

Chapter 30

The firm's meeting room was large with a glass wall letting Trembor see the hall and the room opposite. A mirror of the one he was in, but with a large contingent of people, all dressed like they were at the top of the productivity chain. On the other side of the room, the wall was also glass, looking outside, onto another building. Trembor didn't warrant a higher floor, where he could see the city sprawl under him. He wasn't one of the rulers of old, so wasn't accorded the view.

"Thank you for coming," the armadillo said, entering the room. "As I said in my message, the prosecutor's office is finally ready to proceed after all these delays, and they want to meet. We need to make sure we're on the same page as to how we will respond when Flattooth gets here, in." He pulled his pad as he sat, consulting it. "Thirty minutes."

Trembor nodded. "It should be ample time." Barany looked up at him, surprised. Trembor motioned to the room. "Is the room monitored?" He sat opposite the armadillo. The table was larger enough, his immediate family could sit at it, and there would be space left for a good number of the extended one.

"No. We don't want to give the prosecution any more ways to get their claws onto evidence they can use against our clients." He placed the pad on the table, next to his briefcase, then took folders out. "If there's a need for me to record anything, I have my pad, and that is not as easy to hack into as the servers."

Trembor doubted that was true. There should be more security on a legal firm's servers than an individual pad. Marlot had demonstrated how easy a pad was to hack. His amusement at yet more papers, in this modern age, died as he looked at the pad.

"Then can you turn the recorder off?"

"It isn't on," the lawyer said, looking through the folder and rearranging pages.

"Can you show me?"

Barany studied Trembor, pages in hand, then placed them down and unlocked his pad, swiped to a program, and handed it to him. As the lawyer said, the program wasn't recording. Did he trust him not to have another one running? The lawyer was on his side. He had nothing to gain by recording this behind his back.

"There's something we need to talk about before she gets here." Trembor handed the pad back.

The armadillo placed it back beside the briefcase but didn't go back to the file. "Why does this sound like a discussion we should have had some time ago?"

Trembor shrugged. "Things changed." Barany looked displeased, but motioned for him to continue. "You know I interfered in an investigation."

"Yes. I'm well aware of how you exonerated your brother, who was then officially cleared when the killer claimed responsibility." Barany stated this without opinion. Even his scent didn't change.

"Do you know who I framed to shift the blame away from Bo?"

The armadillo shook his head. "Since the party never came forward to sue you, I didn't have a reason to go ask the enforcer for that information."

"They didn't come forward, because they're more than happy to deal with it

themselves.”

Barany’s lips became a tight line. “The arrangement your father made didn’t cover protection to keep someone from eating you while the trial is ongoing. I really should have known this from the start.”

The comment made Trembor wonder how many trials were ended early when the defendant or the accused got eaten. “They’re not looking to eat me. They’re threatening to destroy my family.”

Barany stared at him. “That seems like an excessive response.” He eyed his pad. “We don’t have much time, but explain to me why they want to do that.”

Trembor quickly considered how far back he needed to go. “Bo is in debt with one of the organized crime groups. When he was arrested for predation on a cub, I figured it was them, so I framed them when I couldn’t find evidence they’d done it. The enforcers got over-enthusiastic and ate some of them instead of arresting them. And the organization holds me responsible for it. They want me to work for them. I turn them down hard, but they decided it just means they need to be more convincing. I was considering getting myself eaten as a result.”

“Your lack of enthusiasm for participating in the trial finally makes sense,” the armadillo said.

“They figured out what I was planning, and they’ve been eating the people who work around my family members, causing slight drops in productivity. Nothing irreversible yet, but they made it clear in my last meeting with them that if I don’t stop spiraling down, they will make sure their productivity drops to nothing, and that my death will not stop them.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for them to threaten to eat your family directly?”

“They’d promised not to touch them, as a show of good faith. And they’re sticking to that.”

“All right. Let me start by pointing out that if you were eaten, it would have allowed the prosecution to dump all the blood on you they wanted. I do not want to hear any more talk of your being eaten, is that clear?”

“You’re missing the point, Barany,” Trembor said, annoyed.

“No,” the lawyer snapped. “I understand perfectly what your intention was. What I do not understand is how the son of Torim Goldenmane can even consider turning prey.” The anger in the words surprised Trembor. “Your father was vicious in court. He would take on anyone trying to bring one of his clients down, in the courtroom, or outside of it. I can’t tell you the number of times someone tried to eat him. For you to simply give up is an affront to his name. To your name.”

“I know how often it happened,” Trembor replied, keeping his tone steady. “I’ve seen the scars and heard the story, but I’m not him.”

“You’re still a Goldenmane,” Barany replied, getting his anger under control. “A Predator. Explain to me why you’d just give up.”

“Because I’m just one male who thought he could go bring them down in the process of saving his brother,” Trembor answered, getting his own anger under control. It wasn’t often being compared to his father was used to show how lacking he was. “They are much

larger than I thought, large enough they made a point of showing they have their claws within the enforcers. Since I couldn't win, I figure removing myself from the hunt would ensure they left my family alone. That's all I care about, Barany. What happens to me is irrelevant if my family ends up being safe."

