

Trembor leaned back in the chair, sighing. “I’m not asking you to tell me where they are. I just want you to find out how they’re doing.”

“You know,” the female on the other end of the call said, “if the prosecution finds out you’re asking about the criminals accusing you of bankrolling them, they’re going to see that as an admission of you being in league with them.”

“In that case, don’t tell them you’re doing this for me, Zarr.”

“I am curious why you want to know.”

“You know I’ve arrested Jasber a few times when I was an enforcer with the rest of you. I just want to make sure the system is treating her fairly.”

“I never got you, Trembor. How can you care about some criminals like that? Especially when she’s the cause of your problems.”

“They’re people too. And I don’t care about all of them. There are plenty of criminals I’d be happy to see become someone’s meal.”

She sighed. “Alright, I’ll see what I can find out, and *if* it won’t break any rules, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Zarr.” Trembor terminated the call and tried to relax. Now that someone he trusted within the enforcers would look into Jasber and her partner’s situation, he had to hope the Burrows female wouldn’t be able to hurt them again. Because Jasber was critical to a court case she was supposed to be protected from predation, but in a place like a cage complex, there was nothing like a no predation area. And the people held there weren’t the kind to care about rules until they were at the receiving end of the enforcement, at which point Jasber or her partner would already be hurt.

So many people could end up hurt because those criminals had their claws in him. The mole had said they could use him even if he was found guilty, but somehow, Trembor didn’t think they’d bother with that if he angered them enough. If he could arrange a lackluster defense, that let Flattooth send him away for as long as he liked, the criminals Maoma controlled with the complex would end him quickly. He chuckled and wondered if he could find a way of implicating Maoma’s group during his trial.

He sobered. Her retaliation wouldn’t be against him if he did that. His family would pay. Not to say Flattooth wanted his trial to open the door to ‘cleaning out’ the enforcers. He had no doubt some of them were dirty, but on the whole, he believed they were all good people.

He let his breath out. The simplest solution was for him to die. He could go out, find a healthy bull, and try to take him down and fail. Of course, he’d be saddling whoever killed him with his tax, which they might not be in a position to deal with. He might be able to arrange something so some of his money was diverted to help cover his tax, but if anyone in his family found out, it would be a clear indication he’d done this on purpose.

*That* would hurt his parents. That he’d given up. He’d survived Gorrek, he should be able to survive this. He could hear his mother argue. Only with Gorrek, he’d been the only one affected, at risk. Here everyone with Goldenmane as a name was at risk. Not that he didn’t agree with her, giving up felt wrong. He simply had no other idea as to

how to protect everyone he cared about.

He stood and took his empty glass to the sink.

He should still prepare himself. Go through his accounts, make sure he didn't have any outstanding bills that someone else would have to deal with. He'd have to reread the agreement on the payment for his house. He didn't remember what the death clause was, or if there was one. He hadn't read it as cautiously as he should have when he bought it.

He'd have to decide how to distribute his possessions and the money he had. Normally it would all go to his family, but he had to think of Marlot.

He swallowed and used the counter to remain standing. This was going to hurt his wolf so badly. He was going to have to be extremely careful around him. His scent could give away his intentions too easily. As much as the idea hurt, he should simply avoid Marlot until this was over. Write him a letter explaining why he did what he was going so that Marlot wouldn't be left wondering.

He washed the glass, dried it, and put it back in the cupboard. He was trying to put in order everything he needed to do when someone buzzed his door. He checked his pad in case he'd missed a message from his family warning they were coming over, then went to open it.

"Hi," the black wolf standing on the other side said shyly. He raised a package wrapped in butcher paper. "I didn't remember what your cooler looked like so I brought meat."

"Marl," Trembor said when he found his voice. What was his wolf doing here? What would he do when he caught his scent? Right now the icy wind was pushing that deeper in the house. But if he entered?

"Trem, is everything okay?"

Trembor shook himself. "Yes, of course. Sorry, just a little tired." He stepped out of the way. "Come on in out of the cold."

Inside, with the door closed, the scents returned at Trembor watch as his wolf sniffed the air, then looked at him worriedly. There was no lying to him, and Trembor didn't have his father's skill at molding his words to imply something other than what he said. He hugged Marlot tightly before the wolf said anything.

When they let go of one another Marlot forced a smile and offered him the package. "I'll let you bake this however you want."

