

“Let me do the talking,” the nervous-looking squirrel in the ill-fitting suit sitting next to him said. “Whatever she says, however she tries to get you angry, don’t say anything.”

Marlot nodded to his lawyer, the two of them sitting in the interrogation room. He hadn’t wanted one. As far as he was concerned, this was clear cut. But by law, he had to have representation, and one was assigned to him. They were just waiting for the prosecutor to arrive. Marlot expected she wouldn’t be long. Anger, if nothing else, would propel her.

“Look, you have to prepare yourself, from what I sniffed out, you’re getting the top female handling your case. She’s ruthless; my guess is that she’s going to tear you apart because she was wrong about the person previously accused of this.” He hurriedly scrolled through his pad.

“Trembor Goldenmane,” Marlot volunteered.

The squirrel found what he was looking for and looked at him. “Yes, how did you know?” Marlot smiled and shrugged. “Anyway. Like I said, I do the talking. If you want to say anything, and this is vital, write it down and hand it to me. If I don’t think it’s going to hurt your case, I’ll tell her on your behalf. I know you think the law is here to protect you, but it isn’t. It’s to maintain order, and the law doesn’t care who gets trampled under its desires.”

Marlot nodded and before his lawyer could start up on whatever other warnings he had to give, the door opened and a hippopotamus in a pale green suit worth at least ten times that of his lawyer entered. She fixed her glare on Marlot as she walked to the other side of the table and sat.

He kept his expression neutral as the two lawyers exchanged terse greetings. As angry as she was, antagonizing her further wouldn’t help. Right now he was the target of anger due to the situation, something which, in theory, was outside both their control. If he actively angered her, she might decide to throw reason out the door and do as his lawyer warned.

“Mister Blackclaw,” she said, the effort not to grind her teeth visible. “I’m—”

“I’m the one who tampered with the evidence in the case against Bolifen Goldenmane,” Marlot stated.

She startled and his lawyer stared at him, looking like he wanted to bold. How had such a nervous male managed to rise high enough to be assigned to defense cases? Or was his firm hoping they would toughen him up? The alternative, as Marlot saw it, was for the squirrel to drop of fright.

The hippopotamus was quicker to recover. “Do you expect me to believe that you got into the enforcer databases, found the reports, and altered them? You’re an RI.”

“Who programs on the side.” He smiled at her. “Do you want me to explain how I found the weakness in the server’s firewalls? The location address within the server where I found the files pertaining to his case? How I modified them? If that’s what it’ll take for you to close this case quickly, I’ll be happy to provide the information.” All that had been done by his friends, but they’d explained things well enough that he could

convince her, and he felt he did have the skills to pull it off, but he would have needed much longer.

“Why would you have done that?” she demanded. “Bolifen Goldenmane is nothing to you. As far as I can tell the two of you met twice and only in passing.”

“He was Trembor’s brother. You met my mate. What do you think he would have done to protect him if I hadn’t acted first?”

She narrowed her eyes. “And yet he was the one initially arrested.”

Marlot sighed. “I should have expected that. He feels this need to protect me. I didn’t think he knew what I’d done, but—” he shrugged “—he is the better investigator of the two of us.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “This is all a ploy. You’re sacrificing yourself to protect your mate. Are you going to tell me you aren’t the one who made all the evidence regarding the string of death he caused vanish? You know all those deaths where he inserted people he controlled in positions of authority in the major corporations?”

Marlot looked at his lawyer, tilting an ear questioningly, but the squirrel was frozen. By his expression, it would be easy to think he was in the middle of two predators fighting over who got to eat him.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but have you met my mate? He gets heartburn at the idea of stepping close to breaking the law. And you want me to believe he was behind some conspiracy to what? Take control of the city’s corporations? I would love to see the evidence you have to support that.”

Her expression darkened. As she’d said, it had vanished. Marlot didn’t know if Mister White had had to sacrifice someone to make it happen. And he wouldn’t be able to look into this until after it was all resolved.

“I know, you’re behind this. I’m going to—”

The squirrel cleared his throat. “What you know,” he said, voice shaking, “doesn’t matter. It’s what you can prove that counts, and you just said there’s no evidence regarding that.”

“Oh, I’m going to find it.”

