

Chapter 45

Trembor felt... He tried to work out how he felt as he finished cleaning the kitchen. The last night's cleaning had suffered from constant interruptions, and some of them had led to making the room messier. Since it wasn't worth buying a new table, he needed to make sure the table was more stable. It shouldn't have tipped over, even with what he and Marlot had done on it.

He felt mostly settled; he decided. Calm. The night with his wolf hadn't caused him to doubt what he was doing, as he'd feared. Instead, it had increased his resolve. He would hurt people he'd rather not, but in the long run, his family, Marlot, and a lot of other people would have a life free of criminal interference because of his actions.

He needed to write a letter to his parent, to Marlot, explaining his reasoning, why he hadn't told them. He'd have to write one for the cubs. He'd have to be more circumspect, but they, more than the adults, would have difficulty understanding why he hadn't survived this. Heroes should always survive battles with evil. At least according to the stories.

His pad rang, and he sighed as he saw who it was. He sat. "Hi, Dad."

Torim let him stew for a few seconds. "Hello, Son."

"She told you." It wasn't hard to work that out. Serene wouldn't keep their talk from his father.

Torim laughed. "Son, unlike what you and your siblings seem to think, I do know about the net and I do spend time watching videos on there. What Serene did was tie me to my chair and took my pad away so I couldn't scream at you after seeing that video of you and Bo screaming at each other."

He rested his head on his hand. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"Son, I thought I taught you and your brother better than to scream at each other."

Trembor chuckled. "Let's remember that you started the trend of screaming at him."

"Ah," his father hesitated. "That's true."

"About Marlot, I can explain."

"Son, I don't care about Marlot. I mean, I care about him being in your life, but if you and him are working things out, then I have no business stepping into that. You were clear with your mother that you don't want us involved."

"I don't want her, or you, to get in the way." He had to stop as his throat constricted over the rest. Over the lies he had to imply to ensure his parents wouldn't interfere. "That isn't the same as not having you involved in our lives."

"Alright," Torim said, in that tone he used when he could tell not everything was being said. Hopefully, he'd attribute it to the awkwardness of the conversation. "Does this mean he'll be coming with you at the next dinner? You'll want to warn the others first if he will. They are going to need time to get over the surprise and not decide you need their protection."

Trembor forced the chuckle through the pain. The next dinner would be horrible because of him, of his absence, the reasons behind it. "It's the cubs who are going to make his life hard. I'm not sure how someone goes around making amends for hurting their favorite uncle." Would Marlot go without him? Would his family be able to help him with

the loss, or was his wolf beyond redemption in the eyes of his siblings? He'd have to make sure his letter to them explained Marlot wasn't Gorrek, that he deserved their support. That he had nothing to do with what Trembor was doing now.

"Son, are you okay?"

Fuck. "Just the emotions of bringing him to the dinner."

His father was quiet. "You and your brother aside," he said, not revealing how he felt about Trembor's answer, "Judge Swimmer contacted me about the paperwork for your case. She's a friend and colleague, and who's handling finalizing your case. The prosecution sent in everything, but Barany hasn't sent anything and she can't reach him. I can't either. Do you know why he's delaying?"

"He got a rotten smell off the new prosecutor assigned to me, with Flattooth having family issues. The last I heard of him was that he was looking into something about making sure everything is in good form. I don't know what that means." It had been a few days. If his lawyer wasn't answering his father or the judge in charge, had something happened to him?

"Well, it's not like that armadillo to just cut contact like that. When you speak with him, remind him he wouldn't be where he is now without my help and that, at the very least, means I expect him to take my calls."

"Alright, I will." The door buzzed. "I got to go. Someone I'm expecting has just arrived." Derimak must have had her car in pursuit mode to get here this fast.

"Alright, Son. If you need help with anything, pad me."

"I will," he lied and disconnected. He was in too deep now to drag anyone else in, especially his father.

