

“Excited to be back on the job?”

“Couldn’t be any happier, Boss.” Jon had finally worked off the weight brought on by the incident with Gage’s restaurant. His body was as pristine as ever; a smooth and lean build that was attractive to the ladies but still granted him agility, a *dangerously* attractive jawline, and his stocky arms and shoulders. “That diet program was a blessing, Boss! I don’t even want to see another spoonful of chili in my whole life after what happened...”

“Being heavy’s not that bad, but different strokes for different folks, I suppose.” The large canine pushed his cigarette butt into the copper ashtray on his desk. “But you’re very lucky. I have a case lined up just for you.”

“As a welcome gift, or because no one else wanted to take it?”

“You’re free to interpret it however you like.” He handed Jon a folder out of his drawer.

“Ever heard of Silver Valley?”

“Remote mountain town? They specialize in fishing. Salmon, specifically.”

“Atta boy. That’s the one.”

Jon opened the folder, looking over the files inside. Pushing his clawed finger against the words, he began reading it out loud. *“For the last two months, a strange affliction began to appear across the fox population in Silver Valley. An obesity epidemic coupled with bouts of fevers, hysteria, and delusions. Patient Zero was a fox named Tate Johnson. He became a recluse, stopped showing up to work, and refused to answer calls from his family or friends. He was then found in his apartment bedbound two weeks later.”*

“Fucked up, huh?”

“Gage’s in jail, so it’s probably the Void Cult. That’s my first guess.” He had dealt with them in the past, but they went dormant two years ago. Most people thought that their numbers dwindled so much to the point that it became impossible for them to reform, but Jon wasn’t so sure. They worshipped a god of gluttony so intensely that they were willing to perform gruesome sacrifices on their force-fed victims. Simple inconvenience wouldn’t be enough to hold them down. “I think that they’re making a comeback.”

“Wouldn’t their MO involve, you know...” Boss grabbed a pen and moved his arm down, making a slashing sound—or the closest he could get to a sound like that—with his mouth. “...their guts open?”

“Well, they can’t make a show to let other members know they’re back if they just kill someone and dump it down the side of the road. There has to be an MO to show there’s a pattern to the strange things going on. It’ll probably make the news soon—”

“I’ll call to get that shut down. Alois will work with the rest of the cybersecurity team to make sure nothing online pops up either.”

“Seems you all have everything under control. When am I leaving?”

“Today.” Boss said flatly. “Your new partner will be at the meeting point. He’ll be driving you there.”

Jon scoffed. “Partner? When have I ever needed a partner before? I’m F.U.R.’s top agent. I don’t need a partner and I’ll certainly never need one! The runt you’re gonna saddle me with is probably only going to slow me down—”

Boss stood up and slammed his hands on the table, all the items on it bouncing slightly. “Get your head out of your ass, Jonathan. The disease only affects foxes and we’re not gonna find anything if you can’t sniff anything out. That’s why we’re sending a fox intern.”

“An *intern*? Boss, are you making me babysit?”

“I’m making you give a fellow employee *valuable* training, Jonathan.”

“So you *are* making me babysit.”

“Pretty much. Yes.”

Jon cocked his head up, letting out an elongated roar in an attempt to pester Boss into letting him work solo. He tried maintaining the whine, but ten seconds of continuous complaining with no reaction from his superior made him quiet down. “Alright... I just hope that he isn’t that much of a brat.”

“Everyone’s a brat when they’re recent hires. It’s part of the job experience.”

“Well, *I* wasn’t a—”

“Oh my GOD, Jonathan.” Boss bemoaned, the bridge of his nose pinched. “Go. I already sent you the location on your phone. Just get a damn cab and make sure you use your fake identity.”

“Yes, sir...” He said, almost like an annoyed child forced to comply to do his chores.

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The intern’s van was comfy. He certainly took better care of the seats than Boss. The kid was kind enough to not pester him with details. All that took was a flash of his F.U.R. badge and the fox let him in without questions. They had been driving for three hours, and the only sound inside the vehicle was the melody of hip-hop hits from the early 2000s that Jon wasn’t the biggest fan of, but if he asked him to change it, it would lead to an argument about what

music they should put on. ‘*Don’t make enemies out of your allies*’ Boss told him after his first dispute in the agency.

“We’re almost here.”

