

Chapter 12

The armadillo smiled as Trembor opened the door. “Good afternoon, Mister Goldenmane, may I come in?”

What would the lawyer do if he said no? If he closed the door in his face? A morbid part of Trembor was tempted to find out. Maybe it would offend him enough to walk away from the case, or purposely throw it. Either would help Trembor’s plan to pay for his crime. But most likely, any lawyer his father picked to defend him had the self-control to do his job to the best of his ability despite a difficult client. Lawyers who couldn’t didn’t maintain their productivity rating high enough didn’t survive everyone they pissed off doing their job.

He stepped out of the armadillo’s way.

“If you don’t mind me saying so,” Barany said, “you don’t look too good.”

“I mind.” The shower had helped his body relax, but not his mind. He wanted to be out there, with Marlot, despite the problems that would cause, eventually. His mood would be just as dark, and his wolf would get answers out of him, and then...

“I hope whatever it is will be resolved by the time your case goes before a judge.”

Trembor snorted, and the armadillo looked at him. Instead of commenting on his brother’s stubbornness, he headed to the kitchen. His lawyer placed a suitcase on the table and took out a pad, along with folders.

“Do you want something to drink?” Trembor offered. He might not want the lawyer there, but he could still be civil. His mother insisted on it.

“Thank you, I would.” Barany looked up from ordering the papers. “Do you have any vegetable juice?”

“Sorry, just blood and water.” He took a bottle from the cooler, then a second as it felt light. Only one left. He needed to go hunt.

“Blood will do then.”

He filled two glasses halfway, putting the empty bottle in the sink and the other back in the cooler. Out of the cupboard, he took a bottle of alcohol and offered it to the armadillo, who shook his head. He added a splash to his glass, then set the other before the lawyer as he sat.

Barany studied him as Trembor took a drink. “Drinking alcohol right now might not be a good idea. You will need your mind to be sharp.”

Trembor shrugged. “After the day I’ve had, I need something to dull the edges before I claw the next person who annoys me.” He grinned toothily at the lawyer.

“I see.”

Trembor eyed the pad. “Out of curiosity, do you know where Jasber Braid is being held?”

No one he’d called had been willing to tell him, or what condition she might be in. Someone knew how many friends he had because even those willing to dig had found nothing. Flatthooth wanted to make sure her star witness didn’t get eaten. That or Maoma was keeping her so she could force Trembor to follow the scents she wanted him following; if Jasber was even still alive. The mole had implied she wasn’t.

Barany thumbed through the folders instead of looking at the pad. “She’s being held at the Cave-in Complex.”

Trembor nodded. Medium caging complex. When he was an enforcer, it was where most of the people working off their crimes on the work details were held.

“Have you visited her?”

“No. I have the transcript of the interrogation. At this stage, I don’t need to evaluate her in person. Her arrest record, and the part you played in how extensive it is, is enough to establish some level of doubt as to the validity of her testimony. Right now, this is about preparing you for what you’ll face.”

“What happens to its validity if she dies?” Trembor was certain the answer had been in one of his father’s stories, but there were only so many court stories a cub and young adult could listen to before tuning them out.

The armadillo paused in his reading, then fixed his gaze on him. “Is there a reason the court should be concerned about her life?”

“She’s in a caging complex,” Trembor said. “Even the low-risk ones have accidents, fights, one prisoner eating the other. You have to have considered the possibility.”

Barany considered something. “Testimonies are taken as soon as they can because those things are indeed possibilities. Normally it happens while they are still in enforcer custody, with a lawyer present, and the recorders active. Multiple copies from multiple parties to ensure any discrepancy can be accounted for and corrected.” He folded his hand over one another. “But I want to make something clear, Mister Goldenmane. Her death will not help your case. It might even hurt it, since Flattooth will be able to point to that as being the corrupt influence of enforcers trying to protect one of their own. Her testimony is on record.” He tapped the stack of folders. “That is all the prosecution needs to make their case. We need her so that when I put her on the stand, I can take apart her character. Show her to be vengeful, petty, willing to do and say anything to make you pay for the misery she suffered because you caused her to be arrested and, in three cases, serve time, although from what I read, it wasn’t as long as it should have been. Still, she orchestrated all of this, and I will demonstrate that to the judge.”

“You’re not doing to attack her.”

“I will do—”

“She isn’t lying,” Trembor said, glaring at the armadillo.

Barany sighed. “Mister Goldenmane—”

“Just call me Trembor,” he said, irritated. “Mister is my dad, and I don’t want to feel like him right now.” If he wasn’t so annoyed, he’d groan as the realization he’d uttered a line used in just about every movie where someone young was called ‘mister’.