He opened the door and was surprised to see a bull there, instead of the hyena.

"Mister Goldenmane," the bull said. He was massive, in a gray suit that made Trembor think 'government employee', except for the meanness of his expression. "My boss wants to have a word with you." He motioned to the car at the curb.

So this was it. His plans might not even happen. He considered the bull, considered taking him on. But something about the expression, the way he held himself told Trembor this was one prey who could kill. Nikal kept him from dismissing the idea outright. If a hare could kill over a dozen people, being nearly half the mass of this bull, why couldn't this male kill him if he caused problems?

Trembor grabbed his jacket and locked the door. He had to play for time, hope this wasn't the disaster he thought it was, and if it was, that Derimak could continue with the plan in his memory.

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Another fucking restaurant, he thought as he followed the bull in. Trembor didn't bother looking at the name or where he was. He didn't care. He'd deal with getting home *if* he got out of this.

Maoma was seated at the center table, with six other people spread within the dining room; not one of them a customer or staff. The mole raised a hand, and the bull stopped him.

"Please turn your pad off and place it on the table," she ordered.

He did as instructed. He doubted playing her game would increase the odds of his survival, but antagonizing her was a certain way for him to end up as multiple meals here.

“I hope you understand my caution. After the claims you made to your brother, I have to wonder if you aren’t planning on doing something stupid again.”

“Stupid?” He snapped and told himself to shut up. “You are calling me stupid after you did the stupidest thing I can ever think of you doing?”

“Mister Goldenmane,” she said, her tone darkening.

“Go fuck yourself, Maoma. We had a deal. I was going along with it. You broke it. So don’t fucking come to me with doing stupid things.”

“I did no such thing,” she replied. Glaring at him.

“What do you call involving my nephew in your criminal activities? Did you, somehow, think I didn’t consider them family? Did you think that because he’s Bo’s son, that meant I wouldn’t do everything I can to protect him? That I’d consider him ruined because of his father’s actions?”

“I had nothing to do with that,” he replied curtly. “There was an unfortunate miscommunication with the people I’d put in charge of your brother. It’s been resolved. I promise you this will never happen again.”

He stared at her, trying to absorb what she’d said, the gall of that female to tell him to trust her. “Even if I believed you. That’s not going to stop the next person you put to handle my brother from doing the same thing, and the next when what I catch you doing it again, and again. I’m not playing that game. You’ve shown me you can’t be trusted. That’s the end of it. You want to send me to the cages, you go right ahead. You want to end me, I can’t stop you. What I can do is do everything in my power to make sure you are never able to touch someone in my family again.”

“Mister Goldenmane,” she said frostily, “you would do well to watch your words and your tone. As you said, there is nothing you can do if I decide to end you.”

“Go ahead, eat me,” he goaded. As much as he hated the idea of abandoning his family. He wanted this to be over. If that meant his death, then he was okay with that. And he wouldn’t be there to see the results, he thought, and called himself a coward for it.

“No, Mister Goldenmane. If I end you. It will not be by killing you. This conversation is over. I believe that we both need time to let our blood cool. When we are both more reasonable, we will talk again.”

Trembor snorted. “Reasonable? You? You take advantage of my brother’s addiction to turn him into a criminal, to get him to convince his son it’s okay to break the law, and you want me to think you’re anything resembling reasonable? Maoma, you’re a criminal. You’re rot on our society. You need to be burned off so the rest can function. You want to convince me you’re reasonable? Set my brother free, then we’ll talk.”

“Actions have consequences, Mister Goldenmane. Your brother did not hold up his side of the agreement he made, therefore—”

“My brother’s sick and you know it! You preyed on him with it. If you aren’t letting him go, there’s nothing worth talking about here.” Trembor turned and headed for the door.

“Mister Goldenmane!”

“Fuck you, Maoma! I’m walking him. Feel free to have one of your goons turn me into meat on the way there.”