

Chapter 52

Marlot looked at the large house, pad to his ear. “Are you certain about this?” He looked around at the other houses, or rather the walls surrounding them, with gates, some of which had guards. He was in a part of the city he’d never expected to set foot in. Edge City, or how most people referred to it, Rich Town. It had been at the edge of the city, decades ago, hence the name. And each property had forested land they’d refused to sell to the city as it grew around it, creating an oasis of wilderness for the owners to enjoy any way they liked.

“Shouldn’t that be my question to you?” Ukely replied. “You’re the one seated across the road from the highest person we could find within the cartel.”

“We’re not going to get what we want out of underlings like the mole. No matter how much power she thinks she wields, we can’t afford someone higher up shutting her down in the middle of everything. Just tell me you confirmed the scents, 3.0 gave you.”

“I hate how predators make that saying sound so creepy. That program of yours gave us so many many identities it would take a lifetime trying to find out who’s actually behind them, but it found enough of a web of money that we could unravel it. Whoever lives in that house stands at the center of it all. If there’s someone higher than them, you need to keep working on that program of yours.”

Marlot stepped out of the car. “Then here I go.”

“You have it?”

Marlot patted his pocket in reflex. “I do. How close do I have to put it?” It was their backup, something his friends had insisted he take in case he didn’t walk out of this predator’s jaws. Marlot was confident in his chances. He’d interacted with plenty of crooked people, mainly the council in Low Valley, and had a sense of how to treat them to both survive and get what he wanted.

“Next to a computer,” Harik said.

“So long as it’s inside the house,” Afirna added, “we’ll be able to claw at the security until we get what we want.”

“Then it’ll be a question of if you can get enough before it’s too late.” He looked up. The sky was gray again, like his mood.

“Next to a computer takes care of that,” Harik said, tone severe.

“If I don’t contact you in two hours, let everyone know to hunker down, and as soon as you have enough, set it loose.” By the end of the day City Leader Sharporns would have the decryption key, Harik assured Marlot the courier service he used was reliable and untrackable.

“Don’t get yourself eaten,” Joren said casually, “You’re the only predator friend I have. I need you around to save me when I piss off one I can’t outrun.”

Marlot chuckled. “Then tell Trembor my last wish was that he protect you.”

“Somehow I don’t think your mate will feel inclined to keep me alive, considering the part I’m playing in this. So don’t get eaten, please.”

“I’ll do my best.” He ended the call, turned the pad off, and pocketed it, only to find there was already a pad in his pocket. Right. He put this one in the inside jacket pocket. He

couldn't wait for this to be done with, so he could stop worrying about which pad to use when he wanted to talk to someone.

He crossed the street—there hadn't been one car in the ten minutes he'd been parked—and stood before the gate. It was tall, but with plenty of hand-holds, and the top was an arch with no edge to it. Someone could climb to get in if they couldn't convince the people in the house to open it. The stone wall around the property looked tougher to get upon.

He pressed the buzzer next to the gate and let out a breath as he waited. The speaker over the button squawked. "Can I help you?" a female asked, her voice made tinny by the electronics.

It had been too much to hope for someone to walk out of the house to greet him. "Could you let the owner of the house know that Register Investigator Marlot Blackclaw is here to see them regarding business with a mole going by the name of Maoma Burrows?"

The speaker squawked again.

The house was at the end of a two hundred feet long driveway. On each side the grass was immaculate, and he could see a handful of people tending to it and the decorative bushes. Some of them might be security, hiding in plain sight. The house was three levels of white stone with plenty of windows, but at this distance, he couldn't make out anything through them.

The front door opened, and someone exited. A jackal, Marlot made out once they were close enough, in a black suit. She didn't hurry, and he fought his impatience. The gate buzzed once she was a dozen paces away and slowly open inward.

