

## Chapter XI - Trust

The doors of Club Polnoch don't open until dusk.

Zielen isn't coming with me. I'm old, and getting older, but Prestupnik won't get his claws into another young doe in my care. He'd have to kill me first.

Maybe he will.

Willow haunts the journey back to the office. She watches from shadowed windows, from within groups of broads heavy with shopping bags and laughter, hides once in a cluster of college-mice rushing to class. Worse—when she thinks I can't see her—she sneaks into Zielen's face, their expressions becoming one and the same.

I try not to look.

Our desks groan under the weight of a hundred witness statements. The first few confirm that, minus Champion Bogaty's fundraiser, Hotel Poranek was hosting a convention for blind mice.

Somewhere in the teetering towers of paper, Zielen finds an autopsy report from Sadowy. "Cause of death, crossbow bolt to the throat."

I toss another pointless form aside. "He had to go to medical school to diagnose that, you know."

"No other injuries," she says, glancing at me without lifting her head. I recognise the rueful turn in her mouth, the *almost-smile*, as one Willow liked to wear.

I hide my face in another file and force myself to read every word.

By the time daylight fails, a third of the statements lie on the floor. I cram my cigarillo butt into the overflowing ashtray and stretch. "I'm heading out."

"What about all this?" Zielen nods at the unread documents.

“They’ll keep,” I say as I grab my cloak from behind the door.

She closes her current file, watching me. “Where do you go at night, Obcas?”

“Out.” I’m through the door before she can reply.

A rickshaw to the edge of the Midden takes a half hour. I ride as far as Laurel and 85th before getting out. The remaining blocks are trudged in the rain, my hood up and my head down. I don’t bother anyone and nobody bothers me.

Until the bouncer of Club Polnoch. A mountain of bad attitude in an overcoat puts a paw out to stop me going inside. “You a Marshal?” he grumbles, beady eyes narrowed at my cloak. “Boss don’t want no Marshals.”

“Who does?” I palm him an acorn.

He considers it for a moment. “The door’s heavy, you know.”

“My wallet ain’t.” I step around him and haul it open.

Across a muted lobby the colour of fading twilight, through double-doors and down a set of short steps, I enter Prestupnik’s lair.

There’s a new dame on stage. Her voice is all rasp and no berry, but from the appreciative hoots and jeers, nobody’s here for the singing. Wait staff in ill-fitting tuxedos flit from bar to table, carrying drinks and, if my twitching whiskers are right, less legal vices. The reek of peanut butter hides behind the cigarette smoke and cheap booze.

I slink to the bar, shove between two square-shouldered chumps. Their glares fall on my cloak, and they make themselves scarce. I flash my brooch at the dead-eyed mouse bartender. “I want to talk to Prestupnik.”

“Wait here,” he says and disappears through a door marked STAFF ONLY.

I wait. Count seconds growing to minutes. Spend the time scanning the room, memorise a few likely faces.

The door opens again. The bartender emerges followed by Tiz Prestupnik in another white suit, this one complete with black waistcoat. The rat doesn't need looks to kill, but his expression makes a good attempt. "I told you to get out," he growls, leaning on the bartop. "I did not think I needed to say 'And don't come back'."

"Yet here I am." I spark up.

His fur creases in a deep frown. "Are you here to apologise?"

"Apologise?" I have to uncurl my paw. "For what?"

Prestupnik straightens, adjusts his pocket square. "Then..."

"I need to talk to you." The words sicken me, but I keep going. "About a case I'm working."

"Campion Bogaty's murder." He studies my face.

I shouldn't be surprised the rat knows my business. "Top of the class."

His weight shifts from one foot to the other. "I did not kill this mouse. If that is what you came to ask, you have wasted my time."

"It's not." I blow smoke in his eye.

He gestures at the bartender, who pours a glass of whiskey. "Tell me. And if I can help you then, for a price, I will."

I follow him to an occupied booth near the stage. He evicts the couple with a jerk of his thumb. They scamper away, leaving their drinks. We sit on opposite sides, each waiting for the other to speak.

Prestupnik sips his barley juice. "Ask your question, Obcas."

I open my mouth, close it when a shadow falls over our table. Open it again as my eyes widen.

Zielen slides into the booth beside me and extends a paw to the rat. "Marshal-Aspirant Myrtle Zielen."

“Tiz Prestupnik,” he says, bringing her paw to his lips. “Obcas and I are old friends.”

I force my heart to slow down. “We’ve got history, Prez, but we ain’t friends.”

“Perhaps young Myrtle here would be my friend instead?” He grins at her, looking like a victorious cat.

Zielen glances at me. “Depends on if you answer our questions.”

“No it doesn’t!” I slam my fist onto the table. Prestupnik’s whiskey leaps in its glass. Before either of them can speak again, I charge on. “Honey Zeylanica’s agent. You know where to find him?”

Prestupnik taps a claw against his tumbler. “Balsam Korichnnevy? I knew this rat, a long time ago. He is tied to Bogaty’s murder?”

I let the son of a birch make up his own mind. “Where is he?”

“Retired, I think. Like Zeylanica herself.” He shrugs. “If he is in this city, I will find him for you.”

“And in return?” I can’t look at either of them as I betray myself.

He pauses, downs his drink, and wipes his whiskers. “You will owe me a favour.”

My gut sours. “What kind of favour?”

“Nothing too expensive.” He raises a paw to cut me off. “Certainly nothing that would compromise a Marshal’s morals.”

*Too late.*

“I will be in touch when I know more.” The rat stands. “Thank you for coming to see me again, Obcas. I was unhappy with how we left things. I’m glad to see you took my advice about moving on.” He bobs his head at Zielen and heads for the door beside the bar.

For the longest time, neither of us says a damned thing. But Zielen can’t fight her natural curiosity for long. “So are you going to tell me what that was about?”

My fingers tremble as I strike a match. “Outside,” I tell her, lifting my snout toward the exit.

Muttering curses, Zielen gets up and stalks out. I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

*This is what happens when you think you’re clever, you stupid old mouse. You couldn’t keep Willow from being swallowed by your world and you sure as hell won’t stop Zielen.*

But I can try.

I follow my apprentice. Stepping out, the chill night air ruffles my fur. Zielen stands away from the doors and the crowds waiting to go in. “Obcas...”

“You followed me? What were you *thinking*?” I don’t mean to spit at her, but the ache in my chest forces it out. “It’s dangerous here, Zielen. *He’s* dangerous!”

“Prestupnik?” Her brow develops fault lines, the chestnut fur darkening. “The *job* is dangerous, Obcas! The job you’re supposed to be teaching me. How can I learn anything if you leave me behind?”

Over her shoulder, Willow watches me. “You shouldn’t have come here,” I say, unsure which of them I’m speaking to.

“I’m here now,” Zielen answers. Willow would have said the same, damn them both. “Is this where you’ve been sneaking off to every night? He called you a friend. Who is he really?”

That question weighs heavier than a broken heart. How can I explain that animal?

When I don’t answer, she throws her arms in the air. “This doesn’t work if we don’t trust each other, Blueberry. Whatever it is you think you’re protecting me from, I can handle it. I’m not a mouseling.”

Trust her. Not protect, not guard. *Trust.*

Trust *her*.

“He killed my daughter.”