

“So,” Trembor said, “No one here hunts?” He’d been looking forward to seeing Marlot’s old hunting grounds the previous night, but he’d understood that his wolf was too tired for it. This morning, when they again stopped at the restaurant to eat, and that it was full, he’d demanded an explanation. What he’d gotten baffled him, “Doesn’t anyone realize how wrong that is?”

Marlot shrugged. “It’s the way it’s always been here. I told you they do things differently.”

“I thought that was the division between predator and prey. This is beyond being different. So everyone eats at that restaurant?”

The wolf chuckled. “Of course not. Most people eat at home.”

“Then how do they get their meat, if they don’t hunt?”

“They buy it from the processing store.”

“And where does the store get it from?”

“From the commune.”

“What? Have they found a way to grow meat from the earth?”

Marlot looked away from the road just long enough to roll his eyes at him.

“Then how?”

“Any of the herbivores who are too old to work, or too gravely injured, go to the store.”

“Just like that? They walk in?”

“They go by car.”

“It still seems wrong to me. Don’t they want to live?”

“They’re farmers, what else are they going to do if they can’t do that anymore?”

“And the other preys are okay with that?”

The wolf didn’t reply immediately, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, clearly thinking.

“If you have the choice,” Marlot finally said, “between being scared for your life all the time, but having the old folks around, or knowing you’re safe, protected, but anyone who isn’t productive anymore becomes someone else’s meal, what would you pick?”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine being scared all the time, I’m not prey.”

The wolf nodded. “That’s the situation they’re in. I’m not saying the commune’s better than the city, it’s just a different system, but here the predators protect the prey instead of hunting them, and in return, they get to eat the unproductive members.”

Trembor thought about that. Prey just walking into the processing store. “How does it even work? I mean killing them? I have no problem doing it during a hunt, but if one of them walked up to me and asked to be killed, I couldn’t do that.”

“They’re given something to make them sleep, and then the butcher bleeds

them out. It's a lot less painful for them than being killed in a hunt, also less stressful."

"You've seen them do it?"

"My father took me when I was a cub. Back then he expected me to take over when he retired."

"If you grew up like that, how did you learn how to hunt?"

"After Margelo died, I'd promised myself I would stick to our promise. So I trained. I made it a game with some friends, playing prey. I'd have to chase one of them and bring them down. And sometimes I was the prey. That's how I have an idea of how prey feels. On the day I was prey, I didn't know when my friend would start hunting me. Even if it was just a game, it was stressful, always wondering when it would happen. As predators, we don't feel that. Even if someone ends up hunting us, we don't spend our time worrying about it. Statistically, we're more likely to die in a fight than by being hunted. It didn't make me an expert hunter, but I learned the basics that way. Didn't you practice with your friends?"

"I wrestled with my brothers and sisters," Trembor said, "but that was about learning to fight, not hunt. My moms taught me that." He paused. "How does their tax get collected then?"

"The government gets a fixed amount per body."

"Really? It isn't based on their productivity rating?"

"They don't have one."

"How can they not have that, everyone has one?"

"They don't have an ID, so there's nothing to attached a productivity rating to."

The lion stared at Marlot.

"It'd be too many problems trying to keep track of all of them," Marlot continued, "and it isn't like they leave the communes. So why give ourselves the extra work?"

"But without a rating, anyone can come in and eat them."

"Which is why we have patrols. To prevent poaching."

Trembor looked out the window at the passing fields. He didn't get it, but as Marlot has said, things were different here. "What's growing in that field?" He asked. The plants were low to the ground and green.

"I don't know. It could be one of the dozens of different vegetables."

"How many vegetables are there?"

Marlot laughed. "I am not the right person to ask that."

Before Trembor could think of another question, they crested a hill and buildings became visible in the distance. A dozen low and large buildings overshadowed maybe a hundred small ones. Those had to be housing, Trembor

thought.

