

“Do you understand any of this?” Marlot asked his lion.

“No more than I did yesterday. What kind of filing system is that?”

Marlot looked at the numbers listed under the name and shook his head. “I have no idea.” He’d hoped there would be something else, but every file was like that. The patient’s name, then a list of numbers, no two patients had exactly the same ones, and sometimes a comment entered by Na’ego.

“I’m guessing they’re codes for what his patients had, or maybe the treatments?”

“If they are, Jaxca isn’t familiar with them. I sent some of them yesterday. I’m guessing Na’ego came up with his own system.”

Trembor looked up from his pad. “It’s chronic, isn’t it? Everyone here needs to do things differently from the rest of the world. How does he sync the files with the medical databases?”

“No idea. Maybe he doesn’t?”

“Come one, every medic has to share the files, how else is the productivity system going to be able to calculate the median?”

“As you said, they like to do things differently.”

“Someone has to know his system. How about Roundpoint? They’ve had to share information, right?”

“I don’t know, but we might as well go ask him.”

“You don’t want to just send him the files?”

“No, they’re still private. If he knows what the codes are, then he can take a look at them, but I’d rather bring them to him. Believe it or not, I’m not the only tech-savvy person in this town.”

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This time, the ram was working at the Rosette commune. Marlot tracked his phone, now that he had his number. That commune was very much like the other one, low multi-colored buildings for housing and gray and brown ones for the businesses.

Here the medical clinic was located inside a large building, with a clothing and fabric store. The waiting area was a bland gray floor and walls, with a dying potted plant. had a handful of sheep, mothers, and cubs were seated there. The mothers reading and cubs playing in the center. The oldest was three, Trembor guessed.

Something clanged on for floor and he looked to the examination room. Roundpoint was looking at Marlot and him, trembling slightly. The lion held back a smile as the ram looked around, eyes wide, ears shaking. This was the first time he saw one of the residents displaying prey behavior, and he wasn’t in any danger of being eaten.

“Relax Urion,” Marlot said, “We’re just here to talk. We’re not going to

have you do any operations.”

The statement calmed the ram, who looked to his patient, a pregnant sheep, somewhat young, the lion thought.

“I—I need to see to Lamia, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Trembor asked.

“Just some minor pregnancy issues. Nothing anyone needs to be concerned about, she’ll be fine and working again in no time.”

The lion shrugged, casting a glance at Marlot. “Hey, we don’t work here, so it isn’t any of our concerns if she takes longer or not.”

The ram gave the wolf a worried look, but Marlot was already heading for the waiting area. He nodded to the sheep in the seat next to his as he sat, took out his pad, and started reading.

Trembor leaned against the half wall and watched Urion work. He had no idea what the ram was doing, running his hands on her large stomach, checking her eyes, muzzle, tongue. When he had her spread her legs and reach between them, Trembor decided it was time to occupy himself another way. He sat next to Marlot, marveled again at how calm all the sheep were, and brought up the novel he’d been reading on his pad.

A chapter later, Urion assisted the sheep off the examination table, and to the door. Her belly wasn’t yet large enough to affect her walking.

“Ladies, I’ll just be a moment, I need to these investigators.” He motioned Marlot and Trembor to follow him, and he headed to an office. He sat behind the desk and eyed them wearily.

Marlot saw and placed a data slate before him.

The ram eyed it suspiciously. “What’s on it?”

“Na’ego’s records and files. At least we think that’s what they are. He uses a filing system I haven’t been able to figure out.”

“That’s it? You just want me to unscramble them for you?”

“That’s all. You do know his system, right?”

The ram nodded. “He came up with it because some of the commune’s managing family kept trying to get files on the other’s farmers.”

“Why?” Trembor asked.

“To undermine them. Marlot said.”

Urion nodded again as he inserted the slate on the computer. “If they could find out who in a rival commune wasn’t feeling well, they could send one of their farmers who was sick, maybe try to spread it to a large group and lower their productivity.”

“How does that help anyone?” The lion asked. “Doesn’t the town need everyone to be productive? Don’t they have quotas to meet to feed the cities?”

“It’s a stupid pride thing,” Marlot said. “Every family does it, including my

father. It's easier to undermine another commune's productivity than always improve your own. Every year, after the harvest, there's a celebration and whichever commune had the largest production gets a ribbon."

"A ribbon? They sabotage each other for a ribbon?"

"I did say it was stupid. It's all about bragging rights."

"Over how many problems they caused others?"

"That isn't how they see it."

"This place is insane."

"I'm not arguing with you on that."

"Don't people brag about anything anymore in the cities?" the ram asked, typing away.

"Sure, about how they brought down the largest buck or one with the highest productivity rating." Trembor sat down. "There's a whole rating system as part of the hunting system now."

Marlot's ears folded back. "I hate that thing, each time I go to pay for my kill it wants to tell me how I rate compared to other predators. Like I care, all I want to do is feed myself."

"You said 'anymore,'" Trembor said. "You're familiar with the city?"

"I did my medical studies at the academy there."

"And you came back to this?"

The ram stared at the lion. "What did you expect me to do? Settle there? I was terrified to leave the grounds for the three years I was there, and even then I was a nervous wreck. I never knew when one of the predators studying there might decide to eat me."

"They don't allow predation in the grounds," Trembor stated.

"Sure, they say that, but do you have any idea how little self-control predators who are approaching hunting age have? If one of them decided to eat me, they'd be growled at, told they couldn't do that. I'd still be dead. I couldn't wait to come back here where I'm safe."

"Only so long as you can do your job."

The ram shrugged. He took out the slate and handed it to the wolf. "Okay, I've unlocked Na'ego's folder on the town network. Next time you try to access one of his files, you'll be able to get the content."

"He keeps his medical file on the network?" Marlot asked, surprised. "Not on his computer? Anyone can access that."

"They have to know they're there. I'm the only one who does. And without unlocking them first, they wouldn't be able to read anything. They all focus on trying to get through his computer's protection."

Trembor smiled. "Which is exactly what you did Marlot."

The wolf chuckled. "True. I guess it worked." He stood. "Thank you,

Urion.”

“That’s fine, just don’t need anything from me anymore.”

“I don’t expect we will,” Trembor said as he stood as well. “Where can I hun—where can I eat around here? We should have eaten before driving here.”

“If you want vegetable and foliage, they serve a great mixed greens plate across the street.” Urion seemed particularly pleased to offer them that.

The idea of eating on vegetables dampened Trembor’s appetite. “I guess I can wait until we’re back in town.” He followed Marlot out.