

Marlot opened the door to Na'ego's office. The bear had liked it neat. The shelves held pictures of families from the town, and gifts his patients had given him. Cubs were the ones responsible for most of those. Small clay figurines, drawings indecipherable things made with sticks or, in one case, styluses.

Marlot still couldn't believe the bear had kept that. He didn't remember what he had tried to make with them, only that his father had been angry with him for using a box of styluses destined for the commune. It was clear from it Marlot hadn't been destined for the arts.

The desk had the computer, as well as a picture of Na'ego's father, whose fur had started turning gray with it was taken. A bowl contained sweets, which Na'ego kept insisting were for the cubs, although Marlot knew the bear ate most of them.

The chair was too large for Marlot to use, so he replaced it with one of the three smaller chairs on the other side of the desk. Turning the computer on prompted him for a password.

Marlot took out his pad and after a moment it connected to the computer. He set it to crack the security as Trembor entered the office.

"I had to leave Jaxca a message, he operating on someone."

"This could take some time." Marlot indicated the computer.

"Do you think there'll be information about the killer?"

"No idea. I'm hoping there's an indication as to why he went to the council hall in the middle of the night."

"Was he one of the councilors?"

"Yes, but they never work past dinner."

"You know the people here, did he have enemies?"

"Not by the time I left. As the only medic in town, he was liked by everyone. He's had arguments, but nothing that escalated past shouts."

"Without his ID we can't get in tax number, but as a councilor and medic, it can't be low. Do you really think he died while someone robbed him?"

"In the council chamber? No. Only the councilors have access to it and the cleaning staff. If one of those on the list was there, it's because Na'ego let them in, and he wouldn't have a reason to do that in the middle of the night. If it had happened here, I could have accepted it. Na'ego would help anyone. He wouldn't have had any problem opening his doors to a vagrant he didn't know."

"So for him to die in the hall, it means it's town business?"

"If you mean another councilor, I don't see it. They scream a lot, but I've never heard of any of them resorting to violence to get something done."

Trembor nodded. "Alright, then while we wait for you to have access to the computer, let's go through the list the lynx gave you."

"They aren't going to be the ones. I don't care what Arlion says, but no

vagrant could have taken Na'ego on.”

“Still, let's scratch as many off the list as we can. Can we remove the komodo and the coyote?”

“I want to confirm the yote's movement first. Some of the herbivores will have seen him, And the enforcer in Low Valley should be able to tell me if he passed through there.” He leaned back. “The komodo didn't look like she could do much, but she might have been better three days ago. The only problem I have with her is that if she stole Na'ego's things, where would she have put them?”

“We can have the enforcers look behind the restaurant, that's where the civet said she was found.”

Marlot chuckled. “We're going to want to do that ourselves. I don't trust Banerik to hand me toilet paper if I ask him to.”

Trembor nodded. “It shouldn't be difficult. I can do that now while you check on the others on the list.”

“Okay, try not to overreact if you see things done you aren't used to. Remember, this town has its own way of doing things.”

The lion smiled. “Don't worry, I won't embarrass you.” Then he left.

Checking in on the others in the list of suspects consisted of querying the arrest databases for their names for a start. Those he could find this way would almost certainly have an alibi for when Na'ego was killed.

Unfortunately, each town had its own database, so he had to send the query multiple times. He also sent it to the city, since vagrants almost always seem to find their ways there.

By the time he was done sending the last query, the first one had returned, and over the next ten minutes, they all came back. Two of the suspects were in a cage, one had been there for most of the week, the other for the last two days. Marlot checked the distance between here and that town, almost a day's travel by car, so no way for that vagrant to have killed Na'ego and ran there.

He ran the ID numbers of the other names against the list of anyone killed and claimed in the last two weeks. One number came up. That left five to account for.

He sent their names and descriptions to the enforcers in the surrounding towns with a request to be notified if they were located. He didn't think the killer was one of them, but now the council wouldn't be able to say he wasn't doing his job.

With that done, he called Low Valley's enforcer.

“Enforcer's bureau, Carniel speaking.”

“This is Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw. I'm hoping you can help me confirm someone traveled through your town recently.”