"If you'll follow me," she said, once the gate was wide enough for Marlot to slip through. While she approached, three of the gardeners moved to tend bushes along the driveway. Those were definitely security, Marlot decided. They were close enough if he tried anything, one of them would be on him before he could even kill the jackal.

He felt their eyes on him the entire walk to the house.

She opened the door and waved him in. Something beeped as he stepped inside and turning, he saw a red flashing light on the door frame. The jackal closed the door and locked it, blocking the keypad with her body. Marlot wasn't getting out of the house unless they let him.

"Do you have anything metal on you?"

Marlot stared at her, confused.

She indicated the flashing light. "This tells me you have something metal on you. What is it?"

He had to think about it. "The buckle of my belt is metal. There might be metal in my shoes? Why do you—"

"Do you have a metal claw?" she asked impatiently. "I will get someone to search you if needed."

"Why would have I one of those?" he asked, baffled. He showed her his hand, turning it palm down at the last moment to make the motion less threatening. "Mine works fine." He'd filed them to a point in preparation for this meeting, just in case.

She mulled it over, then nodded. "Please stay here." She indicated four guards on the

balcony lining the large entryway. “They will stop you if you do anything in any way threatening.” She headed for the large staircase going up to the balcony level.

A metal detector. That was what was in the door frame? He knew those were used at airports, train stations, and inter-city bus terminals to keep people from bringing in metal claws. Tight containers with prey and predators in them for long periods without a way to leave made for dangerous places. Almost everyone had claws, and those who didn’t, compensated with metal ones, and as those came in larger sizes than the natural kind, it led to others getting them too, to even the plain.

What did it say the owner had one of them for his house? Paranoia, or reaction to previous events? And what other security might they have in place?

The walls were the same white stone as outside, with dark wood trim on them. Here and there chairs were clustered so people could sit and talk, but there was a dustiness in the air that led Marlot to think this room only saw people walking through. On each side of the door stood plants in large pots, something tall with long leaves at the top. Something native to warmer climates if he remembered his movies. Next to one was a mirror and Marlot stepped before it. He straightened his suit, smoothing the wrinkles out of it, making sure he looked like the professional he was while checking the position of the guards looking at his back. He’d have to be careful.

He crouched and made sure his shoes were without scoffing. He palmed the tube out of his pocket before using the rim of the pot to help him stand, pushing the tube into the soil in the process. His friends were going to have to be happy with this. He didn’t like his chances of trying to get any deeper in the house, let alone to a computer.

A door closed on the second level, and Marlot turned. A form walked along the balcony, remaining in the shadows. Male, Marlot could make that out by the frame. Muscular. When he stepped into the light to start down the stairs, Marlot stared.

The male was a tiger, wearing a loose black shirt with matching black pants and a gold chain around his neck, but it wasn’t the expensive clothing or regal bearing that made Marlot stare. It was the utter lack of color in the tiger’s fur other than the black stripes.

Marlot had heard about white tigers, but he’d never seen one, let alone known one lived in the city. Marlot stepped toward the tiger to meet him halfway and his host froze on the steps as a hyena hurries to interpose himself between the two. Marlot stepped toward a cluster of seats to give them space.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, the tiger fixed his blue eyes on Marlot. “Borkas, scan him.” His voice was deep and luscious.

The hyena took a wand out from the inside of his jacket and motioned from Marlot to spread his arms. He moved the wand around the wolf and each time it screeched he reached in the pocket, taking out three pads, each turned off. He handed them to the tiger, then patted Marlot until he found his wallet. He looked through it, showed the RI ID to the tiger, who nodded, then put it back.

Once the hyena returned to the balcony, the tiger looked the pads over. “How attached to them are you?”

“I’m going to need one of them to call my friends once I leave here.”

The tiger canted an ear, smiling. “The pad in your car won’t do?”

So someone had already looked over his car. “I haven’t had the time to clean out the programs your people put on it when I had my previous meeting. It’s been a busy few days.”

“So I’m told. Which one do you want to keep?”

