

## Chapter 21

Marlot made his way through the crowd in the lobby of the Revenue Bureau; people who disagreed with one decision or another. Most sounded like they were displeased about their rating not accurately representing them. He caught a conversation regarding survivor benefits, and how she should receive more, as he headed for the back of the room—to the Authorized Personnel Only door, but he didn't catch the agent's reply. One was yelling about how he was due the benefits, even if the tax hadn't been paid. His mate was gone, and that was all there was to it, according to him.

It didn't matter how fair the government tried to make the system, there were always people who would be unhappy about it. Marlot was just happy that outside of a beneficiary here and there who waited on him to finish an investigation, this was a side he didn't have to deal with.

He swiped his ID, and the door unlocked, letting him into the machinery of the bureau. The people making sure the system performed the way it was designed, that no hacker got in to adjust things in their favor, or that glitches were caught before they caused problems. Somewhere in the guts of the building accountants went over every number the system churned out because, even today, there were people who didn't trust machines.

This was also something Marlot didn't deal with. The Revenue Processing Center was a different building a few blocks away because of the need for cages to hold the people waiting to be processed for their infractions.

"RI Blackclaw," he told the tired-looking antelope behind the check-in desk as he swiped his ID. "I'm looking to speak with someone about my current case."

"Is it about contesting that it's yours?" he asked in a nasal monotone.

"No, just an anomaly I'm not certain how to handle, and I'm hoping someone here had an idea how to proceed."

For a second the bored expression was amused, maybe even mocking? Then it was gone. "What you want is a consultant, then."

"Alright, then I'd like to meet with a consultant."

The antelope let out a sigh indicating how much of an imposition Marlot's request was, then pointed to a chair against the wall. "Have a seat, someone will be with you shortly."

Marlot took out his pad. "Hela'han," he greeted his secretary. "I'm not going to be in the office at this point, feel free to head home as soon as you're done with whatever you're working on."

"Thank you, Mister Blackclaw, I'll still be here until the normal closing hour in case you need me, Jesdan will be picking me up when he's done working."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind." He almost disconnected. "Hela'han, how is it..."

"Yes?"

"It isn't important, I'll see you in the morning."

"Very well. Have a good day." She disconnected.

He'd talk with her face to face, where he could smell how the news would make

her feel. He looked at his pad and considered inputting Jesdan's information in Stalker 1.0 to get a sense of how good of a provider he was, but fought the impulse to pry into their lives. Instead, he connected to his new home computer.

The old one was still running, since he wasn't done with the setup. It would be a few days before he was done, seeing how busy this case kept him. He had planned to go home and work on that after checking in at the office, but he wanted to listen to his lion, so here he was. He asked for a report and his installation program returned with a fifty-eight percent completion, along with a list of incompatibilities between the hardware and the operating program it was trying to install.

The downside of designing his own operating program was he needed to fix the problems himself. It all looked minor enough, so he'd go through most of that tonight.

He wished Trembor had invited him over for dinner again, or even just for after dinner, but his lion had seemed preoccupied so Marlot hadn't invited himself over either.

"RI Blackclaw?" a fox asked, offering him his hand. "I'm Vlein, I believe you asked for my assistance?" He was dressed in a black suit that made the fiery copper of the fur at his neck stand out.

Marlot stood as he shook it. "Thanks."

The fox motioned and started walking. "Before you ask for it, my family name's foreign, we're from Arsbrugh, and my father is so traditional that he refused to have it translated. I'm the firstborn in this country, and I have the lashing marks on my back from the times I'd translate it for my friends instead of forcing them to pronounce it." He chuckled and deepened his voice. "Don't you have any respect for your ancestors?" then cleared his throat. "I love the work you did as part of taking down Ruxul, by the way, and you brought in another one only a few days ago. Did you know that in the entire country there are less than a hundred hunters who have been brought in alive?"

"You'll be my consultant?" Marlot asked, following the male, instead of acknowledging the comment. "Is there a lot of demand for your help?"

The fox shrugged. "Enough to keep me employed and fed. Officially I'm part of the chain dealing with complaints. If a case can't be resolved in the lobby, it's escalated to my group. Dealing with all sorts of complaints means we need to know about every facet of the Bureau and that makes us well suited to help out RIs when they encounter problems." He opened a door and motioned Marlot inside. "Although I'm surprised a male like you need my help."

