

Trembor looked into her eyes. “Will you do it?”

Lamia hesitated, pulling at the wool on her arms. She started to say something, then stopped. She closed her eyes. “He won’t know I helped?”

“I promise. We’ll have the lab results, and he won’t need to know that you helped get them.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Hopefully just talk with the people at the lab.” He took out his pad. “I sent you their number, Trem, call them. I’m retrieving her file.”

The lion placed the call and held his pad in his hand.

“Arsego, how may I direct your call?” a male answered.

“This is Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane. I have a situation that involves lab work you did and my current case.”

“Just one moment, I’ll transfer you to legal.”

There was a click, then another one.

“Arsego, legal department, Glazio speaking,” a female said.

Trembor introduced himself again. “I’m investigating the death of a medic out of [name of town] who requested some lab work before his death. We—”

She cut him off. “If the company finished the work, it was sent to him.”

“I know, but we can’t find it. The circumstances lead me to believe the killer took it because it incriminated him.”

“Do you have any corroborative evidence?”

“No, that’s why we need it.”

“I’m afraid that without any evidence to demonstrate that the work the company did is a key part of the investigation, I can’t breach the confidentiality that protects our clients.”

“I understand. What if the mother asked for those results?”

“Excuse me?”

Marlot stepped closer. “I’ve sent the patient’s file to your company, addressed to you. It’ll show that the test was to get the DNA analyzes. It came from a fetus, and we have the mother here.”

“Just give me a moment.” A few seconds later she spoke again. “I have the file. A sheep by the name of Lamia of Softpaw. There isn’t much here, but I do see the request for lab work. And I have the notification in our system.”

Trembor spoke. “Good. Lamia is right here.” He nodded at her.

“He—hello?” the sheep said. “I’m Lamia of Softpaw.”

“Can you give me your ID number? For verification?”

“My what?” Lamia stuttered, and she looked to the buffalo, confused.

Arana opened her mouth, but Marlot stopped her.

“Miss of Softpaw is a farmer,” he said. “She’s part of a commune. She doesn’t have an ID.”

“I see,” the female said, her tone displeased. “Without being able to verify her identity, I’m not sure how I can help you.”

Marlot rubbed his eye. “Look, me and my partner are RIs. You can verify that. It isn’t like we just call up asking for random tests to be sent to us. These results will help us determine the identity of the killer.”

“I appreciate that,” she replied, “But confidentiality laws are in place for a reason. I understand that you have no ill intent, but I can’t know that the next RI to request tests from us will do so in good faith. I’m sorry, but without any evidence linking this to your death, there is nothing I can do.”

Trembor growled. “How about to save the baby’s life then?”

“What do you mean?”

“She was attacked once already.”

The female gasped. “Why would anyone try to kill a pregnant female?”

“Because the father is already mated,” Marlot said, “and he’s a predator. In these communities, such interactions aren’t appreciated. He’s trying to eliminate any proof. And since she doesn’t have an ID, she’s free to kill.”

“But the baby?”

“Other than the test’s result, it’s the only evidence of what he did. The farmers wouldn’t be willing to make a big fuss over a killed baby. Not around here. Knowing who he is is the only way to keep both of them safe.”

The line was silent.

“Do you have children?” Trembor asked.

“Yes,” she answered after a moment. “I have two fawns.”

“Then you know how important it is to keep them safe. Miss of Softpaw doesn’t have the recourse you do. Right now, we’re the only ones keeping her safe, but we need to find him. We can only arrest him for the death he caused, and that is the only long term way to keep her safe.”

“Just—just give me a moment.” Marlot heard her typing, and he sighed in relief. “That’s odd.”

“What is it?” Trembor asked.

“The test isn’t in the system.”

“What do you mean, it isn’t there?” Marlot asked.

“When I asked for the test’s tracking number, nothing comes up. It looks like everything about these tests is gone. I’m going to have to contact the support department to find out what happened. I’ll call you back once I know something.” She ended the call.

