

Chapter 34

Video

The video quality was actually pretty good. Whoever had shot it had apparently had a higher end camera phone, or maybe even a cam-corder. Whatever it was, it was more than enough to show a young centauress with wide brimmed cowboy hat charging through the center of the ring. Dust flew from under her hooves as she carefully weaved her way around the barrels that had been placed as obstacles. Upon reaching the one on the far end, she unslung her rifle and charged back, raising it to her shoulder. The picture shook a little with each crack of the rifle. Apparently, the photographer was nervous around guns. Targets that had been set up went down. A large archery target was brought out, and a *second* centaur, looking like a Native American painted with war paint and a headband charged out on the heels of the first. In her hand was a lance tipped with a slim point and decorated with feathers. This one charged forward towards the target and stopped, letting the lance fly straight and true to the center of the bulls-eye. As the javelin finished quivering, the audience let out a huge roar, nearly drowning out the voice on the loudspeakers announcing their names in a foreign language. Unfortunately, there weren't any English subtitles to translate the words, but they weren't really necessary.

"That's them." There was a curious mixture of hope, satisfaction and something else in Greg's voice. Longing, perhaps? Ben couldn't be sure, but that detail didn't really matter besides the important ones; the girls had been found.

Josh was tapping away at his keyboard, looking for other videos. The kid was definitely tech savvy, and Ben and Greg had gone to his house to stay off the official radar. His chagrin at realizing the girls were on YouTube had made him doubly determined to pull all official data in. He had been stunned to realize that they were indeed centaurs, and it had taken both Ben and Greg to finally convince him of that fact. Now, more than a dozen videos had been found on foreign user accounts, and Ben was hoping that they could determine exactly where the video was coming from.

"Well, kid?" Ben asked.

“Just a couple more minutes Chief. I’m trying to locate any more videos on other accounts to be sure. Offhand, most of the other videos on the accounts seem to center on places in Rio de Janeiro, so my guess is that the video was taken there.”

Ben nodded at the professional assessment from the kid. He was handling the situation remarkably well. Plus, he had a strong natural ability with computers. Maybe he could steer him towards criminal science. With more and more crimes taking place in cyberspace these days, Red Leaf could use all the cyber cops it could get.

“Rio!” Greg groaned slightly. “How the hell are we going to get to Rio?”

“We’ll have to claim vacation. I’ve always wanted to see Rio, and now seems as good a time as any, while things are quiet and there’s nothing around here to attract my attention. Besides, I’ve got a lot of leave stacked up; I could really use it now.”

Greg nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve got plenty of time on my hands after I was fired from mayorship.”

“What!” When had that happened?!

Greg grimaced. “Yeah, I was just given notice. Apparently, my performance has suffered to the point that it is in the best interest of everyone that I step aside and allow one of the council step in until a new mayoral candidate can be run.”

Ben was stunned. How had he missed that happening? And what other things had the City Council gotten away with while he was distracted?

“It was that new councilor, Jacob Meyers. I’m pretty sure he simply wanted a way to get the mayoral position; he’s surely ambitious enough.”

Ben frowned. “Jacob Meyers? I’m not familiar with that name.”

Now it was Greg’s turn to look at him askance. “Well, he came in about three months ago. New arrival to town, but already gained popular support in the city center. He’s been pushing for less restriction in city center to “attract business back to our community” he claims. He’s also got it into his head that the town is a safe place and such a large police force is unnecessary. It hasn’t gathered much support because of the murders, and last week’s drug bust has pretty much shut it down.”

Ben nodded. That had been one of his own ideas, and Officer Mike had done a wonderful job of pulling it off. With that bust in the bag, then things had started coming together for the force. "Meyers, huh? I'll have to keep my eye on him, then."

Greg looked at him seriously. "Do that Ben. Something about this one, it doesn't seem quite right." He held up a forestalling hand. "No, I've got nothing to base my suspicions on, but something in my gut screams that the man is a snake. I'm just not sure what kind."

Ben finally smiled. "Well, you and I both know that politicians are the worst kind of snakes. Of course he doesn't strike you as right."

"Watch it." Greg mocked growled. "I AM...er was,...one myself."

"True, you were only part snake." Ben was glad his teasing had brought his friend out of his melancholies. Now, they could start securing passage to Rio, and maybe end this nightmare once and for all. Of course, he should have realized that it would never be that simple.

"What do you mean, I can't go?!" Ben bellowed at the calm figure behind the mayoral desk. Jacob Meyers looked calmly at the red-faced chief as he absently brushed some lint from the top of his desk. Ben glared down at him and wished he could wipe that unruffled look of his face. The man had a constitution of ice, it seemed. He seemed completely unfazed by his anger. Another approach would have to be taken.

