

Marlot looked at the data on the screen for the fifth time, hoping to see something new this time. Wasn't there something about smelling the same air over and over while expecting different scents, a sign of insanity? It wasn't that the information made no sense, barely; it was that he was seeing so much or if he wasn't sure what to make of it.

Grift Stripe was the name on the lease for the apartment the tiger lived in. There was no ID indicated which, while unusual, was not illegal. It meant he had to pay in person, which meant he needed to carry the money or hide it in his apartment. In this neighborhood, it couldn't be safe to have that much money.

If it was only the tiger, maybe a handful of others, Marlot wouldn't question it, but in a building with three hundred and fifteen apartments, more than a hundred and fifty of them didn't have an ID linked to them. That was a hundred and fifty people handing over money to the building manager every month, and according to the ledger, they paid on the same day.

That the manager agreed to it was suspect at best, but that the company which owned the building didn't mind? How did they ensure the manager didn't skim some of it? For all the indication the building was barely managed, the corporation, Affordable Lodging Affiliated, was properly registered, part of a series of holding Marlot had traced to a small conglomeration which included transports, leisure, housing, restaurants, and a variety of shops. He'd loved to see their finances, but they weren't his case. Once he was done, he might take a look.

Grift could still be a false name, it wasn't like Marlot could go on the registry to find out if this tiger was in it. Or rather, he had and had found that Stripe was a common surname among tigers, and a few other species; and for all that it screamed 'fabrication' Grift was common enough as a name he'd stopped looking after a dozen pages. There were two dozens Grift Stripe in the country.

The others who paid in person also had common surnames; Spots, Claws, Hooves. Blotches, Fast, Runs, Hides. Without visiting each one to confirm it, he couldn't be sure, but based on the surnames, he estimated the building to have seven prey for each predator. The ratio made sense, except for it being in one building. The halls created isolation, which made it easy for a predator to just grab whoever passed by.

Even in affluent areas, larger apartment buildings tended to be almost a hundred percent prey, while the smaller ones tended to end up with the predators. And here, Marlot was beginning to suspect the people were borderline homeless. Which meant their value was so low even the predators in the same situation could eat one of them.

Grift's apartment had two bedrooms, so Hardir could have lived there without being on the building registry. It would reduce how much the tiger had to get, and would ensure he didn't ask too many questions, such as 'what did you do before you fell on hard times?' 'being alive' would just lead to awkward questions. Or...

Vlein had said he had multiple cases like Hardir. The walking dead. By definition, they wouldn't be able to use IDs and they'd need a place to live. A building where the manager didn't mind insist on the use of ID would be ideal. The common ground might even lead to predators being less likely to hunt the neighbors, after all, without an ID

predators were just as tempting as prey to anyone else.

Marlot imagined a building full of people he could pick out at his leisure and never have to worry about going broke. He'd have to hunt there more often, because based on Grift, there wouldn't be a lot of meat on their body. Still, Marlot marked the building as a backup in case he fell on hard times himself.

So, how could he find out if anyone there was one of those walking dead? And would Vlein demand an accounting of how each earned a living for the purpose of calculating their tax? The building was in Marlot's territory, after all. Hopefully, if he could prove they were walking dead, it would become someone else's problem.

He started by making a call.

"That's twice in a week, wolf," Bahamel answered. "If you're about to 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. We're both busy without individual problems, but as far as I know, me and Trem are good."

"I am glad to hear that. If that's not the problem, what's got you calling me a second time?"

"What did you find out about those cases the Bureau sent to you?"

"You mean those walking dead?" She asked, sounding distasteful.

"You spoke to Vlein, then."

"I had to. He a weird one, with calling fraudulent deaths 'walking dead'. But yeah, I needed to find out who he filed it with because no one here knows anything about those cases. He sent it through the pipeline so I'm having IT look into the system for bugs or outright malware."

"Do you think he's right an organized crime is involved?"

"Could be. Or we're dealing with the benefit of all this wonderful technology," she said sarcastically. "So to answer your question, I don't have anything yet."

"Maybe you want to look into this company." He gave her the names associated with Affordable Lodging Affiliated he'd pulled. "No promises it will lead anywhere, but I'm seeing some odd things there."

"Did that Vlein character draft you out of the RI side and fully into Fraud?"

Marlot paused. "I think he did." He hung his head. "I'm going to have to have words with him."

"Have them over pad, you can't afford him."

"Might be worth it for the paperwork he stuck me with. I don't even know how to figure out how my body earned his living if I can't put his ID in my tracking program, and he wants me to tabulate how much his tax amounts to."

"You said you have a building full of people in the same situation as him. If you figure out how one of them earns a living without having an ID, it's reasonable to think your body earned it the same way."

Marlot groaned. "That means following one of them all day."

Bahamel chuckled. "Think of it as a hunt in slow motion."

“A hunt usually ends up with me hungry and with meat on my plate.”

“If whoever you follow doesn’t have an ID, you can still have meat on your plate and it won’t even cost you anything.”

Marlot snorted. “Vlein is going to make sure it costs me something. He probably won’t let me touch the meat until after I’ve reported all the ways it earned enough to pay its rent.”

“That’s why I do vice and not Fraud.”

“No, that’s why you’re in charge and not a grunt. You get to decide who paid for your bad mood.”

“You right, that is why I’m in charge,” she answered, her voice bright. “So go trail someone.”

“I don’t report to you,” Marlot grumbled good-naturedly; He was still looking at a full day of walking around, hoping to catch a useful scent.