"And how likely is it looking?" the armadillo asked, clearly trying not to smirk.

"They're going to be safe when I tell Flattooth she can use me however she wants to bring that group down."

"Absolutely not!" the lawyer ordered.

"I go undercover for her, and I get her all kind of evidence."

Barany ran a hand over his face. "You have no idea what you're talking about. Flattooth is ruthless. She'll have no problem putting you in a situation that will get you killed just for a chance at one extra piece of evidence."

"If it's the piece that destroys them and keeps my family safe, I'm fine with dying for it."

The armadillo glared at Trembor, but before he replied someone knocked on the door and a komodo dragon entered, causing Barany to shift his glare to him.

"What?" he demanded.

"Slather Hardskin," he said, "I'm with the prosecution." He smiled, "well—"

"You can stay outside until Flattooth gets here." The armadillo cut him off. "I'm in a private meeting with my client."

"Ahh," the komodo closed the door. "Then I take it you haven't been informed. Prosecutor Flattooth will not be coming." He sat at the head of the table and smiled at them. "She's having a family emergency that forced her to take some time off." He fixed Trembor. "You know what family emergencies can be like, you have to drop everything, even that one thing that means the world to you, and do whatever it takes to resolve it. I'm going to be taking over the case in her absence."

Trembor glared back, wanting to rip that self-satisfied smirk off the komodo's face. He felt the claws prickling his palm.

Barany looked at his pad. "Then you can come back in five minutes when the meeting starts. I still need to speak with my client."

"It's starting now," Hardskin said flatly.

Barany sighed, turning the recording program on. "You understand this is a break in protocol. I'm allowed to have every minute allocated in private with my client to discuss the case."

"Sure, but I don't see why you need it."

"To discuss private matters," Barany replied, his annoyance thick.

"Look," the komodo said. "I'm not here to make either of your lives difficult." He smiled at Trembor. "In fact, I'm here to simplify it to the extreme. I've looked over the case Prosecutor Flattooth was building, and while I have to admire her enthusiasm and dedication to the law, I didn't find anything there particularly solid. If I didn't know her as well as I do." He smiled again. "I'd almost think she had a vendetta against you."

"What are you saying?" Barany asked, sounding unsure.

“The case against your client is entirely based on the words of a criminal. One which your client arrested multiple times when he was an enforcer. A very good one, according to the reports and word of those who worked with you. I thought I’d be able to get something more from her, maybe evidence that didn’t rely entirely on the skills of people who worked for her, but when I went to speak with her this morning, in preparation for this meeting, I was informed she got herself eaten.”

“Jasber is dead?” Trembor asked, chocked.

The komodo dragon nodded. “You have a good memory, but then again, she would have left an impression, even after all these years. From what I was told, she got into an altercation with another prisoner. She won the altercation but angered some of his friends and they visited her in the night.”

Barany quickly looked through his files. “I had been told Jasber Braid was in isolation until the trial was over. Something about one of her associates being found dead, and how she felt she was being targeted.”

“You’ll have to contact the complex about that,” the komodo said. “I didn’t bother looking into how rules might have been broken, I was too busy seeing if there was anything in her recorded testimonies I could use to get your client a cage in a complex.”

“And?” Barany asked, suspicious.

“And, there’s nothing there,” Hardskin said with a shrug. “You were right, yes, I did go over your own depositions, Barany, Flattooth had nothing substantial, neither have I. So long as your client is willing to officiate a document stating he had no contact with Jasber Braid in the last six months, I’ll start on the papers to have all charges removed. He will be reinstated as an RI for the city, his territory will be returned without penalties.” He paused. “I Understand you’re that RI who worked with another one, and that in your absence, he’s had troubles ensuring he could keep your office.”

“Is that a threat?” Trembor growled. If they were causing his wolf—

“A what? I’m sorry, why would I threaten someone who works for the city? It’s simply something that I came across as I looked into the case. I mentioned him simply because I’m sure he’ll be happy to have you back at his side.”

“Don’t,” Barany said, tone hard, as Trembor stood.

He didn’t care how expensive he looked. Trembor wanted to coat the glass with the komodo’s blood for the implied threat.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand your client’s anger,” Hardskin said, not worried.

“He’s had a few rough days, is my understand,” the armadillo replied. “Have the prosecutor’s office send me the documents. Make sure that what my client agrees to as part of the charges being dismissed is written in clear language, or I will be returning them to you.” Barany paused, his finger over the off button on the recording program. “Something tells me you don’t was this delayed.”

The komodo smiled. “Time is money, and the quicker this is resolved, the faster the firm can reassign the personnel to more important cases. I’ll ensure the forms are clear. I want to make sure this incident won’t leave any bad scents between your client and my firm, as there is no telling when the assistance of a RI with Mister Goldenmane’s reputation will

be of use.”

“As I said,” Barany replied, tone hard. “I’ll read it and discuss with my client how to proceed.”

The komodo stood. “I’ll get on that immediately.” He nodded to Trembor. “I look forward to a chance to work with you in the future.”

Once the male was out of the room, Barany let out a soft curse. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I have to get in touch with Flattooth and find out what is going on with her and the prosecution offices.”