

Chapter 37

“Derimak,” Trembor called as he saw her, heading for her instead of his office. “Have you heard anything back from them?”

She shook her head. “You know how they are about underage bodies. Anytime information leaks, the newsies make a production of the death. Also, that Sleekcoat person had been threatening to eat some of them because a certain someone went and visited her suspect.”

“He’s my brother,” Trembor stated. As far as he was concerned, that outweighed any complaints Sleekcoat had.

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t piss her off, and that she’d dumping that on them since she can’t threaten the person who helped you.”

“Thanks for trying.” The idea of that mink trying to yell at Bahamel didn’t help raise his mood. He needed the evidence that had been collected if he’d have any chance of proving he hadn’t done it.

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“Hey Velin,” Trembor greeted the newt, opening his arms for her.

“Trembor!” She ran in them for a hug. “Where have you been hiding yourself these last years?” She punched his shoulder. “What happened to those times you’d be down here every other day to talk? Did you bring me meat?”

“I became an RI and my office moved away from here,” he answered with a chuckle. He took out a bag with small pieces of meat in it. Welin was a slim female with mottled brown and black skin who worked in the forensic lab.

“The way I hear it, you’ve been back a few weeks now,” she said, trying to sound severe, but her eyes were on the bag. “I really shouldn’t, you know that, right?” She snatched it out of his hand before he could pull it away. “You are such a tempter.” She moaned as she chewed on a piece. “Oh, I missed this. No one brings me the treats you do.”

“Others have to know you like meat.”

“Sure, but they’re too concerned about my health to bring me any. I have to buy my own, and it’s never as good as what someone gives me.” She smiled at him. “Everyone knows a little indulgence is a good thing. Feeling alive comes with risks, and that’s just the way things are.” She popped another piece in her mouth.

“Just don’t eat them too quickly. You know how sick you can get from unprocessed proteins.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “You ever ate that processed crap?”

“Are you kidding? They’re stamping the stuff into something resembling meat now and trying to convince us it’s better for us than stalking our meals.” The lion shuddered. “I’m a predator, I’m going to kill my meat until the law says I can’t anymore.”

“You’re going to keep going even after that.” She said with a smile, carefully closing the bag. “You predator need the chase as much as you need the meat. What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to know what they collected in the case regarding Bolifen Goldenmane.”

“No wonder the name seemed familiar.” She tightened her lips. “I can’t tell you anything, I’m sorry.”

“Velin, he’s my brother. I can’t let that Sleekcoat female bungle this. She’s going to twist any piece of evidence she can to cut my brother as deep as possible. She’s more interested in closing the case than making sure she has the right person.”

She sat at her desk and when Trembor moved to stand next to her, she motioned for him to go on the other side of the desk, where he couldn’t see the screen. “I don’t know what I’ll be able to tell you.” She typed and quickly read. Her facial skin lost some of its sheen, and Trembor knew that wasn’t a good sign. She looked up from the screen. “It’s bad.”

“What are you talking about? How bad can it be? Bo didn’t do it.”

“The evidence said he did.”

“No, that’s just that mink twisting things.”

She shook her head. “I’m looking at the lab reports, those that are going to be sent to her once the last few details have been cleared up.”

He stared at her. “They’re wrong. Bo wouldn’t hurt a cub. He didn’t even need to hunt he has plenty of meat in his cooler.”

“I’m sorry, Trembor. The lab doesn’t concern itself with why someone does what they did. That’s the counselors’ job.” He reached for the screen, but she batted his hand away. There was no strength to it, but it reminded him there were rules he had to follow.

He cursed angrily, and she squeezed his arm comfortingly.

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Trembor angrily terminated another dead-end call. He’d gone through everyone he knew, everyone he thought were his friends, and not one of them would tell let him see the evidence that had been compiled against his brother. They’d have fur, they would have to since the body was found in Bo’s house. As neat as his brother was, it was impossible to remove your fur out of where you lived. They’d also find Herelex and Isenson’s fur. If they looked hard enough, they’d find blood from all three. Even Isenson was probably learning to prep bodies despite his young age. That meant accidental bleeding.

He cursed, and cursed again, when he realized this would be where the wolf mention he could get the information for him. He wouldn’t even have to use one of his criminal contacts. He’d just hack into the forensic labs’ computers, get what Trembor wanted and not even question his reasons. That was how much Marlot—

No! It had just been an act, he reminded himself. Some sick game to get him comfortable breaking the law.

He rested his head in his hands. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run out and claw someone, anyone, until they told him what he wanted to know. It was clear now no one was interested in helping his brother. His family counted on him to get him out of this.

With him, without Trembor getting the information, he knew Bo would be handed

over to the cub's family without even a proper investigation. They'd rip him apart, eat him, and once someone realized the evidence had showed he was innocent afterward. Well, what good would that do Bo then?

It was obviously a setup. Bo had to have pissed off his so-called friends at the gambling house. It was the only thing that made sense.

He stood. If criminals were involved. What was he doing letting the law hinder him? They didn't care about it? He cursed. He couldn't bring himself down to their level. He put his hands on the desk, his claws digging into the wooden surface. He wouldn't go down to their level. He would not lie and plan evidence. He was going to do what was needed to find out the truth, nothing more.

