

Marlot looked at the large house, pad to his ear. "Are you sure about this?"

"Shouldn't that be my questions to you? You're the one seated across the street from someone much higher than that mole in the cartel."

"We are not going to get the kind of information we need just dealing with an underling like her, no matter how much power she wields. So you confirmed the scent?"

"I really hate how predators make that saying sound so creepy, but yeah; who owes the house his hidden behind too many net identities it'll take longer to get you that, but we've traced enough of the money movement to accounts linked to that house that whoever lives there is someone making a lot of the decisions."

Marlot stepped out of the car. "Then here I go."

"You have it with you?"

Marlot patted his pocket and felt the device. "I do. How close to have I have to get it?"

"Ideally, next to a computer, if you can't make that happen so long as it's inside the house's network, we'll be able to chip away at any security and get the information we need."

"It'll just take longer," Marlot finished, looking up. The skies were gray again, like his mood. "So it's going to be a question of if you'll be able to get anything useful before it's too late."

"Again, get it close to a computer and it takes care of that."

"Okay, if I don't contact you in two hours, release everything and hunker down."

"Don't get yourself killed," Joren replied. "I need to keep one friend who's a predator for the day I piss off one I can't outrun."

Marlot chuckled. "Tell Trembor it was my last wish that he protect you."

"I don't think your mate will feel any desire to protect me considering the part I'm playing in this, so don't get eaten."

"I'll do my best." He disconnected and put away the pad. Hopefully, soon he'd be able to stop worrying about what pad to use so he could have a private conversation. As he'd noticed before, the low gate was only decorative. If it didn't open, he could have jumped over it easily. It might serve as an early warning someone was coming, but no more.

At the door, he pressed the buzzer and let his breath out. If he wasn't careful, this would be the last house he ever stepped into. It opened and a slim Jackal in a suit eyed him neutrally.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Marlot took a guess this wasn't the owner by the stiff stance she held. "Can you tell the owner of the house that Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw is here to see them regarding business with a mole using the name Maoma Burrows?"

She stepped out of the way, opening the door further. "Please come in."

He did, and something beeped. Looking around for it as she closed the door, there was a red flashing light on the door frame. Marlot noted she locked it.

"What's that?" he asked.

“Do you have anything metal?”

The question baffled him for a few seconds. “The buckle of my belt is metal,” he finally answered. “I don’t think there’s anything else.”

“No metal claws?”

He frowned. “Why would I have one of those?” he showed her his claws, hand facing down, the least threatening way he could hold it. “Mine work fine.”

She nodded and stepped away. “Please remain here.”

Marlot looked around. He didn’t like this. Who had a metal detector in their house door? Marlot knew some species without claws bought metal them for protection, but those were all prey species and it wasn’t like they knew how to wield them. The owner was somewhat paranoid. He might have good reasons, but if he was paranoid about someone walking in with a metal claw, what else might he be paranoid about?

The entryway was large, with white marble walls and floor, dark wood trim. On each wall by the door was a table with small potted plants on them and a mirror hanging behind them. He stepped up to one and adjusted his suit jacket, making sure his reflections showed him someone professional. When he was done, he took the tube out of his pocket and pushed it down in the soil of the plant. They were going to have to be happy with this because Marlot didn’t think he was going to be allowed anywhere near a computer.

Steps sounded and Marlot turned in time to watch a male walk down the stairs. It wasn’t until the male reached the bottom that Marlot’s mind started working again, getting over the surprise of what he saw. The male was a tiger, wearing a black loose shirt, with black pants and a gold chain around his neck, but it wasn’t the expensive clothing or the regal bearing. There was no color in his fur other than the black stripes.

Marlot had heard stories of white tigers, but he’d never seen one. Let alone known one lived in the city.

“Borkas,” the tiger said in a deep voice, his blue eyes fixed on Marlot, “scan him.”

A hyena stepped in Marlot’s field of view and got him to spread his arms as he ran a wand over him. It emitted a screech, and he reached into Marlot’s pocket, taking out the pad. The male took Marlot’s wallet out, looked through it, and put it back.

He handed the pad to the tiger as he rejoined him.

The tiger turned it over in his hands, looking at it. It was a generic model. Harik had given it to him before he’d left to go see Trembor.

“How attached to this are you?” the tiger asked.

“I’m going to need it to call my friends when I leave.”

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

“I haven’t had the time to remove the program your people managed to insert in it yet. It’s been a busy few weeks.”

“So I’ve been told.” He handed the pad back to the hyena. “Remove the battery. Don’t do anything else to it. Let’s give RI Blackclaw some level of privacy.”

“Thank you, sir?” Marlot asked.

The tiger shook his head. “I also like my privacy. Call me Mister White. Now, why are you here? I thought I’d arranged things so you and Miss Burrows could resolve the situation without having to involve me.”

