

The ram looked at the bear's body while Marlot contacted Jaxca. Once the red frog's face appeared, he transferred the call to one of the larger screen with its own camera.

"Oh, good morning," the frog said. "I'm Jaxca Roughskin, Marlot, and Trembor's medical examiner."

The ram studied the image for a moment. "I'm Urion Roundpoint. I'm sorry for staring, I've never seen someone like you."

"It's alright, there are few of us this far north. Now, as I'm sure they've explained to you, I can't leave my clinic to assist them, so I'm going to need you to be my hands."

Marlot took a seat, to be on hand if there were technical problems, and pulled up a technical journal to read while he waited and tuned the conversation out. Trembor had stayed outside, he didn't care for medical procedures.

"I can't do that!"

Marlot looked up. The ram had a razor in hand and staring at the screen.

"Of course you can," Jaxca said. "You've operated before, it's the same here, except your patient isn't alive anymore."

"I don't understand why you need me to do that. He died of a blow to the head, the skull's fracture makes that perfectly clear."

"Yes, it does, but was he held down what that happened? We need to see his skin to see if there are any bruises."

Urion looked at Marlot. "He wants me to shave him."

"How is that a problem?"

The ram's eyes went wide. "How isn't it? What are the others going to say when they find out I sheared him like he was in of the farmers? Do you have any idea what they're going to do to me for doing that?"

Jaxca let out an exasperated sigh.

"No one is going to do anything to you. You're performing your duties."

"You think they're going to care? I'm a ram. I operate on the farmers, not the town's folks."

"Look, Mister Roundpoint, You're working for me at the moment. You're my medical examiner, and I need you to follow Jaxca's instructions so we can determine the full cause of Medic Na'ego's death."

"Can't you get one of the medics from another town to do this?"

"I don't have the time. I'd have to find one who's schedule is open, or wait until they had the time. You're here, and you can do this. If it makes you feel better, I won't use your name in the report. No one will know you did this."

"People saw me come in."

"Yes, but they don't know why. As far as they know, I needed you to explain some medical documents. No one but you, me, and Trembor have a reason

to come see the body. The freezer is going to be locked. I promise you. No one will know.”

The ram looked back to the body. “Alright, I guess.” He turned the razor on.

“Good,” Jaxca said. “Start with his wrists, then his ankles. If he was tied, the bruises will be visible. Then shave his neck. I want to see if someone had his hands around his neck.”

“You think he was strangled?” Marlot asked.

“No, there was no blood in his eyes, but that doesn’t mean someone didn’t make it more difficult for him to breathe, to make him more pliable.”

“There aren’t any bruises on his wrists,” the ram said.

“Okay. Once you’re down shaving his neck, shave his chest and stomach. We’ll open him up and see what his insides look like.”

The razor clattered to the floor. “W—What? You expect me to cut him open?”

“How else are you doing to perform an autopsy?”

“I can’t do that.” His tone was firm. He picked up the razor, turned it off, and placed it next to the body. “I don’t care what you say. I’m not going to do that.” He headed for the door.

Marlot was stunned. He had no idea what to do.

“Medic Roundpoint! Get back here!”

The ram froze at the commanding tone.

“Now!” Jaxca added after a moment.

Urion looked at the door, then his shoulders sagged and he turned around.

“You’re going to explain to me what the problem is because I can’t believe you haven’t performed any operations in your years as a medic.”

“Of course I’ve performed operations, but only on the farmers. Do you have any idea what they do to one of us if he purposely hurts one of the town people?”

“The same thing as they do in the city, I expect. Got before a judge, spend some time in prison, pay reparation.”

The ram shook his head. “The last time it happened was two years ago. There had been something wrong with Grego for a while by then, but we hadn’t been able to figure out what exactly. We thought the medications were working. At least he was calm and did his work. Then, without warning, he attacked Horimo of the Stripes. Broke her arm and her jaw before anyone was able to pull him off. They killed him right there.”

Marlot was on his feet. “You saw them do it?”

“No, but it got back to us.”

“That’s rather extreme,” Jaxca said.