“Mister Goldenmane,” the lawyer stated forcefully. “That she said the truth or not is irrelevant. My job is to defend you. That means showing to the judge that Flattooth’s only witness can have an agenda that would cause her to fabricate a story and ensure the enforcers became aware of it. As for said character, I have ample documentation that she is indeed petty and vengeful.”

“So you’re going to lie?”

“Of course not,” Barany said, offended. “I don’t have to lie, I will simply lay facts that lead to a specific conclusion. One that works in your favor.”

“You do understand that’s why no one likes lawyers, right?” Trembor said. “You’re not going to lie, but you’re going to twist everything to the point where it destroys someone’s life.”

“Someone’s life will be destroyed by this case, Mister Goldenmane. It is my job to make sure it isn’t yours.”

“I fucking did it!”

The armadillo hurried to look around the kitchen, and the absurdity of the act doused Trembor’s anger.

“You really think there’s some recorder in my house?” he asked.

“You have no idea to what length the prosecution will go.” He set his hands on the table. “Mister Goldenmane, this isn’t about what you did or didn’t do. It is about what the prosecution can prove.”

“They have the evidence my brother was framed by someone other than who I arranged to have framed.”

“Evidence that I have experts looking at for anything that can be linked back to Miss Braid so that—”

“I handed it over to the enforcers,” Trembor said, fed up with the lawyer’s insistence at twisting everything.

The armadillo stared at him, then grabbed the pad and swiped. “Who knows about this?” he demanded. “I didn’t see any mention of your name as part of that evidence.”

“I didn’t hand it over personally,” Trembor said. “I used a kiosk in a part of the city I don’t think I’ve been in before.”

The lawyer relaxed a little. “There are cameras.”

He shook his head. “It’s a low rate area. Lots of vandalism, no stores with cameras pointing at it, and the kiosk itself was spray-painted, which covered the camera.”

Barany nodded. “Can you be tracked there?”

“I left my pad at home. My car might have been recorded in the area, but I walked to the kiosk.”

“That is rather astute for someone so adamant on doing the right thing, and also strange. Why didn’t you simply hand the evidence directly?”

Trembor hesitated. “What I tell you now, is there any way you can then use it against someone else?”

“What you tell me is in confidence.”

“But if it shows that someone else committed a crime. Can you then go after him with the information?”

“I don’t go after criminals—”

“He’s not a criminal.”

The armadillo tilted his head.

Trembor sighed. “Just answer the question.”

“The honest answer is that it depends on the severity of the crime and my conscience. Yes, Mister Goldenmane, lawyers have a conscience. If he is arrested for it, and I find that it is something too severe for me to remain silent about, then I will come forward with the information, unless doing so would in turn hurt your case. That I cannot do, even if it means someone else will go free.”

Trembor nodded. “Then all I’m going to tell you is that it would hurt someone else if people found out I had the evidence and how I came to have it.”

“I see.” The armadillo said, then was silent. “Mister Goldenmane, if this is the case, I have to point out that your insistence in being found guilty could very well lead to this other person being exposed.”

“No. I plead guilty. No one looks into anything more.”

“You plead guilty, and Prosecutor Flattooth uses that to begin a quest to dismantle the enforcers.”

“You must be really happy with yourself, Barany,” Trembor growled. “Having stuck like this. No matter what I do, people get hurt.”

“I know you don’t want to see this, but I am trying to save as many people as I can, starting with you. I would fight just as hard if no one else would be affected, it is what your father asked me to do, and I respect him too much not to do everything I can to save you, but if you were the only one affected, I would take the loss, if it occurred, and move on. But she has decided to use you to go after something much larger. I have to think that you would prefer sacrificing some of your integrity rather than see her win.”

Trembor glared at the Armadillo. “You do realize that me sacrificing some of my integrity for someone else is exactly how I’ve found myself in this situation.”

The lawyer nodded. “I am indeed aware.”

Trembor sighed and admitted defeat. He’d have to find some other way to keeping Maoma from getting what she wanted. “Fine.”

“Good,” Barany said, not showing any of the delight Trembor was sure he felt. “And speaking of that sacrifice, Flattooth will come at you using your brother. Nearly all your friends and coworkers have testified to your strong ties to your family, which is already a documented lion behavior. Many mentioned how you are the one they go to when they need help resolving one problem or another. She will try to use that to make you seem like a fix-it male without regard to the laws or other people. We need to find every event in your past that contradicts that.”

“You realized that it’s just them coming to me and talking, right? I give advice and that’s about it. I can count on one hand the times I’ve had to get involved, and it’s usually either lending some money or acting as referee between them and someone else.”

The armadillo nodded. “Good, then we start with that and show that’s all Bolifen did.”