Ben studied his opponent. Jacob Meyers appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties, with straight black hair that was cut to his neck. Rather than make him look like a hippie, the smooth hair made him look distinguished. His face was severe, with a bold nose gave him the aura of a hawk looking to strike, unless you looked at the eyes. They were cold and dark, merciless. A serpent could have such eyes when looking at a tasty mouse that had wandered into its lair.

"I thought I made myself quite clear." He said coldly. Surely it was his imagination, but Ben thought the man actually seemed delighted for some reason. "The city is in an uproar over such a large drug ring ***operating in our little town. Over twenty people arrested! And with the***

possibility of more than one such ring in the area, this is hardly the time for civic leaders, such as you, to take a vacation!”

Then man had a good point, curse him! The size of the ring had him worried, and a general rule of thumb is that if there was one viper caught, there were a dozen more like him that were slithering about your ankle unseen. Unfortunately, some hid in plain sight and gave him orders.

“Granted, the size of the ring is worrisome, but Officer Mike can handle the interrogations and continuing investigation himself. The department affairs are in order, and crime is currently in a lull. I’m certain things can continue on fine without me for a couple of weeks while I take a hunting trip.”

Jacob frowned. “I wasn’t aware that you hunted.”

Ben smiled. “Well, we haven’t really gotten to meet before, have we.”

“Ah, yes.” Jacob gave a lipless smile back. “You were so busy these past few months. Tell me, what has taken up so much of your time? Surely we could have met sooner, and I would now this about you.”

Uh, oh. Ben thought. Need to think fast here. “Well, there are several high-profile cases that I have been giving my attention too. There is the disappearance of a young woman, Megan, who vanished while on her way to visit family here. I’ve been spending a good deal of time looking for her and her abductor.”

“Yes, I remember reading about that. Tragic case. You have a suspect in it I believe?”

“We have inquiries ongoing.” Ben said straight-faced.

“I...see.” Jacob said finally. “Well, with such an important case on your hands, I’m sure you can keep plenty busy. Don’t worry, I’m sure your deer will still be there when you are finished. After all, we can’t keep that family in suspense, wondering what has happened to their daughter! That would be excessively...cruel, wouldn’t you say?” And he smiled.

Ben left the town hall ready to chew rocks. He walked out to his car and slid behind the wheel, steaming. Putting the vehicle in drive, he merged into Main Street and started driving back to the office.

As he drove, he turned the problem of getting to Rio over in his mind, with no satisfactory answer. He briefly toyed with the idea of claiming a lead that would lead him out of town, but it would be too easy to verify.

Nothing had presented itself to him by the time he pulled up to the three-story red brick building that served as Police Headquarters for the entire town. It had actually been a regional office for a major logging company in the twenties, and then the bottom floor had been used as a bank after the logging company went out of business. The building had been deserted as the town had started dying off, before being given to the Red Leaf Police Department after their old building collapsed in a winter snow. It was far more room than they need, really, but Ben wasn't going to complain. Most of their cells were full up though, mostly with overnights-drunks, taggers, and gangers mostly. However, a disturbing number were local dealers, and with budget cuts, more and more were just walking out. It was a bad situation all around.

Riding up to the fourth floor, where his office was, Ben continued to ponder. Stepping out of the elevator, he nodded to a couple of patrolmen getting in. Starting their shift for the night most likely. The men seemed nervous, and gave him a respectful nod before entering the elevator themselves. Ben barely saw them, or the activity in the office around him as he walked by.

There had to be a way to get out of this. There had to be. Some snooty councilman was not going to get the best of Ben Gardner, not when he had a pair of cuffs in his belt with Nightshade's name on them. There had to be a way.

In his office, he was unsurprised to find Sergeant Michaelson waiting for him. One of the old-timers of the force, Michaelson had been a Sergeant for longer than Ben could remember. He had even shown Ben around town when he first got here from Philly. With a sigh, Ben sat down in his chair. When Michaelson showed up in his office, then that meant nothing good was happening. It fit his mood very well, with his luck today, there was probably a riot somewhere.

"What's going on Michaelson?" he said.

"The Weasel's gang just jumped the Sanger's. There's a bloodbath in 7th and Pike, sir."

Ben stared at him for a moment before jumping out of his chair. "Get all units to 7th and Pike, set up a perimeter, don't let any of them escape, but keep them back from the fighting right now. Evacuate the

civilians from the area. Call the City, see if you can arrange for a police chopper to get over here. Ask the Sherriff's department for volunteers, and get Raven on the phone, have her stand by to get reinforcements out here. Issue all units shotguns, and distribute solid-shot rounds." He rushed from the office with Michaelson on his heels, barking orders. Why the hell had he ever thought a riot would be the perfect capper to this day? He wondered bitterly, but then he was submerged in the pandemonium as officers began rushing by. Someone had set up a whiteboard in against one wall, and information was added and removed as fresh intelligence came in. He took one look at it and wanted to puke.