

Marlot made his way through the crowd as gently as he could. Like most crowd, it was composed in large part of prey species and he didn't want to scare them away, not when the body heat they generated kept the frigid temperatures at bay. He reached the line keeping them away from his crime scene and showed his ID to the enforcer keeping watch. Once confirmed as the RI who owned the territory, the officer lifted the tape for him. Reluctantly, Marlot left the crowd of warm bodies to go attend to his cold one left to rot on this construction site.

The one good thing about the weather was that the body would be preserved.

The zebra standing in the middle of the exposed site told him where his body was located. Killings in exposed locations like this were rare. Predators like to herd their prey to back alleys where there were fewer escape routes, and accidental killing happened in homes as the result of an argument.

He showed his ID. "RI Blackclaw. What can you tell me?" The body was on its stomach, partially obscured by the lightly falling snow.

"It's too fucking cold," the zebra answered, teeth chattering.

Marlot nodded. Even he was feeling it, and unlike the zebra, he had a decent covering of fur, along with the light jacket. He had to keep something heavier in his car all year long and not wait until winter started. "Now, tell me something about the body."

"Wolf, it's been there for no more than eight hours. It's when security did the rounds before it was discovered."

No fencing meant anyone could walk through the site. The building looked like some retail place, half-built. With the cold weather, it might have been the wolf's destination, free protection against the cold.

"It was found by that guy over there. He called it in and hung around until we got here. Been pretty accommodating, if skittish for a predator." The male in question was an emaciated mink in rags and little else. The fur looked matted and couldn't provide any more protection than the zebra's and he was without a uniform.

"Is anyone getting him something warm?"

"No one has anything warm," the zebra complained, hugging himself. "It wasn't supposed to get this cold today. We haven't broken out the winter gear yet."

"Then have someone bring blankets. I'm not having my lone witness die of exposure." Marlot looked the zebra over. "Maybe keep one for yourself."

He walked to the mink, who took a step back before catching himself. The male was hardly more than skin and bone. He wouldn't be worth anyone's time, but those as desperate as he was to eat.

"RI Blackclaw," Marlot introduced himself, showing his ID. "You are?"

"G—G—Galden," the mink stammered.

"What can you tell me about the body?"

"I called it in." His teeth chattered hard enough to make the word difficult to understand. "I could have kept it, but I called it in. It's mine now, right?"

Marlot nodded, surprised the male knew that regulation. It had been put in place to help ensure unclaimed death were reported instead of taken away as free food. But like

most of the laws, people didn't go looking for them, so it wasn't as helpful as the revenue bureau had hoped.

"As soon as I close the case, you'll be able to eat it."

"How long's that going to take?" Galden hugged himself tighter, not that it did anything to stop his shivering. "I haven't eaten anything in days."

"I don't know, but the more you can tell me, the faster it will go. It'll be a few days at least, maybe a few weeks." He motioned to the approaching zebra before the officer stopped. He had bundles of blankets in his arms.

"Can I take a bite now?" the mink pleaded, moving so Marlot was between him and the officer and closer that was appropriate. "It doesn't have to be a big bite, something you won't need, anything. I'll even take a foot."

"I can't let you do that." He took one blanket and handed it to the mink, who looked at it suspiciously before taking it. "The body has to remain in its current condition until the examiner is done with it, then in the freezer until the investigation is concluded."

"I'm not going to last that long." He put the blanket over his shoulders, then eyed Marlot suspiciously as the wolf offered him another one.

"Take it, not freezing to death if your first priority. You can't enjoy the meat if you're dead. You can keep the blankets."

The mink tied the next blanket around his waist, the other one went over his shoulders too and the fourth around his chest. They seemed to cause him to shiver even harder.

"What were you doing here? You should be at a shelter."

"All full," the mink replied, pulling the blanket over his muzzle. "I come here." He indicated the half-finished building. "The guards don't mind so long as I don't touch anything, and it's protection from the wind and snow. I saw the body on the ground and thought I'd finally have a real meal, but I thought about his family. If I did that, they wouldn't know he was food now. Maybe they'd think he just left them. So I called you instead." He hugged himself tighter. "Now I'm not going to eat at all," he grumbled.

Marlot started to turn to examine the body and stopped. He didn't know why, but the mink reminded him of the moose he'd nearly scared to death. His problems weren't Marlot's, he had the statement, and there was nothing there overly useful. It wasn't his job to feed this homeless male. It would be wasted meat, anyway; he'd be eaten himself in a few days if the weather didn't finish him.

But the body was his by law. He'd done his duty, reported it when he could have kept it. A missing body fell under the Missing Person Bureau's responsibility, not his, and as far as Marlot knew their closing rates were abysmal. The mink wouldn't have been caught with it.

He searched his pocket. He had something non-electronic to write with, in one of them. Trembor's doing; because it was impossible to know when your pad would fail. Considering his lion's habit of forgetting to charge his; it was a valid reasoning. He pulled the worn, hardly used, writing pad and pen and wrote a note on it.

“Do you know the Spottedspine Processing Store?” he asked the mink, who shrugged noncommittally. He did a visual estimation of the body and wrote the information down before handing the page over. “Go there and hand this to Ezk’Eriel. He knows me and he’ll give you a week’s worth of meat. If you don’t have a place to store it, I’m sure you can arrange daily visits. Once the investigation is concluded, I’ll bring the body there and they’ll have the rest prepared for you.”

