

Chapter 35

Trembor turned over, catching sight of the clock as he ran a hand over the vacant side of the bed. Waking up tired and missing Marlot were the norm now, but this time, instead of being caused by alcohol, it was because of dreams.

Something about chaining himself before an oncoming train, his family behind him, counting on his body to be enough to stop it. Bo being sucked ever deeper into a hole, and instead of pulling him out, Trembor was pushing him down. In court, his father as the judge, reciting a list of crimes to his mothers sitting in the jury box. He couldn't tell what Torim said. The words were garbled, but he knew it was a list going back as far as his birth.

His three mothers looked at him. "Guilty!" they said in unison, and his nieces and nephews crawled out of the floor to eat him.

This was where he'd woken. He didn't understand where missing Marlot came from, other than just missing him all the time. Even though they'd agreed not to spend the night together; his wolf had work to do, Trembor needed to let what he and Derimak had decided sink in fully. Now he wished he'd had him to hold.

He looked at the clock again. In a few minutes, the calls would start. He rolled onto his back. Shouldn't he be back to his old self now? Looking forward to the cubs' calls? He was no longer lost amidst everything happening to him. He had a plan of action, he was a hunter again. He sat and took his pad from the headboard. It had more than half a charge. Enough for the cubs, if he decided to take their calls.

Barany hadn't gotten back to him yet. He knew better than to embark on this without letting his lawyer know, but the armadillo wasn't in the office. Trying to get in touch with Flattooth, probably. Or, maybe he suspected Trembor would tell him to just approve the terms that came with the case being dropped without bothering looking for hidden scents. Barany would be okay with it, once he knew the plan, but until then, he wouldn't want Trembor meddling.

And he needed to figure out what to tell Marlot. Should he tell his wolf? Lying felt wrong, dangerous even, after what they'd gone through due to not talking, not explaining why they'd done what they had. But if he did, Marlot would demand to be part of it. To do it in his place.

His wolf wouldn't let him sully his hands by killing Nikal. How would he feel about his law-abiding, perfect lion, breaking laws just to bring criminals to justice? He had no misconceptions about it. Maoma would get him to break laws. It might even be the first thing she did. To test his resolve.

She was too smart to believe Trembor didn't have a plan, but that didn't matter. She believed she could break him. Turn him into someone who hated himself so much she could control him with promises of making everything better in time. As if he hadn't already gone through that at Gorrek's claws? Rebuilt himself from the ground up with the help of his family, had his faith in himself shaken by what he and Marlot had gone through.

He'd have to be careful not to get overconfident, but he was ready for her.

His pad buzzed. But was he ready for Dayra?

He could send the call to his message center, pay for it later. Maybe that was the best

way to do this. He wasn't sure how he'd sound jovial.

He answered. "Hi, Dayra." He needed some brightness in his life right now.

"You answered!" his niece replied. "Mom said I shouldn't bother you. That you're busy and that you need to rest, but she doesn't know you like I do. What is it like to be in court? Is Granddad doing it with you? Are you going to be on the news? I can't wait to see you there. You're going to be famous!"

Trembor chuckled. Dayra bore her name well. She brought daylight even when she asked the questions he'd rather avoid. "I haven't been in a courtroom yet. The lawyers are still resolving things. You've heard Torim's stories, lawyers always prefer it if they can solve the problem without involving other people."

"But you won't be famous if you aren't in the news, and you can't be in the news if you aren't in a courtroom."

"That's true," he said, "but as much as you'd like it, I'd rather not be famous. There's a lot of work involved when you're famous."

"Like brushing your teeth, your mane," she said in her sage voice. "Did you do it? Did you clean your ears?"

"I haven't had time yet, I'm talking with you." He looked around for his earpiece. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it.

"Oh, you have to do that, it's important."

"Not as important as talking with you." She giggled and disconnected. He had maybe a minute before the next call came.

He found the earpiece in his light jacket, but Nerik called before he had it synced. And he had to answer questions about life, family. He did his exercises as best as he could with his pad to his ear, then synced it before Vanya called, after her, was Gansir. Even Miril called.

After her, he set the family lock. It was time for him to get to work, and immediately his principles protested. "Really? Isn't it a little late for that?" he knew why they protested now, after talking with the cubs. Why he'd convinced himself to take with them.

He'd have to cut ties with his family once this started. It would be the only way to keep anything he'd have to do from splashing onto them. That was what the protest was about. He wanted there to be another way.

He could explain this to Marlot. His wolf would be angry, but he lived in the gray area where the law and justice didn't always see eye to eye. His family? His father would demand he refuse any deal that forced him to sully his fur. Serene would be furious that he'd waited this long to tell her. Kept her from asserting her self-appointed protector of the family position. She wouldn't care about the danger, only that she hadn't been there to protect him. That he would willingly walk into yet another abusive relationship.

She might eat him right there and make all of this moot.