Marlot indicated the one Harik had given him. A sleeker model than the one he’d cobbled together for his conversation with the city leader, but with as many security features. The others were one he’d kept from Nikal and a disposable one he’d bought a few days ago.

“If you can’t remove the battery from this,” the tiger said, handing it to Marlot, “you’ll want to pick another.”

Marlot took off the back and removed the battery. It was one thing Harik did with all his pads. Even turning off a pad wasn’t insurance it wouldn’t spy on you. The tiger broke the other two and dropped the pieces in a wastebasket.

“How should I address you?” Marlot asked, putting the battery in one pocket and the pad in another.

“Haven’t you found that out? You are here after all.”

“I didn’t search for a person, just where the money led to, which is this house. I have no idea who you are.”

The tiger sniffed the air, then nodded. “That’s good. I’m afraid I would have been forced to eat you if you’d learned my name. Call me Mister White. Now, please tell me what brings you to my home that Miss Burrows couldn’t resolve.”

“With all due respect to Miss Burrows,” Marlot replied, fighting to keep how he said her name neutral, “she doesn’t have the level of authority to agree to what I’m proposing.” He paused. “I also don’t trust her to keep to the agreement. Has she informed you what’s in my possession?”

“I was made aware of it, yes.”

“Then you know the kind of damage I can do if I release that information, even if it won’t hurt you directly.” Marlot watched the male for signs of anger. He’d done his best to keep any threat out of his tone, but there was only so far he could go with ‘I have a bomb I can’t blow up under you,’ and not have it sound like a threat.

“I do. If your goal was to expose us, we wouldn’t be speaking.”

Marlot nodded. “It’s also why I don’t want to deal with the mole. I have... anger issues when someone threatens my mate, which she’s now done multiple times.”

“The lion, Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane. Your lifetime mate.”

Marlot nodded. “I’m not going to try to justify why he did what he did, I don’t—”

“Don’t you mean, what you did?”

The comment confused Marlot.

The white tiger’s smile broadened. “Isn’t that the new story? He covered your crimes because of how much he loves you?”

Marlot narrowed his eyes. That had been set in motion only the day before. No one had been there, there was no recording of the discussion he’d had with Trembor. He was relieved to know he’d gone along with what Marlot had wanted, but the lawyers wouldn’t

have talked, and it was too early for the information to have reached anyone the tiger could control. Only he already knew. So Marlot had miscalculated somewhere.

“I’m obsessed with protecting him. He’s obsessed with protecting me. It’s a bad habit we have.”

The tiger nodded.

“Burrows threatened him, his family. Which means that you have me and Trembor on the scent to destroy her, and indirectly you.”

“And yet, you are here, without any protection,” the tiger stated, mildly amused.

“I have protection,” Marlot replied, “in the form of the information I’m holding. I’m not overconfident enough to believe it’s going to keep you from eating me if you decide to do it, but I think it’s enough that you’ll let me make my case first.”

The tiger nodded again. “Then I suggest you hurry to reach the point you want to make. My hunger rises as my patience drops.”

“What I’m offering you is that I and Trembor work for you. I can keep him under control.” He said in response to the tiger’s tilted ear. “I hand you the originals. I keep a copy for our protection. You return the cubs unarmed, you pay Bo’s tax, since it’s your organization that killed him.”

“I don’t seem to come out ahead as a result of this,” Mister White said. “But first, what cubs?”

“Burrows had Trembor’s nephews, Bo’s sons, taken. I don’t know what she thought that would accomplish, but if they’ve been harmed, I don’t think there’s anything we can do to stop Trembor from destroying her and everything around her.”

The tiger looked at the hyena on the balcony, who took out and pad and stepped away to talk on it. “You understand I can’t vouch for what’s has been down to them before now.”

“Then, if she’s harmed them, you need to be willing to lose her. Trembor will have to kill someone for it. Family is everything to him.”