“With all due respect to Miss Burrows,” Marlot said keep how he said her name neutral through effort. “She doesn’t have the authority to agree to my proposal.” He paused. “I also don’t trust her to keep to the agreement. Have you been made aware of what’s in my possession?”

“I have.”

“Then you know how much damage to your organization its release can do, even if it won’t hurt you directly.” Marlot watched the male for any sign of anger. He’d done his best to say it without making it sound like a threat, but there was only so far you could go with ‘I have the bomb that can blow your group wide open’ and not have it sound like a threat.

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

“That’s right. 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 done multiple times.”

“The lion, Registered Investigator Goldenmane.”

Marlot nodded. “I’m not going to bother justifying 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 for you because of how much he loves you?”

Marlot narrowed his eyes. He’d just told Trembor to say that yesterday, and there hadn’t been anyone there and no recording. It sounded like he’d played along, but for this male to know about it already... well, they knew he had people place within the prosecutor’s office, so he shouldn’t be surprised.

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

The tiger nodded.

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

“And yet, you are here, without any protection.”

“I have protection,” Marlot said, “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 that, but I think it’s enough to let his conversation reach its conclusion first.”

“Then I suggest you get to the point. The more my patience is stretched, the least likely that protection you think you have will protect you.”

“Alright. What I’m offering you is that I and Trembor will work for you. I can keep him under control,” he added to the white tiger’s tilted ear. “I hand you back the originals, I keep a copy for my protection. You return the cubs unharmed. You pay Bo’s tax, since it’s your organization that killed him.”

“It seems to me that I don’t come out ahead of this deal,” the tiger said. “But first, what cubs?”

“Burrows had Trembor’s nephews taken, Bo’s sons. I’m not sure what she thought she was doing, but if they’ve been harmed, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep Trembor from destroying her and everything around her.”

He leaned to whisper something in the hyena’s ears. “You understand I can’t vouch for what has been done to them before now,” the tiger said as the hyena walked away.

“Then, you need to be will to lose her. If she harmed them, Trembor will have to kill someone, family is everything to him.”

“Let’s first see what you seemed to think I’ll gain.”

“Trembor had more contacts within the enforcers than you have people. Once all this had settled, he’ll be able to get you deep into the working of the law within the city.”

“My understanding is that was what Maoma has attempted to do already, with a noted lack of success.”

“That’s because she doesn’t know how to go about it. As I said, I can control Trembor.”

“And is that what you bring? Controlling the lion?”

Marlot released his breath. “I bring a program that will allow you to find out just about anything on anyone you want.”

“There is no such thing.”

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

“You didn’t know about me, your reaction made that clear.”

“But I knew you were here. You’re right, I didn’t know about you specifically, but taking what the files I received had and putting that into my program led me here. It told me whoever lived in this house was positioned quite high in this organization. And the program isn’t even finished. It’s just a hobby of mine and having to deal with what’s happened to Trembor, and untangling that file didn’t leave me much time to work on it.”

Marlot smiled and watched the curiosity blossom in the tiger’s eyes, then the greed. The male didn’t need to know that only half of what he’d said was true. His program had given them a lot of the information, but it was Harik, Ukely, Joren, and Afirna that had made sense of what they’d obtained.

“And you would give me that program?”

“No, I would let you tell me who you want information on, and I’ll use the program for you. You can ask Burrows, the security I have around my program is top-notch. I’ll happily do other net security work for you if you want me to. And of course, I won’t start doing any of that until I’m confident your side has respected the agreement.”

“We back off the lion’s family and pay the brother’s tax.”

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

The tiger nodded. “I can have that done, but the initial case against the lion, regarding the evidence tampering is out of my control. If you want me to deal with that, I

will need more from you.”

“Don’t worry about that one, I’ve got it covered.”

The tiger studied Marlot for a full minute. “You understand that if this is some ploy for you to get within my organization and gather information over the years to finally attempt to take us down, I will find out, and when I do, I will destroy your lion, his extended family as well as that commune you called home.”

Marlot fixed his gaze on the tiger. “Sir, I’m not an idiot. I’m here because I value my and my mate’s survival above everything. I will do whatever it takes to ensure we live, and I mean whatever it takes.”

The tiger nodded. “I suppose I do have the time to mire you into compromising positions over the year, even if this is a ploy. Very well, your side of the agreement is that you keep your lion in check and get him to do work for us. You will provide me whatever information I want when I want it on anyone I want. In return, I let you, your lion, and his extended family live. You have information that will make my life slightly difficult if I break my word, and if you break yours, I’ll have all your lives. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Marlot answered.

“In that case, Miss Burrows will contact you to do 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.”

A cheetah returned with Marlot’s pad, the back cover off and battery out. He took it, walked outside, and did not relax until he was driving away. Part one had gone off splendidly, he told himself bitterly. If part two didn’t work, things would simply be so much worse than they had been before the conversation.

No big deal.

Now he needed to make sure Trembor wasn’t going to kill him for doing this.