watching him for over a year. That one picture of him and the lion enjoying a meal after handing over a particularly difficult killer to track was that old.

A few pictures were of the two of them training, fighting at Grebor's gym. That perplexed Marlot. The pictures were on different days, in one Trembor had bandages from an injury, on the other Marlot had shaved fur on his leg showing he stitched a cut had required.

He couldn't recall the hare ever being in the gym while he and Trembor trained. Anytime Nikal was there it caused enough of a commotion, there was no way to miss him. Had he paid someone to take the pictures? Some of them might have been taken through the front window.

The next file was Gorrek; no surprise there, Marlot thought, and contained an extensive list of what injuries he'd

caused to each of the males he was currently involved with. Gorrek had given the number as nineteen, seventeen of them had hospital visits for one injury or another the lion had clearly inflicted.

Marlot shuddered at the callousness and level of calculation required to inflict the right kind of injuries to ensure someone couldn't hunt for a while, while not crippling them permanently. With only a casual look at the list, Marlot was happy Nikal had killed Gorrek. A male like that was worse than any hunter because he kept his victims suffering.

The last file was Trembor's, and Marlot hesitated on reading through it. The level of details Nikal put in all of them meant he'd read things he wasn't sure he wanted to know about. But again, the hare had set all of this up for him, for some twisted reason.

The first pages were about Trembor and him, their partnership. It had been unusual enough some newsies had reported on it, but it had faded quickly. There were more important stories than two RIs breaking protocol and sharing territories. Nikal had gotten their productivity reports, and Marlot felt annoyed. Those should be better protected.

Then came what Marlot knew he didn't want to see. Hospital reports. He forced himself to read through them. The injuries Trembor had suffered while being with Gorrek, ending with a two months stay in the hospital, and an injunction against Gorrek by Torim. The wording making it clear that if the lion ever got close to Trembor, he'd be eaten alive.

The last item in the file almost sent Marlot running in a blind rage.

The hare holding an unconscious lion by the mane, head up

so his face was clear in the picture. Even once it registered it wasn't Trembor, he had trouble getting himself to examine the image. The resemblance was so close; one of his brothers. Marlot worried that someone had taken the picture; which would mean Nikal had an accomplice, but he noticed the remote in the hare's hand.

Why the picture was in the file was explained by the text written on the back. An address, today's date, and, *This is your last chance. You'd better hurry.*

He was running out of the house, inputting the address in his pad. He didn't even question how the hare had gotten into the house to add the picture and not left a trace of his presence. If Nikal had one of Trembor's brothers, the message was clear. He was after his lion.

Marlot wasn't going to let that hare touch his lion, even if that meant doing what the hare wanted and killing him himself.