“What do you think they’ll do to me if they find out I cut one of them open?”

“Urion,” Jaxca said, his tone calm. “The body on the table isn’t anyone anymore. You aren’t hurting him. Someone already did that. You’re helping us find who did it.”

“I don’t think anyone is going to see it that way.”

“I promise you, Urion,” Marlot said. “If anyone causes you problems, I’ll be there to protect you.”

“Really? You’re going to stay once you’re done here?”

Marlot looked away.

“Marlot,” Jaxca said, “Do you mind leaving us? I think this will go better if it’s only me and Medic Roundpoint.”

Marlot nodded, then realized Jaxca couldn’t see him. “Call me when... Call me when you want me to come back.” He stepped out of the examination room, thought about waiting in the waiting area, which would be amusing, since he hadn’t known it to ever be used, but went outside instead.

The air had warmed up a little, and the sun was bright, although clouds were moving in. He didn’t think it would rain, but the temperature would cool with the sun hidden.

He looked around at the people walking about. A family of tigers doing some shopping, two black bears putting lumber in a truck, Councilor Jofren seated before the town hall, with one of her grandchildren.

Why did he have so much trouble believing they would kill a sheep with little provocation? He’d watched them kill Margelo without any. Had he seen such an act when he was younger? He didn’t think so. Other than going to the commune with his father, Marlot hadn’t interacted with the farmers. He couldn’t even recall hearing about such things happening.

Why did any of them remain if such a danger existed? He pulled out his pad and did a quick search on the government site. When he found the page with the process for farmers to get an ID and productivity rating, he breathed easier. For a moment he’d been afraid the farmers were captives of the town without any way to leave.

“You look relieved,” Trembor said, coming up to him.

“Just learned another thing that bothers me about this place.”

The lion tilted an ear.

“I’ll tell you later. You walked around?”

“Yeah, looked at the stores, had something to eat. Jale’i is a really good cook.”

“I know. He just does overboard.”

“So, why are you out here? I didn’t think we minded watching the autopsy.”

“Jaxca kicked me out. Roundpoint is having problems cutting Na’ego open. He’s afraid of repercussions.”

“Why would anyone mind?”

Marlot shook his head. “I didn’t think they would, but Roundpoint believes it. Having me there wasn’t helping, so Jaxca asked me to leave. Hopefully, without anyone to see him to it, he’ll be able to. If Jaxca can’t convince him, we’re going to have to get a medic from another town, which means being stuck here for days longer.”

Trembor put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. “He’s a medic, he knows what to do, and Jaxca’s trained his share of them, he’ll know how to handle him. What do you want to do while we wait?”

“I want to go home.”

“We can go back to the room and rest.”

Marlot shook his head. “I’m just being a coward.” He took a breath. “I should probably eat something.”

“I’ll keep you company.”

“You just want to listen to Jale’i complain about me.”

“Maybe you can try some of his more extravagant meats, and he won’t complain.”

Marlot smiled. “I’ll do it for you.” He reached for the lion’s arm, then caught himself. A quick look around told him no one was looking in his direction. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I hate this,” he grumbled.

As he sat in a booth, his phone buzzed. He didn’t recognize the caller.

“Marlot Blackclaw speaking.”

“Mister Blackclaw, this is Rosilan, from Affiliated Housing. You put in a request for a family house.”

“Oh, yes. I didn’t think I’d hear from you so quickly. The research I did indicated it could be months before something became available.”

“That’s often the case, but I have a house that just became available. It meets most of your requirements. Four bedrooms, the main washroom by the parent’s bedroom was recently redone, and there’s a second one near the other bedrooms. If you want to come to see it, I can arrange for a visit later today.”

“I can’t today, I’m out of the city, I don’t know when I’ll be back, possibly not for a few days.”

“That’s unfortunate. If there any chance you can come by tomorrow? If you can’t at least come to look at it, I’m going to have to offer it to another family that’s ready.”