He put his pad on the charger on his way to the shower, Then he ate, having to fight his stomach's protest anytime thoughts of his family surfaced. He had to resort to a glass of alcoholized blood to settle it.

Once done, he looked through his clothing, taking out the older reinforced shirts and

pants. Maoma would require him to fight, he was certain of it, and he didn't count on her providing him with any protection, not until after he'd proven himself.

His pad buzzed, and by the time he reached his office and saw it was Herelex, it was one ring away from going to his message center. "Herelex, what's wrong?" suspicion of Dayra convincing the oldest of his nephew to use his bypass so she could ask him a question flitted through his mind, followed by the reminder his nephew was too mature to give into her.

"Herelex?" he asked again, realizing the young lion had said nothing throughout his musing. He listened for other sounds. People talking, clacking of rail. Why was Herelex on the underground? Bo usually dropped him and Isenson at the academy on his way to work.

"I don't know what to do." He sounded in pain.

"What's wrong?" Who could Trembor call to reach Herelex if he was in trouble? The sound of an announcement came, but the pad distorted the words and he couldn't make out the station.

"It's probably nothing," Herelex sighed. "I'm just acting like prey."

"Herelex, if you think something is wrong, it probably is." His nephew wasn't one to give in to fear. To act like prey. The one time it had happened, he'd waited only four of the students were hunting him before calling. He and Marlot had barely gotten there in time. "What is it?"

Herelex sighed. "Someone at the academy offered me Nip, said I'd have a great time with it. Another one said if I didn't want to smoke, I could sell it and make money. Another one said I could make money if I was willing to do the right things, whatever that means. One of them was a teacher, and the others are old enough they have to be working there, right? I know I'm being a cub for thinking this, but should I feel safe at the academy? Now it's like anytime someone talks to me, they might want me to do stuff." He fell silent, but Trembor sensed he wasn't done. "Bad stuff."

"You said one of them is a teacher?" Trembor didn't want to believe Maoma had people in the academy, just like he hadn't wanted to believe she had any in the enforcers.

"Yes, I've seen her teach. One of the others might be an assistant. I don't know every adult at the academy, so I can't be sure. I'm pretty sure one of them implied that if he could record me while having sex, there was a lot of money in it."

Trembor heard the shudder in his nephew's voice. He'd only come out of his first heat a few weeks ago. He'd mentioned a male recently. He hoped that male wasn't one of those pushing Herelex. But no one there would know for certain Herelex was past it. The first heat could come as early as sixteen and as late as twenty. No two person was the same.

"You know you don't have to do what they tell you, right? Especially those who aren't teachers."

"Of course I do," Herelex snapped. "But they're everywhere. When I try to hang out with my friends, one of them will show up and act like she's my best friend, and make everyone uncomfortable. If I'm trying to study, it's a few of them pretty much mocking me for it when there's easier ways to get money. None of which can be legal, so it's going to screw with my productivity."

“Have you told your adviser?”

“I...” Herelex trailed off.

“Herelex, is your adviser one of them?” Trembor demanded, his hackles up. Was this what Maoma meant when she said she would leave his family alone?

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, but the others kind of said he told them where to find me, so I don’t know.”

“Tell your father.” Did she not consider the cubs to be part of his family? As Herelex took too long to answer, Trembor felt the dread rise.

“I did,” his nephew said softly.

“What did your father say?” Trembor asked cautiously.

“That I might as well do what they tell me. That having more money’s always a good thing.”

“He said what?” Trembor roared. He closed his muzzle, tried to calm his breathing. How could his brother ever—

“He said hustling on the side is just how people get ahead. That it would get me ready for when I was done with the academy.” The words were flat and reminded Trembor of how he’d sounded when he was contemplating ending his life.

“How long had this been going on?” He demanded, beyond being careful.

“A while.”

Trembor wanted to ask why he’d waited this long to call him, but he reminded himself he’d been young once too. It wasn’t like he’d asked for help once he knew how destructive Gorrek was. At least Herelex was talking to him now.

“Try to avoid them,” Trembor said in as calm a tone as he could. “I’m going to have a talk with your father, and then I’ll talk with your adviser. Find out if he’s involved in this or not. If you can’t avoid them, set your pad to record as discretely as you can. Don’t agree to anything they ask. Try to stay in crowds as much as possible. Ask your friends not to leave you alone, no matter how uncomfortable one of them makes them feel. Don’t tell them any more than you feel you have to, but do your best. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Trembor wasn’t sure he heard the snuffle, but when Herelex said, “thank you,” the hitch was clear.

Trembor couldn’t imagine how Herelex felt. For his father to basically hand him over like this when his job was to protect his son from this kind of thing. Trembor had had no one but himself to blame regarding staying with Gorrek. His nephew had done the right thing, gone to Bo for protection.

His brother had better have some extremely good explanations, otherwise, Trembor might not leave him any hide to cover his shame with.