“Can I get your ID number? I don't recognize your name.”

Marlot sent it.

“Wow, a city RI,” Carniel said after a moment. “How are you looking for?”

“I’m actually investigating a death in Great Prairies. I’m looking for confirmation of whereabouts on a coyote by the name of Arches Longlegs. He’s a vagrant. He might have poached among your farmers.”

“I haven’t had any reports of poaching in over a month, we look after our prey. I also don’t have any reports about a vagrant yote.”

“Can you ask your patrollers? I’m trying to work up his movements to see if he might have been involved in the death.”

“Sure, might take a while to reach all of them. A few turn off their pads while patrolling. They claim it’s a distraction.”

“That isn’t a problem, he’s caged here, and I’m not letting him go until I know for sure he isn’t involved.”

“Before you go, can you explain to me why they brought in a city RI? I know they aren’t part of Fodel’s territory, but she’s local.”

Marlot considered it for a moment. He couldn’t tell him it was because the council expected to control him into closing this quickly. “I knew the dead,” he finally said. “They figured I’d want to deal with it because of that.”

“Okay, I see. Once I’ve talked to all my patrols, I’ll contact you.” He disconnected.

Marlot spent a moment trying to place Fodel, he’d heard the name before, then he remembered, she’d been a year behind him at the academy. A black bear, if he remembered correctly. Like him she’d studied to be a RI, which was why she’d gone to his town’s academy instead of hers—he couldn’t remember which town she was from.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Banerik growled, barging into the office.

“My job,” Marlot replied, checking on how getting into Na’ego’s computer was progressing.

“So your job consists of forcing my trainee to give you access to the lockup?”

Marlot smiled. “Actually, it does. I needed to see if the two in the cage had Na’ego’s stolen possessions.”

“Of course they didn’t. You think I’d let that pass if one of them did?”

The black wolf shrugged. “I didn’t get any reports on what you did or didn’t do as part of caging them. You weren’t there, so instead of interrupting what you were doing, we just took a look. No harm was done.”

“Yeah? Well, it seems your lion got Naria thinking she can learn the job through reading, instead of doing what I tell her to do.”

Marlot smiled, showing a bit of teeth. “What are you afraid of? After all, the books Trembor recommended are the same one you had to read during your

training.”

“I don’t need anyone interfering in how I train her.”

“Unless you’re not teaching her the proper way enforcers do things, I don’t see how we interfered.” He beamed at the lynx.

Banerik snarled at him. “You better remember who’s in charge here.” He spun and headed out.

“I know exactly who’s in charge,” Marlot yelled after him, and continued in a lower tone. “And it isn’t you.”

Trembor entered the office with a quizzical expression. “What’s got the lynx pissed?”

“We’re interfering in the training of his recruit.”

“Ah. So that’s why he tried to shove me out of the way.”

Marlot chuckled. Trembor had to mass twice as much as the lynx. “Did you find Na’ego’s things?”

“No, I even found the corner where the komodo had been sleeping recently. No ID or things of value.” His pad beeped. “It’s Jaxca,” he said once he checked it. He placed the pad on the desk.

“Jaxca, thanks for calling back promptly.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the frog answered. “But I don’t have good news. I can’t examine your body. I have operations booked for the next three days. You’re going to have to use the local medic.”

“He’s the body,” Marlot said.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Aren’t there any other medics? Towns like that have large populations, they can’t have only one medic.”

“The town proper only had five hundred people, the rest are in the communes.”

“Okay, then they have to have a few medics.”

“They have three, but none of them have training on examining bodies.”

Jaxca sighed. “Can he at least cut one open?”

“I expect so.”

“Okay, I can probably manage to find a couple of hours between operations, If you can set up cameras, I can guide him through it, and do a visual examination. I can tell him what to collect and you can send that to me to be processed.”

“Okay, it might take a while to locate one.”

“Just contact me when you do, and I’ll tell you what my schedule looks like. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go pick up my mate so we can go eat.”

“Enjoy.”

Trembor picked up his pad. “So how do we go about locating the medic?”

Marlot sighed. “I have to make calls.”

He wasn’t looking forward to that.

