

Chapter 29

Marlot stared at the data on the screen. How long had he been looking at it? Why did he think anything would change, since he wasn't entering any additional information, or changing the parameters, or...

Wasn't there something about smelling the same air over and over and expecting a different scent? Something about insanity.

If only the information made absolutely no sense, he'd have a reason to move on to something else. That was the problem, really. It should make so little sense that it didn't happen.

Grift Stripe was registered on the lease for the apartment the tiger lived in. According to it, he was the only person living there, but roommates were common. There was no ID attached to the lease which, while unusual, wasn't illegal. It meant he had to pay in person, using physical currency. The rent on the apartment wasn't too high, but it was still far more than Marlot would be comfortable carrying on him. Even keeping it in the apartment was risky, with the low security within the building.

But Grift wasn't the problem. Or rather, he was only one out of many, and that was where it became a problem. If the tiger was the only one doing this; even if a handful of others also paid in physical money, Marlot would happily ignore it. But out of three hundred and fifteen apartments, a hundred and fifty-four didn't have IDs attached to the lease. That was more than half the tenants handing over physical money to the building manager every month. What made his hackle rise more was that each was marked as paying on the same day.

That the manager agreed to it was suspect at best. How did she get that much money to a bank without being eaten? Did banks even allow deposits of that size in physical currencies anymore? How did the owning company agree to let things be done this way?

They couldn't be sure the manager didn't skim some of it off the top, it was all entered by hand. Not that the corporation who owned the building, Affordable Lodging Affiliated, seemed to pay that much attention to it. He's suspected it was a scam, at first, but it was properly registered. He'd traced it to a conglomerate that held all sorts of holdings: housing, leisure, transportation, dining, and more shops than Marlot could keep track of. Based on how Griff's building did things, he would love to look into the conglomerate's finances, but that was neither his case nor his department.

Still, he thought, once this was over. Once he was done with everything else, he reminded himself, Stalker 3.0 still needed his attention. He might look into them.

Grift Stripes might be a proper name. It wasn't like Marlot could go in the registry and find out if a tiger by that name was in it. Or rather, he had, and had discovered Stripe was a common surname among tigers and a few other species; and that for all that screamed "fake" to Marlot, Grift was common enough he gave up looking after half a dozen pages. There were two Grift Stripe in the city, and two dozen in the country. One was a zebra, and the other a tiger, but one whose productivity was high enough he wouldn't live in such a building.

Of the other names linked to apartments without IDs, they all had common

surnames: Spots, Claws, Hooves, Blotches, Fast, Runs, Hides. Without visiting each one to confirm species, he couldn't be sure, but the surnames indicated more prey than predators, by close to seven to one. And the distribution seemed the same on every floor.

The ratio made sense. He hadn't checked, but Marlot thought that statistically, there was nine or ten prey for each predator in the city. The problem was how they were distributed. Hallways with doors were perfect ambush places. Open the door, snag the prey, close it. Then kill at your leisure.

The buildings Marlot had had to go to as part of his investigations had one thing in common, no matter the rating of the people living in it. If the building wasn't entirely prey, or predator, the floors were. No prey in their right mind would want to walk with such a gauntlet where every step could be their last one.

Only, of course, even the predators were easy prey. Which they would be if they were without ID. It would explain why prey didn't care. Without an ID, even predators were prey. It didn't explain how they could afford to live there.

Two people in each of them would reduce the cost, but not eliminate it. It would also ensure the tiger couldn't ask too many personal questions, like "what did you do before you fell on hard times?" "be alive" would lead to awkward questions.

Unless...

Vlein had eight cases like Hardir over five years. Eight walking-dead.

Simply by virtue of being dead, they couldn't use IDs, but they still needed places to live. A building where the manager didn't insist on the use of an ID would be a great place to know about. But that only works under a specific set of circumstances.

Hardir couldn't be the only one without an ID, and it had to be a known fact, at least among the people in the building, otherwise, the balance was thrown off and the whole place became a food storage place.

Marlot smiled at the idea of free food that wasn't filled with drugs. Although, base on Grift and the others he'd seen around the mailroom, they had little meat on them. So, maybe just as a backup for if he fell on hard times himself.

What of those who had IDs then? The hundred or so sprinkled over each floor. Were they on the way down to being without ID too? Was that why they weren't eating their free neighbors? Because in a few days it might be them in that position? The low rent would indicate that.

So, how likely was it, everyone with an ID was simply hiding who they were or actually without ID, but officially alive? And how could he find out which it was? And would Vlein demand an accounting for each of them? If he did, he could hand the job over to the RI whose territory the building was in, because if it was filled with the walking-dead, Marlot didn't want to be the one dealing with it.

