

Chapter 26

“What is it with you people and restaurants?” Trembor grumbled to himself as they entered the well-appointed establishment. They’d driven him to a part of the city he’d never come to before, too expensive for him.

“Would you rather we take you to a seedy back alley?” the hyena asked.

“At least there I’d know what kind of people I’m dealing with.” And there wouldn’t be any bystanders. The fox stayed well behind Trembor, making sure he didn’t run and probably imagining all the lewd things he’d do if given the chance.

The hyena led Trembor past the host and a counter displaying sweet-smelling meats. He hadn’t had candied meat in years and fought not to salivate. Lyria had a recipe he kept telling himself he’d replicate, but never got to it. That was one dish he was certain would convince Marlot baking was worthwhile.

Maybe he should take Marlot here for a last meal together.

At the back of the boisterous dining room, a beaded curtain led to a private room where Maoma sat, eating a confection Trembor didn’t recognize. She bit into it and the surface cracked, letting juices flow that she hurried to lick with a chuckle.

“Forgive me,” she said as she cleaned her muzzle with a towel from a stack on a warming plate. “I haven’t eaten here in a few months, and I expected it would take longer for them to convince you to come.” She indicated the chair opposite her.

“I don’t like letting things linger,” he replied, sitting, “especially the annoying ones.” He did his best to ignore the large insects on her plate. He hadn’t expected to see that here, since everyone in the dining room was predator or prey. Insect eaters were in the minority, and he expected only specialized places served them. Jaxca ordered his from a provider outside the country, he’d explained once.

“I’m surprised.” She smiled knowingly. “Does it mean this refusal to accept my proposition is because you enjoy the situation it places you in?”

“No. That’s a moral objection to dealing with criminals like you. It makes where I’m at right now bearable.”

She shook her head sadly. “As I’ve explained, Mister Goldenmane, we are a business. One of many within this city providing needed services. The fact the government frowns on us for doing so doesn’t change the fact there is a need we serve.”

“One you’ve manufactured,” Trembor replied flatly.

She canted her head, her minuscule eyes on him. “Do you truly believe that? We didn’t invent the product we provide, nature did. The only thing we did was streamline the supply chain.”

“Are you really going to try to convince me that the fact there’s addictive plants in nature justifies what you’re doing with them?”

She shrugged. “There is a demand. If it isn’t us who met it, it might be someone less scrupulous.” She smiled at him. “But that isn’t what we are here to discuss, is it?”

“I’m here because those two forced me. You can talk about whatever you want and I’m going to have to listen.”

“Would you like one?” she indicated the plate. “Cracked Roach. Very good. They’re

dipped in melted sugar.” She paused. “I’m not certain how familiar you are with baking, or candy making, in this case.”

“Don’t you know everything about me?” He asked, his temper flaring. “And no, I’m not going to have any of that.”

“I don’t know everything about you, Mister Goldenmane.” She picked up one of the candied insects and Trembor looked away from her. “No one can know everything about someone else, no matter how close they are. I simply ensure I know what is needed for this conversation to be productive.”

“Isn’t your definition of productive one where I agree to work for you?” he asked, glancing at her studying the candy. If he thought of it simply as candy, the idea she’d eat it was more bearable. “I won’t.”

She bit into it, giggling as the shell cracked, and she hurried to lick the juices. If he forced himself to ignore the history of threats between them, he could think she looked like any other young female enjoying a candy. Which, he realized as she ate the rest of the candy, might be what she was trying to do.

“How is your family doing?” she asked, wiping her muzzle.

Trembor tense and narrowed his eyes. “If you have—”

“You tell me,” she cut him off. “You would know, wouldn’t you, if one of them had been attacked? Even in your current situation, you are still your family’s confidant. As anyone come to you with such an assault?” she canted her head. “No? How about some other kind of problem? Maybe one of your sisters?”

He ground his teeth to keep from roaring. It would be a waste of time, and he shouldn’t be surprised she knew about Dania’s visit. They could find him when he roamed aimlessly; watching his house would be easy for them.

But how would they know she’d confided problems? Dania had only come over to bring him meat. The conversation had shifted to her work because he’d asked after her, like he always did. But they had no reasons to know about her problems there.

“You ate her assistant,” he growled. That was how they knew Dania had problems.

“I?” Maoma chuckled. “Please, do I look like someone who eats—she motioned to him with a waving finger—people? I had employees eat them.”

He was on his feet, hands on the table and leaning toward her. “If you do anything to hurt my sister, I’m going to—”

“Sit down, Mister Goldenmane.” She fixed her eyes on him, and any amusement that had been there was gone. They were cold, calculating. The eyes of someone who did the intimidating, not received it. “I promised you I wouldn’t touch your family, and I haven’t. You never mentioned the people around them.” Trembor sat under the force of that glare, and she smiled. “Isn’t it interesting how everything is interconnected in our society? How one person becoming someone’s meal can affect another’s productivity? Oh, there are systems in place to mitigate that effect, but it’s more aimed at the macro level. When you look down, on the personal one, it does seem to break down easily, doesn’t it? Especially among professionals. Those positions aren’t as easy to fill as, say, a factory worker.”

“I swear, if you—”

“Please,” she cut him off with derision, “don’t make threats you can’t carry through. It’s unbecoming of a male like you. The situation is simple. I’ve given you time to come to your senses. To understand that working for me is the better of any of the outcomes you can expect. Instead, you chose to use that time to spiral down into a morbid depression that you intend to end in a drastic way.”