Marlot sighed, he wouldn't be able to get away from the hunters. "You do realize there was a lot of luck involved in both cases, right?" He sat facing the desk.

"Luck is simply the result of being well prepared," the fox said in a high falsetto as he sat. "My Grandmother was fond of saying."

Marlot chuckled. "I'm going to guess she didn't track people down for a living."

"Worked in a meat processing plant until her death."

"That seems like an odd job for a predator to take. More suited to scavengers."

The fox shrugged. "Grandmother wasn't the most aggressive person. Timid is how she was usually described. She handled the family accounts, but never got an

education. Different system,” he added at Marlot’s tilted ear.

Marlot waited until the fox was done looking him over. “I’m mated, and I doubt you can afford me,” he stated.

“Sorry,” Vlein said with a chuckle. “Hazard of the job. Half the time someone has a complaint that escalates to my level it’s about how much they should get out of survivor benefit, and a part of that is base of how much meat the body yields.”

“I thought that was entirely productivity-based.”

The fox shook his head. “There’s always been a ‘person’ component to productivity, dating back to when how much muscle someone had was the primary indication of how productive they would be. There’s always been old minds who want things to remain the way they always were, even in this technological age. We’ll phase it out eventually, but until then...” he grinned and spread his arm. “Here I am.”

“Are you sure you’re the right person to help me then? My problem isn’t really about how much meat is on the body.”

“As I said, I’ve had to learn about all aspects of the Bureau in my time here, not just that. I’m also the primary person RIs are sent to, believe it or not, not everyone enjoys working with them.”

Marlot chuckled. “I believe you. Still, I doubt you’ve come across this before.”

The fox smiled. “Test me and find out.”

“I have a body who, from the evidence I’ve been able to collect, was killed twice.”

The fox’s smile broadened as he leaned back in his chair. “You’ve had one of the walking dead.”

Marlot stared at the male.

“It’s what I call them,” the male said with a dismissive wave, “people still walking around after the system claims their tax has been paid.”

“It’s happened before?” Marlot couldn’t believe he’d never heard of it before. Or that it hadn’t been mentioned when he’d called in to check on the possibility.

“I did say I’d be useful.”

“Then why didn’t the agent tell me that when I called in?” Marlot asked, not hiding his annoyance.

Vlein grew serious. “Because we don’t advertise it happens. For the system to work, the masses have to believe it’s infallible. If the general population realized there were flaws in it, they’d begin thinking they could manipulate the system. Just them trying it would send us back to the days when ninety percent of the Bureau’s budget was spent on people like you tracking down evaders and putting the fear of the system into them, instead of them trusting it to keep things going.”

“So there is a glitch,” Marlot said in triumph. The fox shook his head slowly, but not entirely confident and Marlot frowned.

“As you know, a system like what keeps our society going is complex beyond belief, and that makes it difficult to be certain of anything. But anytime a case like yours reaches me, there’s a thorough investigation into how it happened from our side. At no

point in the previous cases was a defect found. As far as our investigations determine, the walking dead are caused by outside actions.”

Marlot thought about it. “Like someone exploiting a flaw in the system?”

Vlein shook his head. “By exploiting the way the system is designed to work.”

“I don’t see how that can be done. If they’re exploiting something, by definition it’s a flaw in the system.”

“The way the system is designed, all it cares about is that the tax is paid. It is assumed that when a body’s tax is paid, it is because someone went through the steps of killing it.”

“But it doesn’t actually check to make sure it’s true,” Marlot said, understanding. “But what’s stopping people from just paying their own tax to get out of whatever trouble they’re in?”

“The fact that life without an ID tends to be rather short,” Vlein replied, “and there are some checks in place to make sure that isn’t what happened. The system checks the body’s accounts when it’s paid. We have algorithms that can figure out with a high level of accuracy if money has been moved around to hide the fact they are paying it themselves.”

“So someone else has to pay it for them, and you’d know if they just handed the money over?”

Vlein nodded.

“Then why would someone pay for a body they aren’t eating? I can’t see anyone willing to pay for a body and not get anything out of it.”

Vlein was silent for a few seconds. “You need to understand there hasn’t been an in-depth investigation because there aren’t enough of them happening to justify the expenditure, so this is entirely a personal theory, but I think that what they are getting out of it is labor.”

