

Marlot was halfway through assembling the computer when his pad buzzed with a message from Ukely.

*Work's boring so I'm making it a short day. Going to go hang with friends. If you need me to drive you home, it'll take a little longer to pick you up.*

He didn't bother replying. He understood what she meant, and, not that he expected anyone intercepting his message to be technical, but she was also not lying. Joren, Afirna, and Harik were her friends.

He went back to building the computer. He kept the design simple, with off-the-shelf parts—Harik would scream if he knew—but Marlot preferred spending the money on processing power and memory rather than a brand name with components designed for specific but narrow tasks.

Not that he didn't appreciate a dedicated computer that could outclass anything Marlot built, but his needs were more general.

He had the computer assembled and was halfway through installing the operating system when his pad buzzed with the office tone. It was almost at the point where it would transfer to the buffer when he remembered he's set Hela'han home with Jesdan.

"RI Marlot Blackclaw speaking," he hurried to say.

"Sounds like I'm bothering you," Joren said with a chuckle. "Has that secretary finally had enough of your drooling over her? You know, keeping your potential meal under your employ had to break some sort of employment rules."

"Funny, I don't think her future mate would let me eat her, if that had ever been my intention."

"I never took you for the kind to let that stop you."

"He didn't see the beating he took from the people who broke into the office to keep her safe. She was too shaken to work. And I'm rebuilding the computer they broke apart in their search."

"Will that keep you busy long?"

"What wrong?" Marlot tried to keep his tone casual, but if they were in trouble because of—

"My computer's shitting garbage on me."

"What?" this didn't make sense.

Joren sighed. "I think I let in a malicious program. Before you complain about me going on site I shouldn't, I was careful."

"You don't—" Marlot's brain finally caught up to the situation. Joren was one of the more aware programmers he knew. Not only wouldn't he go to any site with malicious programs, but he had written his own code to keep them out of his computers. So if this call wasn't about his computer. "—call getting infected being careful."

He looked at the progress bar, still forty percent to go. He couldn't leave until it was installed. The checks he could run tomorrow, or even later. In a pinch, his pad had all he needed to work a case.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Joren sounded chastised. "When could you come over and fix it?"

“I need maybe thirty minutes to get my computer to a point I can leave it alone. Then I’ll have to bus to your place, my car’s still in the shop.” He didn’t want to call Ukely in case someone was watching her. She’d be at Harik’s place, but so would Joren at this point.

“Can’t you be here quicker?”

“I’m not rushing just because you weren’t careful, Joren. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, we’ll be waiting.”

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The door to Harik’s house opened, and the mouse remained hidden behind it. “Get in,” he said. Once he closed the door, he nodded to the last of five isolation cages on the side table. They looked hurriedly put together, but they would be effective in blocking any signals from the pads in each of them. Marlot placed his in the empty cage. Harik didn’t call his condition paranoia. He called it extreme carefulness.

In silence, Harik led Marlot to the other side of the house. One of the bedrooms had been converted into a workroom with five computers set up in the center in a circle, three of them occupied by his friends. With that door closed, Harik relaxed.

“As far as I can tell, no one is watching my house, but we’re not taking any chances. These systems were put together from parts I had lying around.”

“Except his,” Afirna said, looking at the Interon on one desk with envy.

“Privilege of being in my house,” Harik replied. “We’ve already digitized everything, and we started looking through the information, but we’re missing context to make sense of it.”

Marlot sat at the last computer. It looked ugly, without the case and components poking out at odd angles because they had been designed for a larger computer, but it would out-perform anything Marlot used. Harik’s leftovers were better than anything Marlot could afford, the privilege of selling his services to computer parts manufacturer as tester and engineer. He got all the best stuff.

“Context,” he said, ordering his thoughts. “A body was left unclaimed in my territory. Turns out his tax was paid five years ago, he was walking around days before it was reported, so it’s not some joker who kept the body in a freezer all this time. Looking into his movements, I’ve been able to link some of it to organized crime, which resulted in my car being sabotaged, the body’s wife being eaten, and because I consulted with the revenue bureau on this, me being drafted into finding a way to codify whatever work these walking dead are doing so they can be properly taxed. So take it seriously when I say this is dangerous stuff.”

“Oh, I was taking this seriously already,” Harik said. He forced a smile. “My safety is always top priority.”

