

Urion was impatiently waiting for them when Marlot parked in front of the clinic. The ram eyed the car.

“IS this going to be a problem?” Marlot asked, getting out.

The ram startled and took a step back. “No, of course not. What you do is your own business.”

“I wish others thought like that,” Trembor said.

“Where’s Lamia house?”

“It’s by the south field.” Urion paused. “It might be best if we take my vehicle, I don’t want a crowd to form by her house.”

Sheep walking by were looking at Marlot’s car, some even stepping around it to read everything. Marlot studied them, ready for an outburst, but those sheep just seemed perplexed.

“Fine.”

Urion’s vehicle was larger and sturdier. Built to be able to travel on uneven terrain. The back opened up so he could work on a patient while it was being driven back. They squeezed in the cabin and the ram drove off.

Ten minutes later, he stopped before one of three dozen buildings of the same shape, but varying colors. They were close to each other, leaving only enough space between them for two adults to walk side by side.

They were wide, but with only the ground floor. Marlot thought the inside had four bedrooms, a family room, and the kitchen/dining room. His father had shown him the plans, years ago.

Urion got out and knocked on the front door. By the time Marlot and Trembor joined him, there hadn’t been any answers. The ram pounded his fist.

“Let’s go around to the back. It’s nice today, she might be resting outside.” He guided them between the two houses, and they found the sheep outside, as he’d predicted, but she wasn’t resting.

Lamia looked up from the garden. “Medic Roundpoint, did we have an appointment?”

“No, but what are you doing? I told you to rest.”

She smiled at him, getting to her feet and rubbing her dirt-covered hands on her pants. “I am resting. Tending my garden relaxes me.”

“Maybe, but spending your day on your knees, bent, overstresses your stomach. Your pregnancy is already precarious, you don’t want to complicate things, do you?” The ram took her hand and guided her to a chair, forcing her to sit.

“You don’t need to fuss over me. I’m perfectly fine. I’m sturdier than you think.”

“I’ll remind you that just last week, you were bleeding. With Na’ego dead, I don’t want to risk you bleeding again. I haven’t been able to find another medic to

look you over.”

“None of the nearby towns can spare one long enough to check her up?” Trembor asked.

The ram shook his head, while gently pressing his hands on the sheep’s stomach. “They’re busy with their own people. If none of them can find the time, I’ll have to get a city medic, and hope Efron will pay for it.”

“Efron manages this commune,” Marlot clarified for Trembor. “If he won’t pay, Urion is going to have to deal with the expense himself.”

“With Na’ego dead, and the others busy, why wouldn’t he?” Trembor asked.

“Not every manager is willing to spend the extra money. I don’t know what Efron’s style is. But I’m not sure you’re going to want to get her examined.”

The ram stood. “Why not?”

“Because of who the father is.”

“The father’s Tariel, like all her others lambs.”

Marlot watched Lamia’s face, and she looked away. “Who is the father?” he asked her.

“I already told you—” Urion started to say, but he happened to look in her direction as she shook her head. “What do you mean?” he groaned. “Please don’t tell me he’s a predator.”

She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t look at him.

“How could you do that? You know what they’re going to do to you if they find out.”

She looked at him now, anger in her eyes, but her voice was soft when she spoke. “I couldn’t tell him no. None of us can.”

“What is she talking about?” Trembor asked.

Marlot sighed. “She doesn’t have a productivity rating, remember? If one of the predators decides to do something to her, it isn’t going to cost him anything.”

“I thought they were supposed to protect them?”

“They do,” Urion said. “They keep the vagrants from hunting here, they provide the houses and the land. But some of them feel it entitles them special treatment.”

“You mean they force themselves on the females here?”

“Or the males,” The ram said. “Female predators also come here, not just males. It’s mostly the youths. The thrill of the forbidden.”

“But not this time, isn’t it, Lamia?” Marlot fixed his gaze on her. “This time it was an adult.”

She nodded.

“Was it his first time?”

She shook her head.

“Does Tariel know?” Urion asked.

“Of course he does,” she spat.

“Does he know who it is?”

“No. No one does.”

“You have to tell us,” Trembor said. “So we can make him pay.”

“No! You have no idea what he can do to me, to us, to you.”

“He’s on the council, isn’t he?”

The look of horror she gave him was all the answer Marlot needed.

“You knew?” Trembor asked.

“I suspected. Why else would Na’ego die in the council chamber? He was confronting one of them.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. They have money, you told me that yourself. Why didn’t he pay the tax?”

“Because this isn’t about money. It’s about the stigma of having sex with prey. He’s been coming for a while now, hasn’t he?”

She nodded. “Years.”

“If he wants to cheat on his mate, this is the best way. None of the sheep here will say anything, and the odds of getting her pregnant are so small he didn’t bother considering them. Except this time, it took. That’s why she’s having problems. The baby’s mixed breed. Na’ego had to know, that’s why he got the sample. He had a DNA check done. When he got the results, he confronted the father.”

“And he killed him? Why? To keep it secret?”

“Yes. You saw how that youngling was treated. For someone of a councilor’s stature to be caught having sex with a prey species, it doesn’t just mean his position. It means his business, his honor. He’s going to be destroyed.”

“And Na’ego would have exposed him?”

That gave Marlot pause. What he remembered of the bear was that he was a good person, but he was the product of this town. Would he have exposed a councilor for having sex with a sheep?

“No, I don’t think he would have. He wouldn’t have been happy, but he was a councilor himself. He knew what would happen.”

“So he’d cover it up.”

Marlot nodded.

“How far would he go?”

“What do you mean?”

“How far along is she?”

“She’s fourteen weeks in,” Urion answered.

Trembor nodded. “Would he have been willing to abort her?”

“No, of course not,” Marlot replied. “How can you think that? He was a medic, and that would be considered predation of someone underage.”

“Are you sure? You told me this place has its own rules.”

“Of that I’m sure. Na’ego wouldn’t have killed a cub for no reason. Especially when he didn’t have to. The odds she’ll give birth are much lower than those of getting pregnant. I don’t think there’s ever been a viable offspring of a predator and prey, ever.”

“What about the father?”

“He’d know that too.”

“Yes, but can he take the risk? She might not give birth to it, but it won’t be long until the fetus shows signs of being a crossbreed. If she carries it long enough, he’ll still be exposed.”

Marlot slowly nodded. “You’re right. There’s no way he let her continue with the pregnancy.”

“With Na’ego dead, how until he can find a medic willing to abort her?”

“He isn’t going to bother with that. It’s simpler for him to kill her, that way he doesn’t risk her saying something.” Marlot turned to Urion, who was holding the sheep’s hand. “Do you think you can find some strong males to look after her in case a predator shows up?”

The ram had trouble finding his voice for a moment. “You expect one of us to attack a predator?”

“No, to protect her.”

“If I lose it,” Lamia whispered. “He won’t have any reason to want me dead.”

“I am not doing that!” Urion exclaimed.

“I don’t think it’s going to matter, he won’t take any chances. Urion, I need you to get strong males here as soon as possible.” Marlot grabbed Trembor. “We need to get back to town.”

The lion let himself be dragged to the car. “What are you planning on doing?”

Marlot opened his mouth, then realized how stupid his half form plan was. He shook his head. “Nothing. I can’t barge in there and yell that one of them slept with a sheep.”

Trembor’s lips quirked up. “That was the plan?”

“It’s the only thing I could think of, but they wouldn’t believe me.”

“Now that we know what this is about, do you think you can convince the lab to give you the results? There weren’t multiples of the same species on the council.”

“They might ask for something more solid than my word, but I can try.”

As he pulled his pad out, Lamia screamed.