John looked out in awe at the town below. A massive river broke through the town, splitting it into two even sides. Even from up the road, Jon could see a large array of fishermen and hunters gathered around the lake to catch fish through the stream. Despite the very quaint, humble infrastructure of wooden two-story houses that were built by the people that lived there a long time ago, there were convenience stores and a strange amount of food chains for such a small town. There were *two* of the same coffee chain on opposite ends of the town.

“What the hell? No wonder these idiots are eating themselves to immobility. I don’t see any local restaurants here.”

“Food’s cheap, and all they catch is exported outside. Not too many options.” The fox explained. “We’ll be staying in the hotel. It’s not too fancy, but it’ll help us blend in with the locals.”

“Don’t think it’s possible to blend in with people that live in the *mountains*, kid.”

“No, but we can pretend to be something else. There are a lot of people who pretend to be ghost hunters ever since people disappeared in the mountains a few years ago. No bodies, no climbing equipment, nothing.”

Jon chuckled to himself, rolling his eyes. “You believe in ghosts?”

“*No*.” The fox defensively replied, shrinking in his seat and tail bristling outwards. “But just going there without any lie will just going to get us in trouble.”

Jon didn’t respond. The kid seemed genuinely angry. That ‘no’ almost aged him a full five years up compared to the voice he was speaking with earlier. He seemed nice, but good manners rarely meant anything without experience.

“Ah, that makes sense, uh...”

“Sebastien.”

“*Sebastien*,” Jon whispered. “As soon as we settle into the hotel, we’ll go interview the victims. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

At least he follows orders... Jon began looking out the window. It had been a long time since he dealt with the Void Cult. He hoped that he hadn’t gotten rusty, especially when he was tasked with caring for someone else. Arriving with a dead body at HQ... he couldn’t even bear to imagine it. *...And I hope he keeps following them.*

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Most victims were sent out to nearby hospitals. The townsfolk were lucky that in old times, people decided to build settlements nearby to allow for commerce with farther away cities. A lot of traveling caravans—then in the future, trucks—meant that there needed to be medical services nearby. The nurses and doctors were old and weathered, yet still fiercely devoted to their careers.

“Alright. We should work with the most recent victim. Do you have the file, Sebastien?”

“Right here, Mister Jonathan.” He took a manila envelope out of his satchel. It seemed older than even himself from how much the color had begun fading from it. “Let me see...”

Name: Shasta Esteezev

Gender: Male

Species: Fox

Age: 25

Place of residence: Silver Valley

Employment: Silver Valley’s Fishery Unloading Boats

Important notes: Former alcoholic. Anger issues at home yet keeps to himself at work most of the time. He weighed 100 pounds when he disappeared.

On the evening of October 25th, Shasta went missing. His boyfriend said that he didn’t come home nor did he go out to drink according to the only bartender in town. He was found vomiting behind a convenience store, weighing 550 pounds, and naked. Shasta was in the middle of eating raw fileted fish when discovered and was quickly rushed to the hospital.

The patient presented a dangerously overstretched and overfilled stomach at the time of hospitalization. Further examination revealed several broken bones and internal bleeding when he was examined by doctors after treating his stomach.

He is currently taken care of by his boyfriend, Arjun Castilae.

“Unloading boats? I thought that they used the river in the center of the town to fish.”

“That’s the thing you’re confused about? Not, you know,”—he flicked his hand against the envelope—“this?”

“Seen stuff like that. The kid’s lucky that he even came out alive for this. Now, about those boats—”

“The main river is mostly for old people who don’t wanna budge from their fishing spots and recreational fishing. The actual exports are usually done on the outskirts of town with bigger bodies of water. Shasta’s one of the people dedicated to unloading the daily haul onto the trucks and taking it into town to be stored in a freezer.”

“Ah, that makes sense. We probably need to keep that in mind. How long is the trip between the fishing boats and the convenience store he was found in?”

“Thirty minutes by car, one hour and a half at a good pace on foot. With how heavy he ended up, I don’t think he would’ve been able to make it without a vehicle even if you gave him a full day of headstart...” Sebastien’s face scrunched up into an uncomfortable grimace. All the thoughts about the poor fox only seemed to twist his stomach into knots.

“Don’t get scared, now. Boss said that you were needed for the mission.”

“He did?”