Marlot straightened. “So you know who they are?” He hadn’t expected much out of this meeting and certainly not actual answers.

Vlein shook his head. “They have to be criminals, that’s a given. I suspect it’s one of the larger organizations in the city behind it, if not more than one. Simply due to the logistical issues involved in pulling this off. Basically, they’re committing fraud, but instead of committing it on the level of the body, they commit it on the level of productivity.” The fox pulled a page from a drawer and slid it to Marlot. “I’m going to need you to fill this as you continue your investigation.”

“Paper?” Marlot said with a chuckle as he took it. “Wouldn’t it be easier for you to send me the form over pad?” He frowned as he read what he was expected to fill.

“Yes, but as I said, nothing can be done officially right now. Anything I send you electronically would be logged, and questions would be asked. I’m not entirely certain the people asking those questions would work for the Bureau, or any branches of the government.”

Marlot nodded, still looking the form over. He had no problem believing criminal organizations had people in all levels of government. Crime was insidious. He should

know, he had no problem committing them under the right circumstances.

“This is a productivity report,” Marlot stated. “Why do you need me to fill this?”

“All these fraudulent deaths are committing fraud on the productivity side of the system, so I need you to document the body’s productivity so I can figure out how much loss they are responsible for.”

There were enough fields on the page to cover a week’s work if Mixcoat hadn’t had too many undeclared jobs. “How do you expect me to fill this when I don’t even know where the body lived, let alone worked?”

The fox smiled. “You are a resourceful male, Mister Blackclaw. I have no doubt you’re going to figure something out.”

Marlot opened his muzzle to protest but settled on glaring. As unusual as this was, it was still tax fraud, and that was his department. And he had to find out where Mixcoat had lived, anyway. With that, finding out where he worked should be simple. He wouldn’t be able to provide Vlein exact numbers, but with enough data, extrapolation could be done.

“How many such bodies have there been in the last five years?” Marlot asked as a thought formed.

“Eight,” Vlein answered.

Not a lot of data. “Can I get the information you have on them?”

Vlein studied Marlot. “Do you have a way to use that information? Nothing’s verified since there’s no records in the system.”

“More like an inkling of how I can use it.” He’d have to gut Stalker 2.0. It wasn’t designed to look at dead bodies the way this would require. Without an ID, he was going to have to come up with entirely new ways to track movements. He would have to program it in such a way it could adapt, otherwise, Marlot would be tied to the computer making corrections all the time.

It was a good thing Trembor hadn’t invited him over because he would have had to cancel to deal with this. He was going to have to get himself a case of stimulant drinks on his way home.

Vlein cleared his throat and Marlot looked up to the male holding a slate. “I’d appreciate it if you kept the information on here to yourself. The network isn’t secure and I can’t know what the people involved in this fraud are listening for.”

Marlot nodded as he took it. “Have you found any commonalities between the bodies?”

The fox shook his head. “Different species, prey, and predators, male and female, mostly mid-productivity, but two were near vagrant and one should have had enough money to cover him for any spell of trouble. And that’s the only thing that could be call common between them. They had a run of bad luck before their ‘death’.”

Marlot considered that. “Do you think those criminals targeted them and orchestrated the back luck?”

Vlein shrugged. “If they did, my previous investigators didn’t find evidence of it. Their names are linked to the included files, but I can’t say who’s still alive.”

Marlot nodded, not that he intended on contacting any of them. It was too early to even think of asking for their help. “You understand that no matter how deep I dig, if those criminals were careful, there’s no guarantee I’ll find much about whatever work the body did for them.”

The fox smiled knowingly. “Mister Blackclaw, something tells me that if someone can work out how a criminal would do something like this, and ways to find out about it, it’s you.”

There was knowledge in those eyes that couldn’t have been gained in the time they’d talked. The fox had already shown knowledge of Marlot’s past as it related to Ruxul and Nikal. What else had he uncovered? It couldn’t be too much, otherwise, threats would have been issued.

He folded the form and pocketed it along with the slate. “I’ll keep you up to date on this investigation.”

The fox smiled. “I have no doubt.”

Marlot studied the male. Now he wanted his family name because he suspected having as much information on him would be an asset down the line.