“Okay,” Ukely paused. “That actually helps with what I was going through.” She typed something and names and images appeared on Marlot’s screen, the others too, by how intently they studied them. “I had that first page of names, I narrowed the search to this city only and because that number doesn’t correspond to an ID, I removed anyone

alive. Because of the message you passed me in the car, I thought they were people whoever you're looking into killed and didn't want found, so I cross-referenced them with the missing person bureau, no luck, but then I got a series of pings as part of people who's tax was paid. The time frame is between six months to ten years ago, with one outlier at thirteen."

"How many pings?" Joren asked, already typing.

"Twenty-eight out of the fifty-three on the page I had."

"There were two other pages with names not connected to IDs," Marlot said.

"I have page two," Afirna said.

"Starting on page three," Harik.

"Sending you the program I wrote to speed things up," Ukely said.

Harik looked up. "You call this a program? It's a mess."

"We can't all be the genius you are," the zebra replied. "That's what I can write in fifteen minutes. It works."

"But you have redundant command calls and—"

"Can we focus?" Joren said. "If it works, we use it. When we're done we can work on cleaning it up. I'm sure someone would be happy to pay for a program that can tabulate who pays whose tax from outside the revenue bureau."

"Insurers, for one," Marlot mumbled, using his RI ID to pull more detailed information on the people's death. Writing a quick program of his own, it took the information on who paid the taxes and created a file with them.

"I'm pulling those who paid the tax," Afirna said.

"Ignore anything Ukely already sent," Marlot replied. "Already doing those." They exchanged a smile, and he didn't ask how she was getting the information out of the bureau. Unlike him, she didn't have authorized access.

"Then I'm sending what I have to you and I'm going to look into the deads' backgrounds."

More names appeared on his screen and he modified his program so it automatically added any names sent to his computer, while he kept an eye on the result of the program. A lot of names repeated. At a glance, Marlot thought that for every ten dead, there was only one person that had paid their taxes. In a city this size that made sense, but that each of them then turned up in a file of walking dead?

"Harik, how comfortable are you getting into the banking system?" Marlot asked.

"I'll take that," Joren answered with a smile. "I happen to love the banking system's programs, so accommodating to an outsider." The typing paused for a second as they all stared at him. Joren shrugged, and the typing restarted.

"I'm sending you those who paid the tax," Marlot said. "that's a lot of money from an individual. Work out their income scheme." Another modification to his program so it would automatically send the results to Joren.

"I have something resembling a common denominator," Afirna said. "I'm seeing a lot of financial troubles in the weeks before they 'died'."

"If you were already in the banking system," Joren said, "you could have said so."

“I’m not, I’m looking through creditor sites and communications. The interesting thing is that all those problems stop with the deaths.”

“Normal,” Harik replied. “The dead can’t pay.”

“But they all have families. The debts were shifted there, but the survivor’s benefits were enough to cover them, and with enough left over for the family to get back on their feet.”

“No, you have something wrong there,” Ukely said. “If they were in trouble already that means their tax was in freefall, survivor benefits correspond to their tax. There’s no way they’d get enough to deal with debt.”

“And yet they do,” Marlot said. “Mirden, my body’s wife said something similar. After he died, the benefits came in and they were able to get out from under the debts. She also mentioned some luck in getting a better job.”

“Adding that to what I’m looking into,” Afirna said. “I’m trying to find a provenance for the payments. I’m guessing this was part of the incentives to get the bodies to go along with whatever this is.”

“Undocumented workers,” Harik said. “Without any recourse to escape their situation.”

“Serfdom,” Joren added in a whisper.

They all stopped. Serfdom was something Marlot had only heard of in history class. History so old it predated the tax system but had kept going past it. For as long as there had been kings, there had been serfs. People without value or rights; forced to work for almost nothing. If hunger didn’t take them, it was one of the other serfs to the people in charge of watching over them. He didn’t remember when that system had been overturned, but the idea of it still existing, even in an altered form, made Marlot sick.

The system of predation they had was based on the concept that everyone had a right to ensure their survival. It wasn’t always easy, some gave up on it, but the right was there. Work hard enough and you became too expensive for the average predator. Work even more and fewer of them could afford you.

That a group of people was reduced to nothing more than the homeless, while still having to work was wrong. If they worked, they had value.

Marlot looked at the names still appearing. More walking dead.

This was why Hardir had died. Had let himself be killed. So that this injustice would be brought to light.

Marlot would honor him by doing just that.

He’d shine a light so bright on the people behind this it would burn their value away and then they would be hunted down and feed those they had wronged.

He smiled. Trembor would like that kind of justice.