

Marlot walked toward the crowd. He parked a few blocks away, knowing from experience that trying to park close would be a waste of time. Bodies left to rot always attracted gawkers, even when the body wasn't in plain sight. And it happening in such a wealthy neighborhood just made the spectacle all the more appealing to them.

He reached the back of the crowd and looked for space to squeeze in, unlike them he wasn't here to look but to work. He didn't see any. Everyone was packed tight, trying to get as close to the enforcer line as they could, morbid curiosity forcing them to catch a glimpse of what was waiting for them.

Everyone ended up as a body. It was just a question of time.

"Excuse me," he said, his deep voice a little louder than the crowd. "I need to get through." They didn't hear him, too focused on the enforcers moving about in front of the house. It wasn't like they were going to get to see the body until he was done with it.

Marlot sighed and ran a hand over his muzzle in frustration. He could certainly force his way through them. Looking over their head he could see many horns and antlers. It made sense, herd mentality, they wouldn't pack in close to predators if they could avoid it.

A not very friendly smile crept on his muzzle. Well, he could certainly use the fact they were prey against them.

He let a low growl escape his lips and maintained it. It wasn't very loud, certainly not loud enough to be heard over the noises of the crowd. It took a moment, but the people closest to him, a buck, antelope, and horse, started fidgeting.

He kept growling, and they started nervously moving in place, looking around. They weren't aware of him yet, but their instincts were telling them they were in danger.

The horse looked over her shoulder and startled at noticing him. She moved away, bumping in the antelope who looked at what was causing the commotion, noticed him, and also backed into someone else. In a cascade they all became aware of the wolf in their midst and backed away, making a path for him.

Marlot smiled at them, letting his sharp teeth show just for a moment. "Thank you." He strode through the opening until he reached where a muscular moose dressed in the orange enforcer's uniform was standing. He didn't react to Marlot being close to him. Enforcers went through intensive training to help them curb their instinct, fleeing for prey species and hunting for predators.

"This is as far as you go." The moose's voice was deep and reverberating. "There's an investigation going on."

Marlot took out his ID and showed it to him. "Marlot Blackclaw, Registered Investigator. I'm here for the body."

The enforcer took it and examined it, then returned it to him. "There's already an RI on the scene." He looked over his shoulder and searched for a moment before pointing to the lion by the house's garage.

Marlot smiled as he watched Trembor for a moment. He was talking with a female bobcat officer. Further back, leaning against a car, he noticed a bright red frog eating a sandwich.

"I work with him."

"You do?"

Marlot smiled and patted the moose on the arm. "I know, You've never heard of two RIs working together." The moose flinched at the touch. he was new to the force, he still thought of himself as prey, even if his uniform marked him as being off-limit at the moment.

Marlot slipped past him and walked toward the house. like the other houses on that side of the street, it was partially built in the hill. Other than that, each house was different. The people living here were wealthy enough to afford to build to their individual tastes. Everyone else, Marlot included, had to

contend with houses made in bulk and identical.

This house was well-maintained slate gray concrete for the street level and blood-red siding for the two levels above. The color made him salivate. He should have stopped for something to drink before getting here.

There was another officer by the door, a skinny wolf with motley brown fur, but this one looked at his ID and let him through.

The entrance hallway was short, long enough for a small table against the wall that had seen better days and an open door through which he saw an expensive car in the two-car garage.

On the opposite side was another door, this one closed. He put his gloves on before opening it to look inside. He didn't have to do that, the enforcers would go through the house once he and Trembor gave the all-clear, but he liked seeing what was in a body's house, it helped him form an idea of who they were. By the number of boxes in the room, he guessed the owner liked keeping things as a way to remember the past.

He closed the door and went up the stairs at the end of the hallway. The stairs ended at a large, floor to ceiling, scratching post, and by the marks on it, it was used frequently. So the owner of the house was feline.

He could only turn right, and there was a door there leading to the master bedroom. It was over the garage and took went all the way to the front of the house. It was clean, the bed made, and it didn't contain any smells.

He listened for the air system. It was running, his sound much fainter than the one in his house. It was probably more efficient, but he could assume it took about a day to remove all scents from a room this size.

The hallway went along the room and ended at another stairwell going up to the other floor. Before that was another door.

This door was opened and showed a large room divided in two. On one side was an office, everything neatly in its place, while the other side was a workout area with various muscle-building machines. This side looked like a storm had gone through it. Towels hanging on the machines, free weights left randomly on the floor.

He looked from one side to the other; the difference was clear. Two people lived here.