“What are those big buildings?”

“One’s where they process the vegetables, the rest is where they are warehoused before shipping.”

“I didn’t think it needed that much warehousing.”

“Everything the land produces has to be held somewhere until shipping.”

“I guess I just didn’t realize there was so much being produced.”

“Prey eat almost exclusively vegetables, and there are a lot of them in the city, and here.”

“So they grow all year long?”

Marlot shook his head. “The winter’s too cold here, so for that and a bit before and after nothing grows, but the rest of the year, it’s always growing.”

They drove by the first large building, where sheep and horses pushed carts holding crates in it.

“Warehousing,” the wolf said. “They’re going to freeze them, some will stay here for winter, the rest will be shipped to the city.”

Trembor nodded. “There are a lot of sheep here.”

“Sheep are the most common farmers because the commune gets the wool from sheering time. There’s also others, like the horses here, for the more labor-intensive work.”

“So they do all the work themselves.”

“Of course not. A lot of the fieldwork is done with tractors, but there’s some work that needs to be done by hand, and some of the heavy lifting can’t be handled by machines.”

“You said the wool goes to the commune. The town doesn’t collect that to sell it?”

“The commune sells that itself. They need some revenue of their own for repairs, medicine, and other things they need.”

They drove past the last of the warehouses and now Trembor was looking at the houses. They were all made of the same material and had the same design, as far as he could tell, but they were painted in bright colors, some had banners and small flags.

“Why are all the houses the same?” Trembor asked.

“That’s before my time.” Marlot slowed down since cubs were running around the yards and sometime in the street. “My father says sheep like for things to be the same, and until I moved to the city, I believed him. Now I figure they’re just used to it. The houses are mass-produced and easy to build.”

“I don’t think I could stand it for very long. Everything the same.”

“I couldn’t either.”

“Does anyone ever leave?”

Marlot shrugged. "It must happen, not everyone's cut out for the farming life, even here."

"So there's a system in place for them to get an ID card? A productivity rating?"

"There has to be. No one's forced to remain here." They left the residential area, and he picked up the speed a little. "I never asked about it when I lived here. We're so used to the way things are, we never think about it."

A few minutes later they arrived at a group of larger buildings than the houses, with sheep and a few horses going from one to the other, carrying bags over their shoulders.

"Town center?" Trembor asked.

Marlot chuckled. "Not really at the center, but yeah, the stores are here. They have a bar, restaurant. Same as every other town."

"Except for all of them looking alike."

"If you want, we can spend some time here and you can ask them about it."

The lion looked around and shook his head. "To be honest, I'd rather not know. I'm already a little creeped out by the number of sheep out there. I can't shake the feeling that if I talk to one, they're all going to answer together, with one voice. I think someone made a horror movie about that when I was a kid."

"You have nothing to worry about." He parked between two other cars. "Everyone here is perfectly normal. The medical clinic is one or two buildings that way, I think. I can't read the signs from this angle."

They exited the car, and Marlot nodded to the males and females on the sidewalk. They nodded back, not exhibiting any signs of nervousness. They spent a moment looking at Trembor, but then nodded and continued. The lion watched after them, and couldn't shake the sense that this was extremely wrong, but he couldn't say why.

After a few moments, he thought he figured it out. They weren't getting out of his way, glancing around nervously. They were walking confidently, and on some level, he was thinking of them as predators. Which was insane. They were sheep, but he'd never fully understood before that a lot of that sense was in the body language, not just the species.

No, that wasn't right. He'd always known, but it had been something normal. The way things were, the only way things were. Now he was seeing a different way of living. How had Marlot not been confused as to what his role was, growing up here?

"There it is."

Trembor got out of his head and looked at the building the wolf pointed to on the other side of the street. It looked just like every other one, except for a sign which read 'Medical' above the door.

