

**Chapter 23**

Marlot shook the can as he turned off the engine to check it for content, then upended it in his muzzle, anyway. After the all-nighter he'd spent getting Stalker 3.0 started—he couldn't call it 2.0 anymore, since the code had to be written up from scratch—he should have taken the day off to sleep, but he knew that if he'd stayed home, he would just have continued tinkering with the start of the new program. As it was, he'd gotten the network connection established and secured with his security programs. Which meant staying on track today would be tougher; he'd have to resist the temptation to check in on the program on top of resisting the one to just sleep.

He squinted at the sun as he exited the car and considered cursing it, but for once the temperature was well above freezing, so he endured the clear skies all the way to the building.

“Good morning, Hela’han,” he greeted the elephant before a yawn cracked his jaw wide enough she might have fit in. “Sorry.”

“Good morning, Sir. Long night with Trembor?”

His sleep-deprived brain took a moment to understand how she'd known they were together again, then remember that she too had a nose, and he'd come straight to the office after a night at the lion's place a few mornings ago.

He chuckled. “I wish, it was my other passion that kept me up. I'm working on a new stalking program.”

“Ah,” she replied noncommittally.

“You're looking particularly radiant today,” he said, stepping to the desk and sniffing the air before he could stop himself. “Did you have a late-night with a special bull elephant?” he grinned.

Her ears fluttered and gained a pink hue. She grabbed her trunk before it moved the keyboard and stammered. “I, that is. He.”

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't pry like this. But I'm happy for the two of you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Is there any mail today?”

She shook her head, releasing her trunk, which immediately went for her pad. She grabbed it again and Marlot headed for his office door. He was making her nervous.

“There was a call in the buffer when I came in this morning. I moved it to your desk.”

“Any indication what it was about?” he tried to remember if he was expecting anything, and all that came to him were the DNA results, but last he'd checked he was still twentieth in the queue.

“A female, about her mate. She mentioned her name, but I didn't make a note of it.”

He didn't have a cold case with someone's mate waiting on it as far as he could remember. “I'll listen to it, thanks.”

He started the computer, let it run through its security checks. Then he established a connection to his computer at home and began looking through the code. It hadn't

crashed, that was good. He was writing up stuff he had no idea would work. Looking at some of the code, he couldn't even remember writing it.

"It's holding up together, so don't complain, Wolf." Once he had a good night's sleep, he'd look it over and probably discover the reason it was holding up was that it was only chasing its tail.

He connected his pad to the computer and immediately received the notification of a call in his buffer.

"Right." He'd meant to start with that.

"Mister Blackclaw," the female began, and he tried to place the voice, "it's Mirden, you asked about my dead mate a few days ago, Hardir." Now he placed it. She was the mate of his current body. "Well, something odd happened. I got home this evening to find a package waiting for me." She hesitated. "A package from Hardir. The timestamp is only from a few days ago. You mentioned how the body you're investigating looked so much like my Hardir that you thought he might not have died when I thought he had, and now I get this package." She paused again, sounded worried. "It's probably nothing, but I'd really prefer if you dealt with it. I haven't opened it, and... This feels too morbid. Other than a few errands tomorrow, I'm going to be home, so feel free to come by for it."

He called her back and received an automated message.

"The number you are trying to reach had been locked due to the ID linked to it being recorded as deceased. If you are the owner of the number and wish to contest the classification of deceased, please pressed one. If you are a relative, looking to inquire about survivor—" Marlot disconnected.

He looked at the pad. What were the odds it was a coincidence she'd died the night she received the package? She didn't look particularly cheap, so she'd have to have ventured far outside her neighborhood for someone to think they could afford her. A failed hunt? She'd said her son hunted, but also implied she did.

He called the RB and navigated through the menus.

"ID processing," a female said. Marlot gave his ID and name. "How can I help you, RI Blackclaw?"

"I need to confirm a death, in conjunction to a body I'm investigating. Mirden Mixcoat. She died yesterday evening or during the night. I don't have an ID, but I have her address and pad number, if it helps."

"Certainly," she said, and he gave her the information. "Yes, Mirden Mixcoat's tax was paid at ten forty-three last night."

"Who paid it?"

"Can I have the case number this relates to?" she asked, and Marlot hesitated. "Mister Blackclaw, you know I can't release it without a case number, you said it was in relation to an investigation."

"Yeah," he said, feeling his ears heat. "I might have stretched things a bit."

"So she isn't relevant?" the female demanded sternly.

"She is," he replied, "but it's complicated and I'm not sure how well I could

defend my case if brought before a board of inquiry.”

“I see.” She paused. “Why don’t you run it by me and I’ll tell if it’s enough?”

Marlot arranged the information in his head, having to hunt down too much of it as they scattered the instant he wasn’t paying attention. He definitely needed sleep.

“Alright. I’m confident the body I’m investigating he her mate, but officially he died a few years ago, so I can’t actually put his name on the case. Or I can, but it doesn’t link to an ID, and without that, well...” He trailed off, trying to remember what he’d meant to say.

“And without an ID, she can’t be reported as the body’s mate,” she said. “Can you match the DNA?”

“It’s being processed.”

“I’m afraid that until you have at least that, there’s nothing I can do.”