The stairs followed the front of the house, with windows looking out. At the top, he turned right and saw that this last floor was one large space. the only door was on the other side of the room, on the wall now to his left. There was an ornate bench next to it and a large mirror hanging above that. So it probably led outside.

In turning right again he saw the body on the floor, in the living area, close to the kitchen which was against the right wall, toward the back. He could tell at a glance it was female and a cheetah. He didn't go to it, continuing to look around, getting a sense for the person who had lived here.

The kitchen had modern appliances, a warmer, and a cooktop, which told him she had done some cooking, and not just warmed her meat, as Marlot did. He'd never gotten the hang of cooking food.

There was a large dining table, close to the kitchen. He counted eight chairs, and there was a purse on the table. The rest of the space was set up as a living area. Multiple seats and sofas positioned around a heat generator. For cold evenings, or because most felines loved relaxing in front of a warm spot.

He was surprised at the lack of a vid unit. The only one he'd see was in the office and served as the computer's screen.

the four sides of the rooms had thick curtains blocking the outside light. He turned off the light and found himself in almost complete darkness. She liked to control her environment. He turned the

lights back on and pushed the curtain aside.

He looked out onto the side of the house, the hill going up until it became level with this floor, about two-thirds of the way. He went to the back of the house and looked out. The yard was deep, well-manicured, and lightly wooded at the periphery. He could see a path at the back, going through the trees, and closer to the house was a sunning chair.

He didn't bother with the purse as he walked by the table to reach the body. Something else the enforcers would catalog and send to them, Trembor was the one to deal with that. He did note her pad was out of the purse.

He stood over the body, looking at it. She was on her stomach, right arm stretched out toward the table. Her death hadn't been instantaneous. She dragged herself, trying to reach her pad and call for help. The killer had either let her do it, knowing she wouldn't make it or had already left.

He crouched next to the body and took out his pad. He looked at her again and sighed. "What a waste." Before turning on the recording program. "This is Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw, recording the visual examination of the body. No name yet. The body was a cheetah, female, approximately five foot eight, and weighing a hundred and ten pounds. The body is clad in a light brown business jacket." he paused and pulled the sleeve away for the arm. "Over a white shirt, and a matching knee-length skirt. She is still wearing her shoes, so she was attacked not long after arriving home. Those things look too uncomfortable for her to stay in them any longer than needed."

He paused the recording when he heard someone coming up the stairs. A red-brown mane came into view, followed by Trembor's golden furred face.

"What do you think?" Marlot asked the lion, indicating the body.

Trembor looked around and joined him. "Well, I don't think she did it to herself."

Marlot chuckled. "That's kind of obvious. Do you have a name?"

"Aiden Spottedfur, she was thirty-two."

"Did the first officer on the scene catalog her ID?"

Trembor shook his head.

"Maybe we'll be lucky then. It's possible her killer just hasn't gotten around to paying her PRT."

Trembor leaned over the body and sniffed it. "Smells like she'd been dead for a few days. what do you think, three? That's a long time to wait to pay her Productivity Tax."

"Just being hopeful, if he was planning on paying it he would have taken the body." Marlot started recording again. "The body's name is Aiden Spottedfur, and the smell test approximates the time of death at three days. Now checking the pockets for content." The only thing they contained was her ID wallet. "Her ID has been found. This is now officially a tax evasion case."

"Her rating is going to be high," Trembor said. "She worked for Arcas."

Marlot had to think about it for a moment. "They're the ones who came out with the synthetic meat that's actually edible, aren't they?"

"Yes. Everyone who worked there saw a large increase in their rating when that stuff started selling."

Marlot called up the Productivity Rating Database on his pad. It checked the pad was authorized, then requested his access code. When that was confirmed, the scanner on his pad came on, and he Scanned Aiden's ID.

A moment later her information appeared on his pad, including her Rating. "Take a look at it," Marlot gasped, lifting his pad so Trembor could read it. "I don't think I've ever seen a Rating this high."

"No wonder," the lion said in amazement. "She didn't just work at Arcas, she was their vice president."

Marlot read her information and confirmed it. That indeed explained the number. "Who contacted

the enforcers?”

Trembor took out his pad. “Her secretary. This morning was the third that Aiden wasn’t there. When she didn’t answer her pad, he checked the Claimed ID Registry. Aiden wasn’t listed there, so he came here. All the doors were locked, but the curtains were open. that’s when he saw the body. The enforcers closed them to prevent the newsies from peeking in.”

“It lines up with the scent of death.” The wolf stood and stretched.

He was in the process of entering Jaxca’s number when something fell behind him. He and Trembor spun around and stared at the doberman standing by the door, a sports bag at his feet.