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The scents permeating the bar were that of cheap, but potent alcohol, blood, sweat, and a variety of smokesticks. This was nothing like L'Nard's bar, and he hated it. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't the place the female he'd contacted had picked it. He'd even tried to get her to choose something more respectable, but she'd laughed. She'd picked it specifically because he didn't like it.

He located the bison in a booth on the far side of the bar. Of course, she'd force him to cross the place. He was going to have to burn his clothes once he got home. She watched him approach, a mix of amusement and suspicion on her face. As he sat opposite her, he noticed a thin and nervous-looking hedgehog sitting next to her.

"So, is this a setup?" she asked.

Trembor shook his head.

"Speak up." She indicated the pad on the table with the active recording app. "You know the courts don't accept gestures."

He glared at her. "It's not a setup, Jasber." He wished it was. That would make being here more palatable.

She beamed. "As I live and breathe; the almighty Trembor Goldenmane wants to do business with the likes of me." She canted her head. "How many times did you try to arrest me?"

"I arrested you sixteen times," he replied angrily. "There was no trying involved. You just managed to get the witnesses to recant their testimony."

"I did no such thing," she replied, eyes wide and tone hurt. "I know you aren't the one who got them to lie. You'd rather let a pack of hyena eat you than bend the rules, but you weren't the only one involved in the whole investigation, were you? It isn't my fault that by the time I made it to court, they'd decided to do the right thing and tell the truth."

"Can we stop this?" Trembor demanded, rubbing a temple. "We both know you made sure they were paid to say you weren't involved, and days after you went free they got eaten."

"Did you ever trace payments to me?"

He glared at her. "I'm not an enforcer anymore Jasber, I'm not even trying to get you to admit to anything. You're the one bringing it up, rubbing how you got away with it in my face. I just want to get this done with and never see you again." He nodded to

the hedgehog, who shrank in on himself at being acknowledged. “Who’s that?”

“My brother,” she answered in a tone that made it clear she didn’t want him asking more about that.

Trembor tilted an ear. “And he’s here, why?”

“You said you have computer problems. You know that’s not my thing. I’m a management kind of female. My brother, on the other hand, now, you can hand him a computer broken in tiny pieces and he’s going to return you a fully functioning computer.”

“Can you hack into the enforcer database?” Trembor asked the hedgehog, figuring they were past the point of stalking around the prey.

The hedgehog’s eyes grew wide.

“Why do you want him to go in there?” the bison asked. “From what I gather, you’re back working in a precinct.”

“I’m an RI, not an enforcer, which means that I can only access the evidence database on cases I’m working.”

“What do you need?” the hedgehog asked, his voice soft and shaking.

“A copy of every lap report on one specific case.”

“That means the forensic database,” he said, looking at the table, and Trembor had to strain to make out what he said. “It’s better protected. They don’t like it when we go in there and mess with the information.”

“Does that mean you can’t do it?” Trembor did his best to keep his annoyance buried, but he didn’t put it past Jasber to waste his time in retribution.

“It means it’s going to cost you,” the bison said.

“How much?”

A smile formed on her muzzle, fingers tapping a rhythm on the table. “I could be open to discussing an ongoing arrangement.”

“No. This is a one-time thing. You tell me how much, I pay, you get me what I want and we never see each other again. And just so we’re clear. You try to blackmail me with that recording and I’m going to eat the both of you.”

“I don’t do blackmail, lion. You of all people know that.” She indicated the recording pad. “That’s for my protection because the lion I used to know would never do business with someone like me. You changed, and that means I have to be careful.”

Trembor ground his teeth. This wasn’t him having changed. It was him dealing with extreme circumstances. “I’m going to discuss what a protection racket is,” he said. “So, how much?”

She told him, and he had trouble keeping the surprise from showing. He was going to have to eat smaller portions for a while to cover that. Maybe also avail himself of meat the precinct brought in if they offered it again. At least Marlot had shown him how to go about getting physical currency without raising flags in the system.

“I’m going to need a day to get that much.”

Her ears straightened. “You know how to get hard cash?” she smiled knowingly. “Do you have some need I should help you with?” Trembor glared at her and she

chuckled. “Bro, can you have him what he wants by the time he brings the payment?”

The hedgehog shook his head. “It isn’t enough for me to risk getting caught,” he whispered, eyes on the tabletop. “At least a week.”

Jasber smiled. “So, do you want this done faster? I’ll give you a discount, on account of our precious working relationship and all that.”

A week.

As much as he wanted this to be over sooner, rather than later, what she was already asking for nearly wiped out his budget. She’d want an ongoing relationship to cover the rest. He was sure Marlot would have tricks to deal with her, counteroffers, maybe even information he could blackmail her with to keep things reasonable. But even if Trembor had access to any of that. He was a law-abiding male. He wasn’t playing the criminal game.

At least, unless Sleekcoat had ways to pressure a judge, it would take time for Bo’s case to progress through the court system. It was one of the major complaints his father had about the legal system. It was slow. And with the evidence being so tightly wrapped, no enforcer should think they could afford to eat his brother. He’d still see about getting people he trusted to protect him. So a week was doable, realistically, Bo was looking at two, maybe three weeks, with a good lawyer running interference. Torim would see to it Bo had a good one.

Trembor stood. “I’ll be back tomorrow with your money.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” Jasber said. “Everyone gets dirt in their fur. It’ll wash right out.”

Trembor shuddered at the image. He already felt dirty from the deal and the bar’s scents that clung to him. Any more and he’d have to shave his fur off for any chances at feeling clean again.