

"Mister Calmader is here to see you Mister Orr," Alice said on the intercom.

Just on time. Damian liked that about his acquisition officer. "Show him in, Alice."

The bull entered. Today he was dressed in a sharp Hermmione suit in a dark green that flattered him. Damian did note that it was a little tight around the waist. Jeremy wasn't keeping up with his exercise regiment.

Damian stood and extended his hand, "Ah, Jeremy, where to we stand?"

Jeremy shook the hand and handed Damian a folder.

"The managerial reorganization is proceeding well," the bull said. Damian looked through the list of names while he continued. "We've identified those who just do the bare minimum to keep their jobs and we're looking for the best positions to promote them to. We expect that within a month of their promotions they will be so overwhelmed they will either quit or fail in such a spectacular way we'll be able to fire them."

Damian found the one he was looking for, closed the folder and sat. "Good. How about the rest of the employee restructuring?"

Jeremy followed his example. "We want to wait until the management situation has calmed down. A month at the most, then we'll inform the employees of the takeover." The bull paused, and Damian could read the coming question on his face. "Sir, why are we doing this?"

"It's a good factory. With a few upgrades we should be able to increase productivity." Damian answered casually, knowing that wasn't what Jeremy meant. "People will always need mattresses, Jeremy." He'd learned quite young that people became very uncomfortable around him if he was too perceptive.

"Yes sir, I know that. I mean the company paid employee training. That's going to cost us millions and all that's going to do is let them get paid not to work. I can guarantee that none of them are going to bother learning anything."

"Really, Jeremy? So tell me, why do you think all those people are poor and stuck working what is basically a dead end job?"

Jeremy talked and Damian listened, but didn't pay attention. *He has bags under his eyes, not sleeping well. His suit is wrinkled, and smells like it's his second day in it. Not going home? Fiddling with his wedding band. He's been married for twenty years. So it's because it's troubling him. yes, problems at home. He doesn't realize he's pulling on it,*

but he hasn't taken it off. He's thinking about toughing it out.

"So, if I understand," Damian said once Jeremy was done. "You feel that they are where they are because they don't work hard enough. they are lazy and deserves to be where they are." Jeremy nodded.

"I see. So tell me, if your marriage were to fail—"

"What's my marriage got to do with this?" Jeremy interrupted.

Damian's only reaction was surprise. *He's getting flustered. He sees my comment as an attack.* "Excuse me? I was just throwing a theoretical scenario out there." He paused. "You're married? I didn't know."

Jeremy nodded.

*And he's calm again. with that he believes I didn't know, and meant nothing by it.* His face showed none of the pleasure even such a small manipulation caused him. *I need to find someone to let loose on. Jimmy is nice, but he no longer offers any challenge, and it isn't looking like I'll be taking Adam camping anytime soon.*

"So, if it were to fail, would it be entirely because you didn't try hard enough? Isn't it possible that some outside forces might be involved? Maybe your wife had an affair?"

Jeremy just managed to stop himself from wincing

*That's what he suspect.* "Maybe you did try had hard as you can, but she isn't willing to work with you to save the marriage."

Jeremy had trouble keeping his worries off his face. Reluctantly he nodded.

"Then, can't you accept that it's entirely possible these people." He tapped the folder. "Might be trying as hard as they can. but just have the deck stacked against them? Look Jeremy, I want to do this because educated employees are much more productive than uneducated ones. Yes, I'm certain that you're right, some of them will see this as a paid vacation, but those people will weed themselves out of the company in time. We're going to be left with people who can do their jobs better. even if they don't learn the skills needed to climb the corporate ladder, They will have skill that will let them improve how they do the work, which will help the factory be more productive. You'll see, this is going to help them, and in return it will help us."

Jeremy stood, "Yes sir." He tried to hide it, but it was obvious to Damian he didn't believe him. Damian stood and shook his hand. That didn't matter, Jeremy was good at his job because he followed the plan and didn't let his personal

prejudice interfere.

Damian sat down once the bull was out of his office.

Of course, what he'd said was total bullshit. Something he'd come up on the moment, a good, if long, sound bite. Good enough in fact he was going to condense it, print it and make sure it was distributed at the factory when the employees were informed of the take over. Something to keep morale high and reassure them they weren't going to lose their jobs in the process.

No, the fact that all these people were going to get an education out of this endeavor, a better life, was irrelevant. Only one name in that list mattered, not that he actually cared about her either, but Patrick did, even if he was angry with her at the moment.

He hadn't lied to Patrick. A woman like her, steeped in the negative side of her religion, would never accept anything from someone like him. So he wasn't going to give her anything, he was going to set things up and see how far her work could take her.

His eyes fell on the frame on his desk. It only had three pictures in its memory. One was a picture of him and his brothers, taken when Damian turned twenty one. The other of his nephews, taken on their sixteenth birthday. But the one that always showed was of him and his father. The way things were going he would have to add a fourth one, since it didn't look like Patrick was going to pose for a picture with his brothers any time soon.

The one he was looking at was of Damian and his father. He was five, seated on Brian's lap, they were waving at the camera. His smile looked fake, he hadn't perfected how to smile at that age. He didn't keep this picture because it engendered some emotional response.

He had it because he had wanted a picture of his father and this one perfectly exemplified what he meant to him. What wasn't visible in the picture was that Brian was whispering to him, explaining why they were waving, why they smiled, helping him behave normally.

He smiled at the picture. A smile that could fool anyone, even if it was just an act he put on. Not for the first time, he considered what his life might have turned out like if he hadn't looked in on him that last time.