Trembor swore. “He didn’t come talk. That’s how this mess started. He wouldn’t let me help. I had to find out about his arrest from Herelex. I knew Bo hadn’t done it. Everyone knew it. My brother can be an idiot, but he isn’t that stupid. So I set to prove it. Only I couldn’t find anything not showing my brother did it. I got desperate and

shifted the blame on those I figured were responsible.”

Barany nodded in understanding. “That, Mister Goldenmane, is exactly what you can’t say.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“Which Prosecutor Flattooth will—”

“Turn around and use that to destroy the enforcers,” Trembor spat. “What do you want me to say then? Lie?”

“No. I will establish your character as a law-abiding male with a deep love for his family. When I ask you a question, you will talk, you will answer them well and extensively. Don’t worry, we will go over them ahead of time. When the prosecution asked their questions, you will answer as succinctly as you can get away with. Yes and no is usually sufficient.”

“Isn’t that going to make it sound like I’m guilty?”

“You’ve told me you are.”

Trembor ran a hand over his muzzle. “The stories I remember from my dad sounded a lot more fun than this.”

“The joys of looking back and ignoring all the work that went into a victory.”

“Look, what happens when she outright asks me if I did it or not?”

“You plead the right to not cause your own death.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s the six hundred eighty-fourth clause of the defense law. I’m surprised your father never mentioned it. In short, it states that no defendant can be forced to admit to something that will cause them the loss of their lives.”

“I’m just going to be caged.”

“The law was amended back in the time of King Lermont; when caging someone became more acceptable as punishment for a crime than just eating them. The lawyers of the time all started using that to claim no death would happen, so the defendant had to answer. And the law was altered. But the name remained.”

Trembor thought it over. “What you’re saying is that she won’t ask directly because I’m going to be able to refuse to answer. Doesn’t that just prove I’m guilty?”

“It doesn’t prove anything. Only that you don’t want to answer. She will still have to establish the case against you.”

“Why aren’t we taught that in the enforcer courses? Do you have any idea how often we’ve told a crook that things will go much easier on them if they just come clean?”

The armadillo chuckled bitterly. “I think you can work out why by yourself. Believe me when I say that the defense league keeps petitioning to have the law taught as part of enforcer training and that the prosecutors all make sure it never goes in our favor.”

“If we don’t know about it, no one can tell us we don’t have the right to ask. And once the criminal is recorded admitting to the crime, the prosecution can use that. Why aren’t you petitioning to have everyone arrested gets representation?”

“Who’s going to pay for it?”

Trembor grumbled. Of course, it came down to money. When did it not? “So we’re going to stalk around what I did in such a way the judge thinks I didn’t do it?” he asked bitterly. “How are you doing to do that and not lie?”

The armadillo fixed his gaze on Trembor. “You are going to have to learn a hard lesson.” Trembor narrowed his eyes. “The truth is subjective.”

“No.” Trembor snapped. “The truth is the truth. You don’t get to bend it and still call it that. I’ll play your game, but you aren’t going to get me to lie by telling me it’s someone else’s truth.”

The armadillo sighed and leaned back in the chair. “You framed an innocent conglomerate of gambling houses.”

Trembor snorted. “They’re criminals.”

Barany smiled. “Where’s your evidence?”

Trembor opened his mouth, then had to close it.

The armadillo leaned forward to put his hands over the folders. “Truth is subjective. I have no reason to doubt you, and I’m certain there is evidence supporting that, but right now, it is simply your truth. Their truth is that they offer a service to the public. Gambling allows people to relax. Some to go far, but that can be said of everything.”

“It doesn’t make me wrong,” Trembor said.

“No, it doesn’t, but that is why the courts rely on evidence. Unfortunately for the court, people are still involved in the system, so there is a level of subjectivity we can take advantage of. Flattooth will do so to convince the judge you are a criminal mastermind worse than anyone before. I will do so convince them you have been the victim of an old enemy of yours.”

“So long as I go along with it.”

Barany nodded but didn’t point out the consequences. He didn’t have to. Trembor hated that so many people would be dragged down with him. Good people, enforcers who put themselves at risk every day.

Marlot.

He hated where he saw this going. If he won, he put himself at the mercy of criminals. They’d claim to have played a part, and if Trembor didn’t do what he was told, they’d hurt his family. If he lost, Flattooth would destroy the enforcers. He could almost believe that was also part of Maoma’s plans. He could deal with the cage, and maybe he’d do some work for her there. But he couldn’t be part of everyone else suffering.

He only had one way out left.

“Alright,” he told the armadillo. “The truth is subjective.”

Barany smiled. “I am pleased to hear you say that.”

Trembor wondered if Marlot would ever forgive him for what he was contemplating.