“That may be,” the lawyer replied, his voice growing steadier, “but until you do, this is about resolving the case of evidence tampering to which my client has admitted to.” The last part was said through gritted teeth and glaring at Marlot.

“Right,” the hippopotamus said. “Since you admitted to it and it’s recorded, I have to inform you that tampering with evidence is an offense that can result in cage time. And it will definitely result in the termination of your contract as a registered investigator with the city, as well as the suspension of your license. You can’t be an RI with a record.”

Marlot nodded. He already knew the price. He’d even started the process to get a loan to cover his bail to avoid being caged until after the sentencing was pronounced. If he was lucky everything would be over before that happened. He counted how her not being in as much of a hurry to prosecute him since she couldn’t use it to drag the entire enforcer system down with him.

“You’ll have to prove that he—” the squirrel snapped his muzzle shut under both their stares. “Sorry, force of habit. My clients don’t usually admit to committing the crime.”

“Since my admission is on the record, how long do you think it’s going to take for the sentencing? And based on your experience, how much will bail be?”

Her glare returned. “Is this a joke? You’re asking me that after the deal you and Sharphorns reached?”

Marlot stared at her. “What deal?”

“Are you telling me you didn’t leverage your mild fame for capturing that hunter years ago as well as the recent one on him to stay out of the cage until your sentence was pronounced?”

“I have no idea what this is about,” Marlot answered.

What was the city leader doing? Not that Marlot minded, owing the bull was better than any other debt it could have, but why puzzled him. If he’d wanted Marlot fully in debt to him, the best way was to make the entire case disappear. But that would have drawn attention to his interest. Maybe this was the best he could do without alerting the other parties involved.

Flattooth studied Marlot. “I will push for the maximum sentence I can. If I can convince the judge to assign you a sentence that takes into account everything Goldenmane was accused of, I will.”

“You can’t do that,” the squirrel stated, as Marlot’s stomach dropped. What kind of crime was trying to take control of corporations? Did that fall under trying to manipulate their productivity rating? Corporate espionage? Some other crime? Marlot didn’t remember how many people Trembor had been accused of placing, but he’d be looking at decades of being caged. This was not what he’d planned for.

“I can make my case to the judge,” she replied. “She will decide what to do about the actual sentencing.”

He had miscalculated how she’d react big time. Or possibly it was the city leader’s intervention that was responsible. Now he had to hope she’d change her opinion once she received her delivery. Or at least distract her from pushing so hard to have him caged for the rest of his life.

She put her pad away. “Regardless, since your client confessed, there’s no reason to continue this interrogation. I will send you the transcript for your client to sign, and should he change his mind, remind him that there’s a video record too, and it will show he volunteered the information.”

“I won’t recant,” Marlot said as she headed for the door.

She stopped and turned. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Mister Blackclaw, but I will make sure it ends up being too expensive for you. The law isn’t some system you can play with. It’s the foundation of our society, and anyone who thinks otherwise should be put down.”

Marlot smiled and couldn’t help replying. “I’m sure you can afford me, so why don’t you try it right now?”

She stiffened and looked like she was about to be sick at the idea. She stormed out and slammed the door.

He shouldn't have done that. He'd probably given her the idea of mentioning his name to predators she knew. Prey didn't have the kill instinct that made solving problems like this simple, but it didn't mean they couldn't pass it on to people who did.

The squirrel didn't look much better, but he still turned to face him. "What was that about? You don't just confess. I can't protect you that way."

"With all due respect, you weren't going to protect me from her. You said it, she's ruthless and no offense, but the way you're shaking, she could have eaten you. I just saved everyone time and money."

His lawyer considered it, then nodded. "Is she right? Did you engineer all of this to protect your mate?"

"We're still being recorded," Marlot pointed out, but then added. "But I'll tell you this. There is nothing I wouldn't do for my mate." With Flattooth gone, he figured that part of the record could be accidentally lost without her knowing about it. "You can ask him the extent to which I have gone to already."

The squirrel looked even more uncomfortable now. He stood. "Well, you've made sure my services won't be needed, so I'll take my leave." As he reached for the door it opened and Trembor shoved him out of the way, hurrying in.

Marlot was up, cursing mentally. He couldn't be here. If he said the wrong thing on record, there was a chance Flattooth would find out and then it would all come falling apart.