

Marlot sighed and placed the call.

“Rosette’s Commune management, Preprio talking.”

“Hi, I need to know if any of the medics are at your commune.”

“I have no idea. I don’t keep track of their coming and going.”

“Okay, then can you tell me which one has the most experience?”

“How would I know that? I don’t keep track of their records, that’s the Blackclaw’s thing. They’re obsessed with keeping track of all those details. They’ll be able to tell you that.” She disconnected.

“Thanks,” Marlot said.

“Well,” Trembor asked.

“She didn’t know. They don’t all keep track of the medics since they only look after the herbivores.”

“What are we going to do if no one knows?”

“Someone’s bound to know.”

“Start by the last one on the list. It’s always the last person you’re planning on talking to that has the information you want.”

Marlot knew the last on his list would have the information, but he was hoping not to have to call them.

He called the second commune.

“Stripetail Commune,” a young-sounding male answered. “How can I help you?”

“I’m wondering if you keep records on the medics who operate in your commune.”

“Sure, but I can’t release that information.”

“My name’s Marlot, I’m a Registered Investigator. I’m looking into the town medic’s death.”

Trembor tilted an ear at him, but Marlot ignored the questioning expression.

“Oh, I guess I can give you that then.”

“Good. Who’s the best medic?”

Marlot heard the sound of typing.

“That’d be Urion Roundpoint.”

“Good.” Marlot remembered him slightly, an older ram. “Where can I find him?”

“That I don’t know. He was here this morning, but after treating two sprained ankles and half a dozen cuts he moved on to another commune. I think he was going to Hardback’s.”

“Thank you.” He disconnected.

“What’s with not using the medic’s name?” Trembor asked while Marlot looked for the Hardback’s number.

“I don’t want them to realize I’m familiar with him.” He found the number

and called it.

“Why?” Trembor asked.

Marlot indicated he was on the call instead of answering.

“Yeah?” a gruff female’s voice answered

“Is this the Hardback’s commune?”

“Yeah. What’s you want?”

“I’m looking for Urion Roundpoint.”

“You tried calling him?”

“I don’t have his number.”

“Look it up.”

“He’s a herbivore. He isn’t listed.”

The female on the other end sighed. “Right. Well, I don’t know where he is. Call the Blackclaws, the medics have to log their movements with them.” She disconnected, and Marlot looked at his pad in surprise.

“How come being a herbivore means he isn’t listed?” Trembor asked.

“Who’d need to call him?”

“Someone who’s hurt?”

“He only treats herbivores, the only one in town who has a reason to have a number was Na’ego, and…” he indicated the computer, which was still locked.

“Things are kind of weird here,” Trembor said.

Marlot shrugged and called the next commune

“Masked Commune, how can I help you?”

“I’m trying to find, or reach Urion Roundpoint.”

“Roundpoint? We don’t have anyone by that name working here.”

“He’s one of the commune medics.”

“Oh. I have no idea where he is. Check with the Blackclaws.”

“Do you have his number?”

A snort. “What would I do with a herbivore’s number?”

“Alright, thank you.”

Trembor raised his pad. “You want me to call the others?”

“No. There’s only a few more.” He considered calling his family’s commune, With his father’s obsession with tracking data they would have the medic’s number, but he might be the one to answer, or worse, his mother might.

He called the next commune, maybe one of the two others left had the information. After a quick conversation, both recommended he contacted the Blackclaw Commune. He no longer had a choice.

He called the commune and knew he was doomed as soon as he heard the female’s voice answering.

“Blackclaw Commune, what is your need?”

Marlot hesitated a moment on hearing his mother’s voice. He thought about

disconnecting, but she'd call him back.

"Hello, I'm trying to get the number for medic Urion Roundpoint."

There was a long silence. "Marlot?" she asked.

He stifled a sigh. Of course, she'd recognize his voice, just as he had hers. For a moment he considered lying, but she'd see through that. "Hello, mother."

"Oh Marlot, it's wonderful to hear your voice. How are you doing?"

"I'm well, mother. If you c—"

"I am so happy to hear that. I wish you'd called before. What have you been up to? Is the city treating you well? Have you found a nice female there?"

Marlot's ears folded back. He didn't want to deal with her questions, she was bound to ask something that would force him to lie to her. "I'm well, mother. Do you have Urion Roundpoint's number? It's important that I reach him."

"Of course I do. Why do you need to contact him?"

"I need his assistance in investigating Na'ego's death."

Her typing stopped. "You're in town?"

He closed his eyes. She'd have found out soon enough. Actually, he was surprised she didn't already know. "Yes. Arlion Tuff insisted I be the one to investigate it."

"Oh, that's wonderful. You need to come have dinner with us then."

"No!"

Trembor stared at him.

"No, I'm sorry mother, I can't tonight. I'm going to be working all evening."

"You shouldn't overwork yourself."

"I know, but I'm starting an investigation, I have to sort all the information as quickly as I can so I can move forward."

"Oh," she sounded disappointed. "Tomorrow then, you must come tomorrow. Your sister will be ecstatic to see you."

Marlot didn't want to go, he was certain what would happen, but he found he couldn't refuse outright. "I'll see if I can make it."

"I'll make your favorite."

Marlot smiled despite himself.

She gave him Urion's number, and she got him to promise to come for dinner. Only after that did she disconnect.

Trembor looked at him. "You didn't sound too happy to be talking with your mother."

Marlot winced. "Our relationship isn't as comfortable as yours with your parents." He leaned back and looked at the ceiling.

"What did she make you promise to do?" He chuckled at Marlot's surprised look. "Trust me, I've been there. I know what it sounds like when your mom extracts a promise out of you."

Marlot gave the lion a small smile. "We're going to have dinner with them tomorrow."

"Because we have to work tonight?"

Marlot winced again. "Am I such a horrible person for now wanting to see them right now?"

Trembor shrugged. "You have your reasons. But are we working tonight?"

"Until we have access to Na'ego's computer, or confirm one of the vagrants on the list was here when he was killed, there's little we can do."

"How about Roundpoint?"

"It's too late at this point. I'll call him tomorrow. Let's grab dinner and then get a room. I feel like relaxing."

Trembor jumped to his feet, rubbing his hands. "Yes. I can do with a good hunt. What?" he asked at Marlot's sad smile.

They stopped by the restaurant where Marlot got them each a meal to go, then they drove to the motel on the outskirts of the town. Once in the room, Marlot made sure all the blinds were fully closed. He'd have preferred them to be one large sheet, instead of small slats.

He felt Trembor watch him make sure no one could see in the room. When the wolf stopped moving Trembor stood behind him.

"Can I touch you now?"

Marlot turned and pressed himself against his lion. "Yes." He breathed in his scent. "I'm sorry, Trem. I'm so sorry for how I'm acting."

Strong arms wrapped around him. "It's okay, Marl. There's bad history here for you. I understand. You don't have to worry, I'm not going to judge you."

"Thank you."