The mink eyed the paper suspiciously before snatching it. Marlot suspected it was the only expression the male had left.

“What if it takes more than that?”

“Have Ezk’Eriel call me then.” The body wasn’t overly large but looked healthy. It wouldn’t last Marlot more than two weeks, but he had a healthy appetite. The mink might stretch it longer. “I’ll work something out with them. If I need to talk with you, is there a place I can contact?”

The mink looked at the paper. “Here?”

Marlot would have preferred someone else, but the homeless weren’t known to be easy to reach. He headed to the body, taking out his pad and placing a call.

“Spottedspine Processing,” a male Marlot didn’t recognize answered, a cacophony of voices sounded as backdrop.

“Is Ezk’Eriel around?”

“Zeek here,” Ezk’Eriel said after a few seconds.

“It’s Marlot.”

“How can I help you?”

“A homeless mink is going to show up asking for you. He has a note with a body’s dimensions. I have the body here. I need you to advance him the meat.”

“It’s not really something we do.”

“I know, but the male did the right thing and he going hungry.”

“How long until you bring the body in?”

“A week, probably.”

The hyena sighed. “Alright, I’ll check with mom so she’ll keep something palatable for him.”

“Thanks.” He disconnected and crouched by the body. He dusted the snow off it and immediately noted the position of the head. At least that part would be easy.

He activated the recorder. “The body is a wolf, middle-age is the best I can do for age in these conditions. Brindled fur, cause of death will have to be confirmed by the examiner, but the head is twisted at over ninety degrees, so a broken neck is the most likely cause. No smell test for time of death, temperatures are well below freezing and it snowed, but the enforcers have records of the security patrols on the construction site which shows that as of the last patrol, eight hours ago as of this recording, there was no body present. The body was reported by a homeless male under the body-reporting clause, making him the legal owner. Name and information are in the enforcer’s possession, as is his testimony.”

He paused the recording while he searched the body; removing more snow. “No

wallet on the body, no ID found. So the possibility exists the killer is just slow in paying the tax. The weather has turned bad today.” If that was the case, it would make Galden’s claim on the body tedious, but that would be a legal issue and not his problem, other than getting a new body to hand over to Ezk’Eriel.

“No possessions on the body at all, which raises the possibility this is a robbery turned into a killing. The clothing is worn, but in good condition, no visible indication of rips due to claws.” He couldn’t pry the muzzle open, so limited the check to feeling the teeth. “Dentition is intact, so that’s the most likely route to identify the body if he isn’t in the DNA registry.”

The clacking of metal made him look up at a bundle of black with the only spots of red visible being around the eyes and nose tip. “Did you somehow know the weather was going to turn?” he asked the frog.

“Only you furred people take the weather for granted,” Jaxca answered, his voice muffles to near incomprehension. “Us cold-blooded people can’t do that. My heated outdoor clothing is always in my car.”

“I need to get myself one of those,” the zebra pushing the gurney commented. “I’d kill my grandpa right now for taking the family this far north if he wasn’t already dead.”

Jaxca snorted. “Come back to me with your complains after you missed two days’ work because you set out to work in the garden and the temperature dropped unexpectedly.”

“Your mate left you outside?” Marlot asked in disbelief, taking the gurney from the officer.

“She was away at a conference,” the frog answered, crouching next to the body. “She found me when she returned. How old?” He pressed different locations on the torso.

“No more than eight hours.”

“The temperature dropped below freezing four hours ago, and he feels about four hours hard, so that puts the death at between four and eight hours.” He indicated the neck. “That’s yet another broken neck.”

“This isn’t the work of the hunter,” Marlot said.

“I saw the news. I’m glad he’s off the street. I’m not seeing any defensive indicators, but I’m going to need you to turn him over. He’s frozen in place.”

Marlot forced the body onto its back as carefully as possible. The shirt broke, taking some fur with it as it stayed attached to the ground.

“Nothing on this side either,” Jaxca said. “My preliminary report is that he was surprised from behind by someone strong.”

“So not a robbery,” Marlot said.

“Predators don’t usually go down without a fight,” The frog noted. He looked at the claws. “No visible blood. I’ll check for bruising once he thaws. Help me lift him on the gurney. Leaving him here isn’t going to get you answers.”

With the body on it, Marlot motioned for the zebra to help the frog. He looked the scene over. That was a lot of ground to cover with no idea where the clues would be, not

to mention the snow over everything. He pressed a hand on the sandy ground and it remained firm. His weight didn't break it either, he had to slam his foot down for his heel to break the frozen ground.

“Does anyone have an air blower?” he asked the returning zebra.

“That isn't standard equipment,” the male replied.

“Then get me one, there's a chance the cold preserved the killer's footprints.”

The zebra looked around, grumbling something about it wasn't an enforcer's job to run errands. Marlot smiled. An enforcer's job was whatever an RI told them when a body was involved.

“Think about it this way,” Marlot told the zebra. “Whoever goes get it for me gets to be out of this cold for a while.”

The zebra stared at him, then was off running.