Trembor blinked, the anger washed away by the surprise.

“Did you really think no one would realize what you are planning? You stood there in the precinct, looking at them. Not saying anything.” She shook her head. “Or that visit to your cousin’s bar? The other friends you’ve talked with? Or how you’re keeping that very special wolf of yours away from you?”

“If you even think of touching him, or anyone around him, you’ll find out how dangerous I can be.”

She smiled. “No need to worry, I’m familiar with how far you will go to protect him. Your brother did recount what happened. He was rather hurt you did that for the wolf and not him. So that is one person you don’t need to worry about. Marlot Blackclaw and the people around him at perfectly safe. I want you working for me, Mister Goldenmane, not on a crusade to destroy me and mine.”

“Then leave my family out of this.” He hadn’t expected Bo to remember so much of that time. He’d been out of it because of the drug the hunter had given him. It must have come and gone for him to understand only Marlot had mattered.

Her eyes went wide in mock surprise. “But I have, you know I haven’t touched any—”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it!” he snapped, his anger returning. “You’re going to leave them, their jobs, the people they depend on, alone.”

The smile that formed on her lips was nasty. Something even Gorrek hadn’t matched. “That, Mister Goldenmane, depends entirely on you.”

“You can’t force me to do anything,” Trembor said through clenched teeth.

“What I am telling you, Mister Goldenmane, is that this will not end with you becoming someone’s meal. I will not allow it. So long as you remain on that path, I will keep eating at your support system.” She smiled proudly at her use of the word. “I will destroy the people around you without ever breaking my word to you. Without even twisting my words. Of course, it isn’t like you will care that their troubles will never end since you will have removed yourself from their lives permanently. But I do promise you, they will wish you had taken them with you in your death.”

Trembor stared at her, utterly calm. Where was his anger, his rage? How could he be calm when moments before he’d wanted to explode? All he saw was her. Just like with the hunter, she was all that mattered. But unlike with the hare, he realized violence wasn’t the way to fix this. Even if he killed her, the hyena and fox, and however many others were in the restaurant, she was only the face of the organization he could see, not the entirety of it. The danger to his family would remain until each and everyone one of them was destroyed.

He nodded to her. “Consider your mission accomplished.” His voice was cold, emotionless. “The spiral is over.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you’ve come to your senses. Kold and Groniel will drive you

back to your car.”

Trembor snorted. “Only if you’re handing them over for me to eat.” He stood, not taking his eyes off her. “You’re off-limits, no one else. The next time one of your thugs comes close to me again, I will eat them. Do we understand each other?”

She nodded. “Keep this joy of life, and I will not have any reasons to send my people for you.”

The smile that grew on his face couldn’t be pleasant, with the exposed teeth and his hunger to devour her, but she didn’t react. “Don’t worry. I’m going to make sure I enjoy my life from now on.” He turned and left.

Once outside, he didn’t deflate as he’d expected. His emotions didn’t swarm back in. He had things to do, starting with getting a sense of how his family was doing.

“Hey Bro,” he greeted Cerek as he walked away from the restaurant.

“Are you okay?” his brother replied, sounding cautious. “It’s not like you to call in the middle of the day.”

“I’m fine,” Trembor answered, not caring if he sounded it. “How about you?”

“I’m good, you know that. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“How’s your job been?”

“You know how the advertising industry is,” Cerek replied after a hesitation. “Up and down all the time. Artists are such a fickle bunch. The only thing keeping them alive is how one good creation will send their rating to untouchable heights.”

“So nothing out of the ordinary?”

Another hesitation from his brother. “There’s a bug going around, mostly among the canines right now, but with the cold snap we had, it was going to happen. It’s hitting a little harder this year, but they’ll get over it. I’m keeping my distances to limit the chances of it crossing the species boundary. Okay, now tell me what’s going on. You’re starting to sound like mom.”

“Dania’s had some bad luck at work. She lost a couple of techs. I just want to make sure everyone else is okay.”

“Have you started by asking yourself that?”

“Cer,” Trembor warned.

“Oh, don’t give me that. The last time we talked, you sounded done-in. Now today you’re all ‘let’s look after the entire family’. I know you, bro. Something’s up.”

“I’m fine. It’s just the lawsuit. I’ll see you later.” He disconnected before Cerek replied. He brought up Bo’s number, then remembered he couldn’t be trusted right now.

As he walked, he called all his siblings: Elin, Vex, Baytil, Fanea, Atilen, and Harezik. For each, the story was similar. Minor difficulties at work, people out sick, or a family member recently eaten, or someone had left because of a better offer elsewhere. Nothing sufficiently noteworthy they’d have brought it to him, but after speaking to all of them, he was getting a worrisome pattern, and he hadn’t asked about their mates’ jobs.

If he wasn’t worried his parents would pick up on why he was calling, especially if any of his siblings called them and mentioned his behavior, he’d check on them too.

The calm that had wrapped itself around him cracked as he put his pad away. Maoma

had affected everyone in his family without ever getting close to them. None of it would affect their productivity, but it wouldn't take much more for the effects to become cumulative.

So he couldn't just spiral down anymore.

That was fine. His death wouldn't be at the end of a spiral. It was going to be a bomb detonating in the middle of her organization and taking as many of them along with him as he could manage.

Now, he just had to figure out how to make that happen without the mole realizing it.