Marlot thought about it. Even if they got the autopsy result today, there was no telling how long it would take to find the killer. Unless he was willing to put the death on one of the vagrants in the cage...no, he wasn’t doing that. Could he afford to drive to the city and back? That was half a day at a minimum. He’d never hear the end of it from Arlion.

“It’s okay. I’ll contact you when I’m back in the city, and I can see the next available house.” He paused. “Unless you can send me pictures? I might be able to make a decision with those.”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Good, I’ll look at them tonight, and let you know my decision tomorrow.” He put his pad away.

“The house?” Trembor asked. Marlot nodded. The lion and Tarin had spoken in low tones while he was on his pad.

“You ordered?”

“Yes, and I told Tarin you wouldn’t complain about it.”

“I’ve never complained about Jale’i’s meats. I just—” Tarin came out of the back with a tray and placed a couple of dishes before Marlot, as well as a tall glass of blood and one of water.

“This is today’s lunch. That’s horse meat marinated in my dad’s secret brine, then baked in a fruit sauce. This one is sheep seared over flames, then basted with Roben’s alcohol.” She looked at him expectantly.

Marlot cut a piece for the horse meat and ate it. It was flavorful, bitter, and sweet. “It’s very good.” He cut another piece, then stop as Tarin scrutinized him.

“It really is,” he said.

“You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course not. Your father’s a great cook.”

She studied him a moment longer than smiled, before returning to the back.

“I mean it,” he told Trembor, who wore an amused expression.

“Then why does Jale’i complain so much?”

“Because you know I’m not a finicky eater. Meat’s meat, I can appreciate the skill he puts in this, but I’m not going to wait around for him to prepare it if I’m hungry.”

“It didn’t take that long.”

“That’s because it’s early. He always prepares a batch just before the crowd arrives, but once that’s gone you have to wait. And since the others appreciate his food more than I do, I figure I might as well let them enjoy it while I have plain meat.”

Trembor smiled and watched Marlot eat for a moment. “So, the house?”

Marlot looked around. Only half the seats were taken, and the booth next to them was empty. “It has the rooms w—I want. He didn’t give me any details since I can’t see it, but I expect all the information will be with the pictures he’ll send.”

“You really want to make a decision based on pictures?”

“Not really, but what if it’s perfect? I don’t want to miss out on it.”

“It’s just a house, there will be others.”

Marlot shrugged. “I have nothing to lose by looking at them.”

“Just don’t sink your teeth into it without looking at it thoroughly. He doesn’t matter how hungry you are, always make sure the meat hasn’t gone bad first.”

Marlot grinned. “When have you ever known me not to do as much research as I can on something?”

Marlot finished the food and then gave his compliment on it to Jale’i, which earned him a suspicious glare. After that he and Trembor walked around. He showed him the town’s academy, which was only a handful of small buildings, not the sprawling complex it was in the city. The classes were small, with no more than a dozen cubs in any of them.

Trembor shook his head in amazement. Marlot understood his reaction. The city’s academy had so many students each class could have a hundred of them at a time.

His pad buzzed with a message from Jaxca. He had results for them.

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The first thing they did was put Na’ego’s body back in the freezer. Urion was in the shower, Jaxca told them, scrubbing any evidence of what he’d done.

“The cause of death is straight forward. Trauma to the cranium from a straight length with an edge, although it wasn’t sharp. Something Medic Roundpoint’s examination revealed is that Na’ego was in a fight close to the time of his death, possibly what caused his death. He has bruises on his chest and arm, and he had dried blood and flesh under his claws. They’re in the sample vials on the counter as well as some of his blood. I don’t think I’ll find anything unusual, but I want to be thorough.”

“The coyote in the cage was hurt,” Trembor said. “He might have lied about how it happened.”

“Banerik would know already. The protector who brought him in would have reported what happened, and Naria would have known and told us if he was lying.”

The door to the washroom opened, and the ram exited, dressed, but his wool still wet. “I need to get out of here.” He glanced around furtively.

Marlot was about to tell him to wait, but Trembor nodded. “We’ll drive you back. Jaxca, we’ll expedite what you need to test today.”

Marlot now noticed the terror in the ram’s eyes.