It was impossible to tell if he was relieved or even more distraught by the news that Boss of all people had expectations of him. His face was too corroded by bubbling fear to tell.

“Yep. Now, get inside. We gotta interview a morbidly obese fox.”

They slowly opened the door. An absolutely massive figure lay behind the door, confined to its hospital chair by its weight. The fox was so massive that he didn’t even resemble a person, looking instead like a giant pile of flesh that was only alive through means not meant for mortal men. The peak of his belly was elevated far above his back by so many layers of adipose tissue that had piled up across what used to be a lean torso. The sight was horribly striking. His chunky arms and legs were suspended in the air by neon green elastic bands hanging from the ceiling, holding each limb up.

“Why aren’t they just using normal medical tape to hold him up?” Sebastien asked in a whisper.

“Too heavy for them. Something that’s real stretchy and won’t break is ideal for cases like this.” Jon said in a matter of factly way, still hushed.

“W-who’s there?”

Shasta’s voice was warbled and distant. It sounded as if he was talking through a thick, long cardboard tube. The pair inched closer, noticing that his cheeks had swollen to such a size that they dragged his face downwards, impeding his speech. The sagging fat attached to his face pushed against the rings that had begun to build around his neck. All the lard around his skull and land neck smushed up against each other, folding in on itself to make space for everything.

“Oh my god—” Sebastien stopped himself from speaking with a harsh elbowing from Jon. “Sorry...”

“We’re the police, Shasta. We’re here to find out what happened to you.” Jon pressed against Sashsa’s paw. It was soft, as if the fox was wearing a glove. “Do you think you could talk to us about what happened?”

“I-I already... explained...” His words were strained, the sound of heavy breathing parting his lips resembling a deflating helium balloon. “Why do I h-have to...”

“We have someone who we didn’t have before.” Jon cocked his head at Shasta, beckoning Sebastian to join in.

Stepping closer to the mountain of fox blubber, the rookie cleared his throat. “Hey. My name is...” He pulled out his fake ID. “*Sebastian*. I’m a fox, just like you.”

“Chaaan’t... see you...”

He inched closer, feeling a chill down his spine as he met eyes with Shasta. The morbidly obese fox’s eyes were squinted, pushed upwards by the supple pockets of fat filling his face. It was almost impossible to see Shasta’s brown pupils, forcing Sebastien to lean in closer to get a good look.

“Can ya see me now?” His voice turned softer, almost parental-like. “Try nodding if speaking is too painful.”

“C-can’t do it anymore... my neck’s too heavy. I can’t turn to the side either, t-to be honest...”

“No worries. I can stay still like this. Can you recall anything from the day you disappeared?”

“I-I was going home from the docks and then I felt like I blacked out. My car ended up crashing, right? Arjun keeps telling me to not worry, but overheard some policemen talking the first time that they came here.”

“Yeah. It ended up in the lake. They’re trying to pull it outright now.” Jon said. “You have insurance for that, by the way?”

“Y-yes. Arjun helped me pay for it. He’s... really nice. Most people would’ve left me when they saw me like this.”

“He’s a keeper,” Jon said. “Anything after that?”

“Everything turned into a blur after that... The only things I know are from people telling me what happened. I can’t recall anything on my own... I don’t even know how I managed to get the fish they found me eating.”

“A full crate of it, actually.” Jon pressed his thumb against his chin. How *did* Shasta manage to get the box of fish from work all the way to the convenience store? Even if he was picking away at the fish pile from the *second* he crashed the car—since if he had opened the crate before the car, the fish would’ve been sent flying into the bottom of the lake with the vehicle and nothing of the sort was found on the scene—it would’ve been hard. Technically possible, but hard to believe.

Sebastien didn't seem too enthralled with theory crafting about the methodology. He continued steadfastly focused on comforting Shasta. "Well... if you can't recall any specific memories, any feelings? The toxicology report was all over the place, so it would be of great help if you could help us narrow down what you were going through."

"I... I felt alone."

"Alone?" He gently pressed his thumb against the obese fox's palm, clutching it and the layers of blubber surrounding it. "What do you mean by that? Are you saying that you think no one saw you?"

"N-No... Well, I don't really know. That's not what I'm referring to." Shasta whined loudly, seemingly not out of pain but out of confusion. He scrunched up his face even more, eyes so clenched that it almost looked like they were completely closed. "I was alone. Not that I was away from people. It was like I was pulled out of the world..."