“I understand. I’ll see what I can do to speed things up.” He disconnected and checked the queue; eleventh. Estimated time? Two days. He could tell them to jump the queue, he had the authority, but they’d get back at him with his next request and he’d have to snap at them again, and again. He didn’t want to create an antagonistic relationship with the labs. Too much of his work depended on them to go smoothly.

“This had to have worked so much better when we were part of the enforcers and could just tell the captain to get them to speed it up. It was him they’d get angry at, not me.”

He straightened and cursed his tired mind. He should have started with him. He placed the call.

“RI Blackclaw,” Vlein said. Even his listing within the RB only had his first name. “It’s good to hear from you. If you’ve filled the form and want to know how to get it to me, courier will work well enough.”

“That’s not why,” Marlot replied, wondering what form he could mean, then annoyed the male thought that would have been at the top of his list of things to do. Still, he needed to remember where he’d put it. He should scan it in his pad. It would simplify things. “I need your help with something. Hardir Mixcoat’s mate was killed last night. I got the confirmation her tax was paid, but I’m looking for who paid it. The timing’s a little suspicious since I talked to her a few days ago.” It was a few days, right? He also decided not to mention the package until he’d seen it. It could be nothing. Sure, again the timing was too suspicious. “How did the other RIs deal with their walking dead body? How did they justify speaking with the relatives and all that? How are you even going to file this once I fill out this form?”

“I can’t tell you how they explained things to the relatives, if they even bother with them. Once you have the form filled out, we charge the current killer with the tax we calculate. The body itself is marked as unidentified.”

“The system accepts that?” if they could use something like that, that old goat would have been a lot easier to deal with, he thought.

“I can have the system accept it. In the end, it only cares that the tax is paid. The details are somewhat irrelevant. The classification belongs to the Missing Person Bureau,

so it gets filed on their side.”

So much for making his life easier. That department didn't like taking on other people's cases. “Has anyone investigated the fact they died twice?”

“That is the enforcer's department. Once I'm satisfied the Revenue side is closed, I forward the details to them. You'd have to check there to find out what happened.”

Marlot nodded and pulled his pad to enter Bahamel's number, frowning when he noticed he was already on a call. Right. He had to finish that one first. Was he done with it? Wasn't that why he was about to call her? No, he still needed something.

“Can you get me the details of Mirden Mixcoat's death? I talked with her a few days ago, and now she died. I find it suspicious considering you mentioned organized crime had to be involved with the walking dead. It's possible her death is linked to that of her mate.”

“How about you drop by this afternoon? I'll have the information for you then.”

Marlot nearly told the male he was mated, then remembered this was business, and it was his office he wanted him to drop by. As soon as he was done with his call, he was going out and getting a few cases of stimulant drinks. He would not be getting any sleep today.

“Is there anything else, Mister Blackclaw?”

“What? No, thanks.” He disconnected and entered the next number.

“Hey Wolf,” Bahamel greeted him. “Tell me you aren't calling because your lion is in trouble and you're considering doing something utterly stupid.”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that's why I'm calling?”

Bahamel didn't immediately reply. “Are you seriously asking me that?”

Of course, he was, he couldn't understand why would she's think—oh. “Right. Never mind. I'm stalking on stim juice right now. I spent the night programming.”

“Nothing better to do with your lion?”

He sighed. “No, the case is getting him down, and I decided to give him some space. I need you to tell me what you know about bodies dying twice.”

“They Return,” she stated.

“Excuse me?”

“The vid. If you want a good one about people dying multiple times, that's the one you want.”

“Not science fiction, fraud.”

“That's your department,” she said, sounding miffed.

“The financial side of it, yes, and I'm dealing with that, but there have been other cases that were forwarded to the enforcers once we closed them. They involve organized crime, and that's your department.”

“Marlot, I have no idea what you're talking about. I've never seen any reports about bodies dying twice.”

“But you're in charge of Vice. They have to have been set to you.”

“Do you trust the person who told you that?”

“He's got me filling paperwork so he can calculate the body's value even if the

ID's already paid, so yes, I do."

"How many such bodies are you talking about?"

"Eight over the last five years. I have the files with me if you want to look at them."

She hummed thoughtfully. "There's no way eight of them happened and I haven't heard anything about it."

"Well, they did happen. Vlein at the RB is giving me paperwork to fill out because of mine."

"I'm not doubting you, Wolf. I'm annoyed at the implications. I'll get back to you about getting a copy of your files. I want to see what I can claw out of people first."

"So you'll look into it?" Marlot asked, immensely pleased that he'd talked her into doing it. "Oh, please tell me I didn't just bully you into doing what I want."

"Why would you think you can even do something like that?" she asked.

"I have a bad habit of bullying people into doing what I want. I even locked Trem out of his pad. That's why he walked out on me. If I'm doing it to you, I need you to tell me."

"Marlot?"

"Yes?"

"Get some sleep."

"I can't. Too much work to do."

She sighed. "I'll tell you what I find out once I do. In the meant time, sleep!"

"Thanks." He disconnected as she protested. What next? The package. He had to confront a grieving family to get his hand on it.

"Stim juice first," he told himself. Falling asleep while driving was considered a bad thing.