

The store was busy with people dropping off bodies or picking up the orders. Exk'Eriel happened to look in his direction when Marlot joined the line, so he waved to him with his free hand. He was carrying a bag with the unfolded and washed blood container from his previous kill.

Exk'Eriel nodded then went back to talking with his customer, a slightly overweight alligator. Marlot could hear them over the noise of the crowd, but it didn't seem to be going well. The alligator was gesturing emphatically, and Exk'Eriel was shaking his head.

Marlot checked the time, he'd taken into account how busy the store would be, so he should be able to get home, put the meat in his freezer and still be to Harik's place on time. He might have to forgo the shower. The smell of meat would make the mouse uncomfortable. Hopefully, the line for the pickups would move quickly.

Drugar was at the counter with Exk'Eriel, but he was handling the pickups and sale of the pies. While the other three moved the orders outside to be transferred into the cars. The bundles of meat had a protective wrapping and were stacked on pushcarts.

The line moved steadily, and half an hour later he was at the counter. "Marlot. I dropped off my kill yesterday. I'll also take three pies." If he didn't have to worry about prepping his food, he should be able to grab a quick shower.

"Horse," Drugar read off the screen, "Just the meat and fifteen quarts of blood."

"Just fifteen?"

The hyena checked. "Yes, it says we could keep ten."

Marlot nodded. "My estimation of his mass was off. I thought I'd get twenty quarts out of him."

"Well, considering you left us everything else, I can get you the five quarts, it won't be from your kill though."

Marlot smiled. "Thanks, but I don't have the time. I'll manage." If he had to, he could buy some preserved blood from the convenience at the end of his block, even if he hated the way that stuff tasted.

Agasmil rolled out a cart as Marlot paid for the pies. "Marlot Blackclaw?" the hyena asked.

"Yes, that's me."

"Just point me to your car."

Marlot helped him move the meat to the trunk

"Thanks, Agasmil," Marlot said as the hyena pushed the cart away.

The hyena stopped and turned. He studied the wolf. "Sorry, but do we know each other?"

"Not really, I'm usually here twice a month. I caught your name from discussions between you and your brothers."

"Ahh, okay. Sorry, I don't think I ever noticed you before."

"It's okay, you deal with a lot of people every day. I wasn't expecting you to remember me. Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too."

The hyena was still looking in Marlot's direction with a puzzled expression as he pulled out of the parking lot. Once home he pulled out his own cart and moved the packs of meat and blood to it. He counted twenty-five packs. The hyena put three pounds to a pack, so each was one meal. Considering he and Trembor usually had lunch at the office from the meat there, he was good for almost the next month. That had been a good kill.

With everything in the freezer and a quick shower, he headed out. Harik lived in a neighborhood on the other side of the core. And even with his pad directing him around the worse of the traffic, he was a few minutes late.

The house was large. On paper it was for a family of six, as were all the houses around, and the others had children playing in the front yard under parent supervision. Harik didn't have a family, but he was wealthy from his work in electronics and he could afford to pay to have the paperwork misfiled so no one evicted him.

"Like dad always said, 'Wealth has its privilege'."

The door opened before he could buzz. "If you weren't here in the next five minutes I was going to start without you," the mouse said.

"Thanks for waiting."

"Thanks for showering," Harik spoke quickly and looked around nervously. Marlot thought he was making the mouse nervous, being twice his size, and a predator. He had no way to know since he'd never seen the mouse outside of these meetings.

They walked by rooms filled with electronics. Every bedroom except for his bedroom, and his office looked like someone had shredded computers and pads and left the parts piled up on the floor.

Marlot didn't know how the mouse could work in this environment, but he couldn't deny his success. Harik had designed the hardware for the Slasher, which was why he was getting one month before it was available to the public.

"Finally!" A raccoon exclaimed, rubbing her hands together.

"Alright, we finally get to see the wonder." Said a rabbit stretched on the couch.

"Afirna, Joren," Marlot greeted them. "Where's Ukely?" She was the last of their quintet.

"She can't make it Joren said, getting up and moving to the desk, on which was a large box with the Interon logo on each side. The rabbit put a claw under one of the flaps, but it was slapped away by Harik.

"Patience, patience. My system, my privilege to own it."

"Then you better do it before I get too impatient," Marlot said. As usual, they were nervous in his presence. They couldn't help it, he was a predator, and he couldn't help reacting to it himself,

finding himself slightly on edge and wanting to chase one of them.

He wouldn't do it. Not only was it impolite in the extreme to hunt your host or his guests, they were his friends.

Harik carefully opened the box, then pulled the system. It was a black cube, close to a foot on all sides. Harik placed it in the center of the desk.

"That's it?" Afirna said. "The way you were talking about it, I was expecting something more impressive."

"Where's the screen?" Marlot asked.

"They didn't ship it with one, I have plenty." Harik pulled one from the floor and set it on the box.

Joren grabbed a keyboard and handed it to the mouse.

"I won't need it."

"Errr, isn't this how you interact with a system?"

"Yes, but the Slasher comes with its own keyboard."

Marlot studied the system. mate black plastic casing with no visible seams. He expected them to be on the underside, as not to mare the simplicity of the design. That was one of the things Interon was consistent on.

"I don't see where it's stored," the wolf commented.

"That's because it isn't one." The mouse pressed the corner, and the system beeped. The screen flashed and the Interon logo appeared. Less than five-second later the screen showed the standard display.

"They sped up the boot-up," Afirna said.

"It has the new Interon Slasher processor, it's using milicent circuitry in HAFIM encoding, just that doubles its speed. Memory is now on flatline connection so information transfer if up to a millionth of a second."

Marlot was impressed. "Is it still on the A-Core language?"

"Yes, they considered going to Sintico, but not enough programmers use it."

Marlot was happy about that. He knew Sintico, but he found it too bulky of a language, for all that it was supposed to make programming more intuitive. A-Core was still his preferred language.

"I still don't see the keyboard," Joren mentioned.

Harik smiled. "That's because you're not looking. it's right here." The mouse tapped the empty desk in front of the system, and the keyboard appeared.

"It's a light projection?" the raccoon asked.

"yes. the projector is at the base of the casing. the size can be adjusted, and it had location perception is extremely accurate." He quickly typed commands, bringing up management windows and then the code for the operating system.

Marlot looked at it, but it was going by too fast to make much of it. Harik wasn't showing that to them, just how responsive the keyboard was.

"I think they didn't take into account a good part of the

population." Marlot wriggled his fingers, and then typed on the desk, his claws clicking loudly against the wooden surface. "There's a lot of us who either don't have retractable claws, or don't constantly trim them short. I'm going to gouge holes on my desk in no time this way."

Harik nodded. "It still recognized external keyboards. You don't have to use the integrated one."

"Good," Joren said. He put the keyboard he was holding on the desk. "Move over, I want to see what this baby can do."