"Out of the world?"

"Dark. It was s-so dark..." His fat lips trembled desperately, the chins that hung off them jiggling from a sudden bout of movement. It was like seeing a giant pile of meat come to life, his entire body convulsing with a fervor that strained it to a painful degree. "I was starving to death. Organs eating each other. Cannibalizing. I was just... alone... and hungry... in the dark..."

"MOVE!" Jon dug his claws into Sebastien's shoulder, pulling him away from the shaking fox.

The bed underneath creaked out as if it was letting out wails of suffering. The springs were barely able to hold on against the thrashing, blubber-coated canine. The elastic bands holding Shasta's wounded limbs up were pulled taut by his sudden fit of violence, stretched and pulled to their limit, squeaky sounds of rubber being pulled piercing the pair's ears. Amidst the horrible symphony of medical equipment being pushed to the brink of snapping, the sound of Shasta's panicked breathing was piercing through it all. It was a horrible, abominable sound. It sounded like the dying wail of a feral animal.

"W-what is going on?!" Sebastien screamed.

"Stay back, stay back!" Jon knew that something was wrong. He had seen something like this before. Victims of the void cult—their bloated stomachs ruptured open with tarry, black goo seeping out of the wound—were always left desecrated so violently. He was lucky that he never saw the process, only the gruesome end.

The door burst open, panicked nurses and doctors entering the room and pushing past them, as the heartbeat monitor let out a wretched series of beepings, Jon knew it.

It was time to leave.

He gripped Sebastien's arm, squeezing it as hard as he could. The fox pushed back—he knew he would—and the puma could only pull back even harder.

“LET GO!” He screamed, sounding almost as panicked as the medical staff gathering around Shasta. “HE NEEDS HELP!”

“And *you* need to learn to remove yourself from dangerous situations!”

He wrapped his arm around Sebastien's head, engaging him in a headlock as he dragged him through the hospital hallway. The fox screamed and kicked as he desperately tried to claw away at Jon, but the Puma was as stalwart and unmoving as a wall.

“GOD DAMMIT, JON!” He yelled. “JON! *JON!*”

The puma didn't care for his complaints. Ignoring them and the weird looks he was getting from the staff, he kept walking.

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The weather in Silver Valley always turned for the worse once the sun went down. The already frigid weather would get strong enough that even species sporting thick pelts would need to cover themselves in thick winter clothing. The sound of freezing winds muted the sounds of drunkards having fistfights outside the bar and couples having domestic fights nearby the hotel.

“Are you still mad at me?”

Sebastien didn't respond. He kept his gaze focused on the window, looking at the water stream outside.

“This is just protocol. We can't reveal ourselves. We were just cops who wanted an interrogation. We weren't supposed to know *anything*.”

“Then what the fuck are we here for?!”

Sebastien sounded like a dejected, confused child. Jon thought he sounded like a petulant brat whining about the unfairness of the world. He was technically right, but what was *he* supposed to do about it?

“To solve this case. We *help* people by solving this case.” Jon affirmed with fangs clenched.

“And we can't *solve* the case if you tell everyone that we know more than the police. Do. You. Get. It?”

“But—”

“And even then, what could you have done that the doctors couldn't? You're just an *intern*, for god's sake.” Jon hissed. “You haven't seen the things that I've seen. This can't just be

solved by patching a wound and hoping the bleeding stops. I mean, for fuck's sake, the man *broke his bones* from how fat he got!"

"And why didn't you do anything?! If you know so much, how could you just stand there and let him get into critical condition?!"

"I have a responsibility. That goes above all." Jon bluntly stated. "If you don't like it, you can quit and go work a dead-end job in an office like every other schmuck in the country."

"Asshole."

That was the last thing Sebastien said to him before laying on his bed and turning away from the puma. His ears flicked down, entire body deflated with the bitter taste of defeat. He wanted nothing more than to fall deep into slumber and try to proceed with the investigation.

I should've never let Boss convince me to come here with him...

Suddenly, a high-pitched alarm filled the room. The screens on their F.U.R. receivers began coming off. The sound was like nails on a chalkboard, prompting the two to immediately spring into action and check them.

"There's a break-in in the Dalmartan convenience store five minutes from here..." Jon read out.

"And the suspect... is a fox."