

Marlot snapped awake, lifting his head off the desk. He looked around at the room, momentarily confused as to where he was, then he remembered, in his office, at home.

He'd planned on staying at the office, but his stomach had had other ideas. Drinking flavored blood while watching a store hadn't nourished him, and without Trembor working, he hadn't kept meat there. So he'd packed the papers and brought them home. He ate, then set to work.

He looked at the pages spread on the desk and the screen where his notes were written.

He'd confirmed a quarter of the pages were lists of walking dead. He'd done so by looking for and finding the one name he knew for certain was without an ID, Grift Stripe, and in the process remembered he had a second name to work with. Hardir Mixcoat, when he found it too. In the end, he had close to two hundred walking dead, but still couldn't confirm what the numbers attached to each name meant.

The businesses were simpler to figure out. He began with Karlix Housing Supplies a search on the network returned enough information to confirm it was legitimate. The number attached to it was their business ID; he couldn't do an indepth search through those in the system for irregularities, since his authority as an RI didn't stretch into business productivity.

Something for Vlein to look into himself.

What gave him pause were the names on one page, names with valid ID attached to them. He'd run through a few of them. One was employed within the judicial system, a filing clerk, one was a teacher at the academy, the next few worked in a variety of stores, none of which were on the other pages.

What annoyed him was that for all that was there, nothing helped him figure out what it had to do with his body. It told him what he'd done to live, but not how or who had killed him.

His pad buzzes.

"Hello."

"Registered Investigator Blackclaw?" an official-sounding male asked.

"Yes, it's me." Marlot straightened reflexively and looked at the time. Late morning, way too late morning.

"I'm enforcer Longjump. I need you to come to your office, there's been a break-in and—"

"His Hela'han okay?" Marlot's thought's raced. Why break into his office? If Hela'han had been hurt, they would have more to worry about than charges of breaking and entering.

"She's fine. They're both fine. It seems they surprised the intruders. There was a scuffle, but in the end, the intruders ran off before anyone was seriously hurt. We need you to come and see if anything's missing."

They? Both of them? If Jesdan had driven Hela'han, he might have saved her life. As imposing as she was, she wasn't a fighter. "I'll be right over." He disconnected and

was out of the office when a possible reason for the break-in occurred to him. He came back and looked at the papers on his desk.

If they knew he had this. They'd want them back. He might not understand exactly what they represented. But they were important enough for Hardir to have ensured two copies made it to his family. The question was, how could they know? He looked at his pad. They knew who he was from his car. They hadn't hacked his pad, but there were so many other ways to listen in on a call it was a certainty they could.

He'd called Trembor. Had he given details? He couldn't remember, all he recalled was that his lion hadn't been in a great mood. He'd called Ba, and he'd at least mentioned organized crime and have new information.

Once he left, would they break into his home? He had to assume they would, which meant he couldn't leave the papers here. Could he bring them back to the office now that they had already looked there? The enforcers presence would draw the curious, which would allow anyone to watch and not be noticed. He showed up with a package and he'd advertise where they are. Camouflaging them was simple enough, but he had to expect them to watch anything he did.

He placed a call. "Ukely, Marlot. Any chance you can give me a ride to my office? Thanks, I'll be waiting."

While he waited, he got things ready.

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"You're running late today." The zebra said as Marlot sat in her car.

"I didn't sleep well," Marlot answered, "slept through the alarm, and there was a break-in at the office. It's why I'm not busing it there."

"Is anything important missing?" She drove off.

"It's what I'm heading to find out. At least Hela'han wasn't badly hurt." Now that they were moving, he unbuttoned his jacket, revealing the butcher paper over his stomach, held in place with strings.

Ukely glanced, looked again, and Marlot indicated the road when she looked at him and shook his head as she opened her mouth. He'd run his pad through every invasive program detection app he knew, but he also knew enough not to believe they were infallible. Even without something on his pad to listen to their conversation, listening to people in a moving car was difficult, not impossible.

He slipped a piece of paper to the zebra as discretely as he could. On it, he'd written: *Pretty sure I'm in trouble and being watched. I'm leaving evidence with you. When you can do so without attracting attention, take it to the others, we need to figure out what it's about.*

Then he slowly removed every other paper and let them slip to the floor. He didn't bother organizing them, only using his feet to make a stack of them. He needed anyone watching them to think he'd left them at home or had missed them at his office.

She crumbled the piece and put it in a pocket, then talked about nothing important.

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The scene around his office wasn't the chaos he'd expected. Only one enforcer car was there, and only a handful of watchers stood around. Marlot did his best not to appear to do so as he looked them over, trying to figure out which one of them was part of the organized crime group he'd stumbled onto, but he knew his neighboring business more by scent than by sight, and while not a busy street, there were always people walking up and down it.

Inside, he found a scene he hadn't expected. Jesdan stood before an enforcer, chest puffed out. "You are not touching her." What made it unusual was that the enforcer was a panther, a predator, and that even with a wide ear bandaged, a broken tush, and bandages over his cheek, the elephant was not backing down.

"I don't want to touch her," the panther replied, "but I need to take her statement now that she's settled down."

Behind Jesdan, Hela'han sat, eyes glazed over, trunk darting about, searching for things to grab. She was nowhere near settled.

"It might be best if you give her more time," Marlot said.

Jesdan turned his gaze on him, and the fierceness in them surprised Marlot, before it faded to relief. He'd known how the elephant felt for Hela'han, but he hadn't thought him capable of standing up to a predator like that, let alone be willing to take on two.

"I'm Marlot Blackclaw, this is my office, are you officer Longjump?"

The panther shook his head. "Officer Augor. My partner is outside, looking for any indication of how they broke in."

"They probably bypassed the lock. There's a lot of apps available on the network." Marlot looked at Jesdan. "How are you? Looks like you stood your ground."

The elephant touched his injuries. "They scared Hela. I wasn't going to let them hurt her."

Marlot nodded. "You can look after her. I'll keep officer Augor busy until she'd ready to talk with him." He motioned to his office. "If they took anything, it's going to be in there." He opened the door to the mess they had made of his office.

He sighed as he looked at the opened up computer. At least everything important was on the network, and he'd trapped his tracking program, so if they tried to get that to work, all they'd end up with would be broken code.

Just like they'd left him with a broken computer. It was due for an upgrade, anyway. Rebuilding it was as good of an excuse as anything else.