

Chapter 31

Marlot watched from a parking lot across the housing building, as three buses pulled in, and people piled into them. Among them was Grift Stripes, who was dressed better than when Marlot spoke with him. He wouldn't pass as a top-rated worker, but the pants and shirt were clean and in good condition. As was what everyone with him wore.

If he hadn't been in the building, seen the lack of ID attached to more than half of the apartments, he'd think the average resident was middle productivity, at worse. He could tell this was a common occurrence by how they chatted among each other while they waited. There was also a comfort between the prey and predators that shouldn't be there, not if they were all middle rated.

He noted the bus's tags as they loaded, then followed them. When they separated, he followed the one Grif was in. He wanted to stay with the tiger as much as he could. The rating of the neighborhoods climbed ever higher as the bus traveled. To the point Marlot expected this was a shortcut to reach something more in line with how everyone was dressed.

The bus pulled into a driveway, stopped at the gate long enough for it to open, and continued onto an estate that had to belong to one of the city's elite. Marlot peered through the gate as he drove by, not daring slow, and saw a mansion, with cars that at a glance, were worth more than he'd accumulate in his lifetime.

What were people so low-rated doing here?

He drove around the property, the entirety walled, and parked on the side of the road far enough he hoped he wouldn't attract attention, but with the gate in sight. He wrote the address for Vlein. He fought the impulse to look through the buildings registry for who owned it. This was dealing with a level of productivity that went beyond eclipsing his own. The people here wouldn't even register his tax if they ate him.

Common labor? Marlot wondered. A place like this had to require a large workforce to maintain it. Using people who couldn't protest how little they were paid was a way to save money, but was it illegal? They needed an ID to work. It was how the system kept track of their productivity; of their worth. That he hadn't linked an ID to Grift, or any of the names he'd searched, didn't mean they were without one. But again, this would be a scent Vlein could chase.

His job was to establish how much Hardir Mixcoat had been worth when he died. And he couldn't do this from inside the car. He stepped out, tightened his jacket against the returning cold, and headed for the gate.

He set his pad for video recording and held it discreetly. A ram in a business suit stepped out of the mansion as he walked by and a car pulled to the bottom of the stairs. Marlot slowed, and when it exited the property, he recorded it, getting the tag. He crossed the street and returned to his car, again recording as he passed before the gate. What he'd need was to set up a long-term recorder.

No, that was what Vlein would have to do. All he needed was enough information to work out the value of one body.

Back inside the warmth of his car, he reviewed the footage. The ram looked familiar,

except for how he was dressed. He could be one of the people that had gotten on the bus with Grift. Marlot hadn't thought of recording them.

He searched the outside of the mansion for any sign of who was maintaining it, but no one was visible. The property was large. They could be anywhere on it. The recording on his way back caught a bull getting into the car waiting for him, and this one, Marlot was certain, had been waiting for the buses. He stored the recordings and watched as three more cars left, each ten minutes apart. From where he was, he couldn't see who was in them.

Were two recordings enough? For Vlein, possibly, but he still hadn't worked out what Grift was doing.

He did another walk by, recording a weasel dressed for work in an office. Not the expensive suit of the two before, but still of a higher productivity rating than he'd looked waiting at the curb, or living in the building. On the way back it was a wolf, another Marlot thought he'd recognize, who'd been dressed as a factory worker getting on the bus, and now looked like an accountant.

In his car, he again looked for anyone working outside, but now he was confident this was something else. What? He couldn't tell. Why take low-value people, dress them as higher value, and drive them off to who knew where?

He stepped out again. This time, as he reached the gate, Grift was outside, speaking with a gorilla build like a hunt's linemale. He ran back to his car, wishing he'd been able to park closer. By the time he was in, Grift could have driven off and he'd have to catch up.

He jumping in his car and cursed loudly when it didn't start. He'd had it serviced a few months ago, it couldn't fail now. He kept trying with the same result, watching the car leave the property and drive off.

Without there being a point to hurrying, he noticed the dash wasn't coming on. This was beyond not starting. It was a generalized electrical failure. He opened the hood and immediately saw the problem. The wires had been pulled; all of them.

He slammed the hood shut and walked around, sniffing the air. There were scents, but there had been scents all morning, and he couldn't find one near his engine. The right clothing would reduce the scents left behind, and the cold wind could take care of the rest. Regardless, it was clear whoever had done this knew what they were doing. More than he did. This was not what he was paid to do. The one positive was that for someone to disable his car meant there was something here.

Unless this was nothing more than vandalism?

He looked at the cars parked along the road. There were all worth more than his. Unless this was the locals telling him he didn't belong, Marlot had trouble imagining they wouldn't have done something to those cars too.

He called his mechanic and while he waited for the tow, tried to figure out how he was going to have the house watched. He knew no one who'd fit in, so he'd have to go outside his usual circles, and that meant having to pay them. And for them not to attract attention here, he'd have to pay a lot.

He needed to talk with Vlein about how the male was going to cover his expenses. It was the only way he'd get what the fox wanted. Otherwise, he was going back to looking for

the killer and Vlein could deal with the productivity aspect himself.