The tiger studied Marlot. “Family is precious, but before I agree to lose someone like Miss Burrows, if it comes to it, explain to me why I’d want to agree to this deal.”

“Trembor has more contacts within the enforcers than you have your claws in among them. He can get you deep within the enforcement of the law in the city.”

“My understanding is that this is what Miss Burrows is planning for him already.”

“And how successful has she been?” Marlot replied. The tiger nodded. “She has no idea how to go about it. As I said, I can control him.”

The tiger sniffed the air between them again. “Is that your contribution? Controlling the lion?”

Marlot released his breath. “Other than my programming skills, which Burrows already made clear are wanted. I bring a program that will let you find out just about anything on anyone you want.”

“There’s no such thing,” the tiger scoffed, and gained the hints of an accent in doing so.

Marlot smiled. “How do you think I found you?”

“You don’t know who I am, you said that yourself, and you weren’t lying.”

“My program didn’t tell me about you directly, because I didn’t have the time. You’re very well hidden, but it did work out that this house stands at the center of everything. Which is how I came to find myself here. And to add incentive. The program isn’t finished. I’m been working on it part-time, when I wasn’t busy dealing with everything else that’s been happening.”

Marlot watched the tiger’s suspicion turn to curiosity, then greed. The tiger didn’t need to know only half of what Marlot had said was true. 3.0 had given them a lot of information, but his friends had made sense of it. Maybe, in time, he could get 3.0 to be that good, but that was only if he kept working on it, and even he wasn’t sure he should anymore.

“And you would give me that program?” the tiger asked, his greed giving way to suspicion.

“No. I would use it for you. If she hasn’t told you already, you can ask Burrows about the level of security I keep on my computers. I’ll happily do net security work for you if you want me to, but that’s going to be after I’m confident you have respected your side of the agreement.”

“I back off the lion, his family, and I pay the brother’s tax.”

“And you make that conspiracy thing disappear. You don’t need it since we’ll be working for you.”

The tiger nodded. “I can make that happen, but the initial case against the lion, the evidence tampering, isn’t something I arranged. If you want me to deal with that, I will need more from you.”

Marlot waved that aside. “I have that covered.”

The tiger studied Marlot for a full minute. “You understand that if this is some ploy to get within my organization and gather information over the years to attempt to bring me down, I will find out and when I do, the level of destruction I will bring down will not be limited to you, the lion, and his family. That commune you call home will cease to exist.”

Marlot was tempted to ask him to do that part, but reminded himself the council was who he hated. He disliked most people in Low Valley, but they were innocent of actual crimes, other than doing what the council taught them. “Sir, I’m not an idiot. I’m here because I value mine and my mate’s survival above everything. I will do whatever it takes to ensure we live.” He fixes his gaze on the tiger. “And I do mean everything it takes.”

The tiger scented the air and nodded. “I believe you. And with you working for me, regardless of any other ploys you have in mind, I’ll have the time needed to mire you into compromising positions that will ensure you can’t destroy me without destroying yourselves.” He considered something. “Very well. So long as you keep your lion under control and get him to do my bidding, that you provide me with whatever information I ask for, you, your lion, and his extended family will live in peace. If I break my word, you will have the power to make my life extremely difficult. You break yours, and I have a feast. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Marlot answered.

“Then Miss Burrows will contact you for the exchange. The files for the cubs. If anything has been done to them, you have my blessing for your lion to eat her. I’ll pay her

tax.”

The jackal returned and escorted Marlot outside and to the gate. The eyes Marlot felt on him the entire walk kept him from relaxing. Once he was at his car, he put the battery back in the pad.

“I’m out of there,” he said, “he agreed.” He disconnected.

And that was it for part one. Such a success, he thought bitterly, getting in his car. If part two didn’t work, things would be so much worse than they had been before that conversation.

No big deal. He started the car.

Now, all he needed to do was convince his lion to go along with the plan. He sighed. His lion loved him enough not to eat him because of this... right?