Marlot cursed. “Of course he’d have that erased. The result Na’ego received had the tracking number.”

Trembor stared at him. “I don’t care how powerful the council is. He can’t have gotten them to delete it.”

“No, but it’s easy for him to hire a hacker to do it.”

“What—what does that mean?” The sheep asked, edging away from them.

Trembor sighed. “It means that unless they are able to undo the deletion, we can’t get the results, which means we have no way to know who the father is without you telling us.”

“I won’t!”

“I know.”

Marlot smiled. “Actually, there’s one thing he hasn’t counted on. You’re still alive, so we can get the tests redone.”

“Will any of the medics in the commune know how to get the sample?”

Marlot shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. We bring her to Jaxca, he can take it.”

“No!” The sheep had taken four more steps away, almost stepping into her garden.

The wolf stared at her. “You have to. It’s the only way to get him.”

“I’m not leaving. This is my home. I’m not going anywhere.”

With a growl, Marlot took two steps in her direction, but Arana interposed herself.

“She said no.” The buffalo said, crossing her arms over her chest.

The wolf backed up in surprise. “You can’t be serious. We need to bring her.”

“She said no.”

“But—”

“You can’t force her to go anywhere, she isn’t a criminal.”

“But without that, he’s going to get away with it!”

She didn’t move. “Then we find another way to get the information. Your Jaxca can come here.”

Trembor shook his head. “He’s too busy, he can’t be away from his clinic, and I don’t think this is something he can talk one of the medics here through.”

“Then we get another medic to come do it.”

“That’s going to take time,” Marlot said. “You think he’d going to just wait around until a medic gets here? He’d going to try to have her killed again.”

“I’m going to stay here to protect her.”

Marlot wanted to argue with her, but Trembor placed a hand on his shoulder. “She’s the local RI. If we want to stay on the case, we need to follow her lead. Let’s give Miss SoftPaw some space while we contact Jaxca. He should know someone who can help us.” He didn’t give the wolf a chance to protest. He led him around the house and to their car.

“I can’t believe she’s being this stubborn,” Marlot growled. “It’s almost like she’d rather die.”

“She isn’t a predator, Marl. You can’t expect her to think like we do and

confront the problem with tooth and claws. On top of that, she lives in a secure environment. You heard what Urion felt about his time at the academy, and that was what we think of a safe place.”

“We’d keep her safe, she’s got to know that. Safer than what this place is going to become.”

“Come on, Marl, you know better than that. She’s scared. What does prey do when you have them on the run? When fear is what drives them? Do they go to the populated area? No, they head home as fast as they can. They want something familiar, something that makes them feel safe, even if it’s the more dangerous route they can take.”

Marlot sighed. He knew Trembor was right, but it still infuriated him. “I wish she was more like Al.”

The lion laughed. “That rabbit’s one of a kind. Well, two of a kind, he’s a lot like Arana.”

“Maybe we should introduce them to each other.”

“I don’t think that’d be a good idea. They might go at each other’s throat.”

Marlot chuckled, remembering watching the hare take on a panther twice his size and wiping the floor with him. Marlot had fought him, in a friendly match, and he’d been amazed at how fast the hare had been, and how ferocious he could be in his fighting. He’d never fought prey who actually knew how to fight before him.

“I think—”

A female screamed.

Marlot ran to the back of the house, took in the scene of Arana fighting a cougar and a badger, while a tiger and a wolf were stalking Lamia. He ran at those two, punching the tiger as the wolf tacked the sheep.

She cried in pain and he turned, kicking the wolf in the stomach. Then he grabbed him by the nape and pulled him up. He stopped, stunned. He recognized him, even without the wool. He opened his mouth to ask what he thought he was doing, but Lamia’s moan of pain stopped him.

She was on her side, curled up, holding her stomach. She had a few scratches on her arm, but the inside of her pants was turning bright red.

Trembor ran to her side. “Get a medic here!”

Marlot pulled out his pad and called Urion.