They entered, and it looked like nothing of the medical clinics he'd gone to. There was a waiting area with a dozen empty chairs, with an earth brown carpet and sky blue walls. The air smelled clean, but not in that saturated with disinfectant scent the clinic usually had. It smelled like the air in a park, or on that hill, by the tree, Marlot had taken him to.

A half-wall separated the waiting area from the treatment area, with half a dozen beds and tables, only two of which were occupied. One with a muscular horse with his arm in a sling sitting on the bed and the other had a very pregnant sheep lying down. A ram in a gray jacket was running his hands on her stomach and talking to her in a soft voice.

He looked and noticed them. "Is it an emergency?"

"No, but we need your help with something," Marlot said.

"Have a seat then. If no one else comes in, I'll be with you once I've seen to Arashel." He nodded to the horse.

Trembor took a seat that let him watch the medic as he helped the sheep to sit up and then down from the bed.

"Just take it easy, you have a week at the most to go. You can do light housework, but I'd prefer that you rest."

She nodded and waddled out of the clinic.

The ram went to the horse. "Why are you back here?"

"My arm hurts again."

The ram gently took it out of the sling, and the horse bit his lower lip.

"Arashel, I told you to rest up. It can't heal when you work in the field."

"I didn't—"

The ram looked eyes with him.

"I'm just so bored. Everyone but me's working. I got nothing to do. I was just going to keep them company, but then Dad had some trouble with a hay bale, so I went to help him, and I didn't think about it."

"You're lucky, you didn't do any new damage, but if you don't rest, you could tear the muscle completely. If that happens, you're looking at months for it to heal, and it could take years off your working life. You don't want that, do you? Arashel?"

The horse looked at his arm. "No sir."

"So I want you to go home and rest. I know it's boring, but that's what you have to endure if you want to get back to the field any time soon. It'll probably take two weeks, but come see me next week, just in case. Now, go home, and tell your father to contact me. If he had trouble in the field, I need to take a look at his back again."

"Yes sir." The horse hopped down, and left with a nod to Marlot and Trembor.

“Work-life?” Trembor asked, standing when the ram joined them.

“You must not be from around here. Arashel needs both arms to do his work. His family aligns the hay bales so the truck can pick them up. Torn muscles don’t heal fully. While he’s young it won’t bother him, but as he gets older, it’ll hurt more and more, to the point where he won’t be able to lift the hay bales.”

“What happens then?”

“He goes to the processor.”

“Just like that? There has to be something else he can do.”

“Bale pulling is all he’s done, by then he’ll be too old to learn something else.”

“But—”

“Trembor, I told you, things are different here.”

The ram looked at the wolf. “You’re one of the Blackclaw, aren’t you? Negel’s son, the one who moved to the city.”

“Yes, I’m Marlot. And you’re Urion Roundpoint, correct?”

“I am.”

“I’m a registered investigator, I’m looking into Na’ego’s death. I left you a message this morning, to let you know we were coming. This is Trembor, we work together.”

The ram took his pad out of a pocket and showed it to Marlot. It was off.

“It ran out of power again. I must have forgotten to put it by the charger last night.”

“You should move the charging station to where you normally leave your pad, that way you’re sure it’s charged,” Marlot offered.

The ram smiled, “I really should. My mate was in charge of our pads, but she had an accident last year, and I’ve been on my own since.” He shook his head. “But that isn’t important. What can I help you with?”

“Our usual medical examiner can’t come here, he’s based in the city and has other clients. We’d need your expertise to look at Na’ego’s body.”

“I’m supposed to go to the Masked Commune after midday, I already have a handful of patients I need to see there. Can you ask one of the other medics?”

“You’re the best in the region. If you’re worried about getting in trouble with the town council, you don’t have to. My authority supersedes theirs.”

“Alright, let me make a few calls to find someone who can take care of my patients.” He went to tap a code on his pad, stared at it, then looked around. “I’ll just be a moment, I need to find where the charger is.”

Marlot nodded and sat back down.