Still, he needed to establish if they were. He placed a call.

"That's twice in a week, Wolf," Bahamel answered, "if you tell me you and your lion have broken up again, I might just have to eat you myself for monumental bad judgment."

"And I love you too, Ba," Marlot replied, chuckling. "We're busy dealing with our individual problems, but as far as I know, me and Trem are good."

“Glad to hear it. If that’s not the reason for your call, what is?”

“What did you find out about those cases I told you about?”

“You mean those walking-dead?” she asked, sounding like she wanted to spit food out.

He chuckled again. “You spoke to Vlein then.”

“I had to. He’s weird, calling fraudulent deaths “walking-dead”. But yeah, I’m still looking into it. I haven’t found out who received those initial files on our side, and no one admits to knowing anything about it. He sent it through the pipeline, so I’m having IT look into the system for bugs or outright malware they missed.”

“Did he tell you how he thinks organized crime is involved? Could they be who kept the files from reaching you?”

“Sure, it could be. But we might just be dealing with yet another benefit of this wonderful technology, and they’ve been misfiled somewhere no one knows exists.” She sighed. “So to answer your question, I don’t know anything yet.”

“I know this isn’t exactly your department, but maybe you can have someone look into Affordable Lodging Affiliated and the people who own it.”

“Why don’t you just give me what you dug out?” she asked, typing, and Marlot’s ears burned.

“I didn’t do anything illegal,” he replied, defensively.

She was silent.

“I swear, Ba. Everything I found is available to the public.”

Still silence.

He sighed. “Ba, I’m trying to be better.”

“Wolf, you do know I don’t care about those kinds of things, right?”

“See, that’s why. You still think I’m lying, and you’re right to think so. It’s how I used to do things. It’s what led me to hack Trem’s pad.”

“So you’re telling me you’re going to be sniffing only the places you’re allowed now?” she asked, sounding amused.

“I,” he hesitated, “I’m not saying that, but in this case, I’m already too busy with the body, making sure I’m there for Trem, and a few personal projects. And while I don’t know that there’s anything there, if there is. You’re in a position to do something about it, while I’d just have to tell you, and then explain how I’d come across the information, trying to not give away too many of the laws I’d broken in the process.”

“I keep telling you I don’t care. I’m vice, not cyber-crimes.”

“You’re still the law, it doesn’t look good when I’m telling the law what I’ve done.”

She chuckled. “So this looking into the building, does it relate to your body, or had that Vlein male drafted you over to fraud?”

Marlot had to think about it. “I think he did. I mean, my body is part of it.” He groaned, “I’m going to have a talk with him.” He couldn’t believe he hadn’t realized that was what the fox had done. He investigated bodies, not people still alive.

“Have that talk over pad, you can’t afford him.”

“It might be worth just to get out of doing the paperwork he stuck me with. I don’t

even know how to figure out how my body earned a living without having an ID to put into Stalker...” could version three replace the ID by camera body recognition?

“Wolf? You still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. But Vlein insists I have to work out the body’s actual value since he was contributing to society in some way.”

“Can’t that building help you? Isn’t that why you told me to look into it? Can’t you confirm someone else there doesn’t have an ID and works and base your body’s value on them? There can’t be that many jobs out there for someone without an ID.”

Marlot groaned. “But to do that, I’m going to have to follow one of them all day.” He’d thought he was done with that, with Nikal being dealt with.

The bear chuckled. “Think of it as a hunt in slow motion.”

Marlot’s stomach reminded him breakfast had been a while ago. “A hunt usually ends with me having meat to eat.”

“Then eat whoever you’ll be following. Without an ID, they’re not going to cost you anything.”

Marlot snorted. “You can bet Vlein is going to demand I pay him; after he has me fill out paperwork list everything they did. He’d probably going to keep me from eating any of them until after all the paperwork is done.”

Bahamel laughed. “That why I’m in vice, and not fraud.”

“No,” Marlot grumbled. “It’s why you’re in charge instead of a grunt. You get to decide who pays for your bad mood.”

“You’re right, that is why I’m in charge,” she replied, tone bright. “So go trail someone.”

“Hey, I don’t report to you,” he said, trying not to chuckle, “go order someone who does.” His mood darkened as soon as he disconnected the call. He wasn’t looking forward to a full day of walking about with just hope of a scent to lead him forward.

He looked at his pad.

So, who did he want to spend the night with? Trembor or Stalker 3.0? The better question was probably with which were the odds he’d get any sleep better. Unlike him, his lion didn’t have to go to work in the morning.