Trembor chuckled as he took it. "You said that because you know my baking isn't all that much more elaborate than yours."

"You add sauces and spices when you bake. That's way more than what I do."

Trembor looked in his wolf's eyes, steeled himself against the barrage of questions. The demands Marlot was in his right to make.

Marlot canted an ear. "Unless you're a much better baker than you've shown me, I don't think the meat is going to end up baked with us standing in the entryway."

Trembor shook himself again. Almost asked why Marlot wasn't interrogating him, caught himself. He gazed deep into the wolf's eyes, almost admitted everything right

there. Only knowing Marlot would run out and take on Maoma and everyone in her organization, get himself killed in the process, kept him quiet. He took his wolf's hand and led him to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry for the state I'm in," Trembor finally said, opening the package, studying the cut of meat. Professional work. Marlot had a store process his bodies.

"The meeting with your lawyer didn't go well?" the question was asked with hesitation.

"It depends on how you look at it." He took out a cast iron pan, put it on the stove set it to high heat while he took ingredients out of the cooler. He stared at the almost empty bottle of blood. He took it out and emptied it in a glass and offered it to Marlot.

The wolf looked at the empty container on the counter. "Are you sure? It's yours."

"I've drunk too much already." Once Marlot took it, he filled himself one with water, barely considering adding alcohol to it. The only way he enjoyed alcohol was with blood. "Barany, that's my lawyer— He'd from dad's old firm— is confident he can resolve this, in spite of who he's up against."

"That's good, isn't it?"

Trembor paused in the middle of mixing the sauce. "Marl, I'm guilty. I can't stand the idea of the system being used to let me walk away from this." He shivered as the hand caressed his back.

"You're a good male, Trem. This one thing doesn't make you a criminal." Marlot pressed against him.

It just allowed a bunch of them to get their claws into me. He felt, more than heard, Marlot sniff his fur.

"I'm sorry, I know this goes against who you are. I won't ask anymore."

"It's not—" Trembor began and immediately felt himself grow defensive. He forced himself to go over what Marlot had said, realized he'd apologized, not accused, and relaxed. "How was your day?"

Marlot snorted. "Oh, nothing much, that body I'm investigating is turning out to be a male who was killed six years ago." The wolf kissed the back of Trembor's neck and moved away.

"How is that possible? I mean, how certain are you they're the same people?"

"As certain as I can be without having run DNA. I spoke with his family and they kept the bag of his possessions when it was returned to them. So I dropped that off at the lab and asked gently for them to expedite it."

Trembor turned to stare at his wolf. "You don't have a habit of forcing your way ahead of the queue, but you're more the telling type."

Marlot's ears folded back. "I'm trying to be more considerate of others."

"Marl, you're not—"

"Do you remember Telima?"

"The name sounds familiar." Trembor went back to cutting the slab of meat while he tried to remember anything.

"Jackal, he was the boy toy of that cheetah vice president or something."

“Right, the prowler.”

“Do you remember how I told him about her being pregnant without and consideration for how that would affect him? How her contracted mate happened to show up at the freezer. How devastated they both were?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the kind of male I can be. Seems to have a bad habit of being. I hadn’t realized how determined to get my way I tend to be. So I’m trying to pull back.”

Trembor wondered if that was why Marlot wasn’t questioning him about his scent. “Is that what your counselor told you to do?”

“I haven’t seen her yet. Tomorrow’s the first meeting, but I expect she will tell me something to that effect, yeah.”

“Then I think it’s a great thing you came up with it yourself.” He coated both cuts with the sauce before plopping them in the searing hot pan.

“But yeah, until I get the results, all I have is the fact it’s the only thing that makes sense. He was still using his name from before his death. Same coloring, if a little grayer taking into account he was older by six years and living without an ID had to be stressful. His mate recognized him, but of course, she only saw someone who looked like him. Since he’s dead.”

“How did he die?” Trembor turned the meat and fragrance filled the kitchen.

“Broken neck, no signs he fought back.”

“Suicide?” some of the joviality at talking about work left him as he was reminded of his own plans.

“Looks like it, but why? And why did his killer leave his body there? No ID means a free meal.”

“Unless he just freaked out at the ease of the kill and didn’t even think to look.” He pushed away the gloom and focused on not ruining the meal. He was going to enjoy this time with Marlot since it might be the last time they spent together.