

Chapter 51

Trembor looked across to the other cage. Derimak hadn't been there when he'd been returned to his cage. The precinct captain had taken him out of the interrogation room minutes after Bahamel had left him there with grumbles of incompetent lawyers wasting her time, and they should all be turned into meals to feed the homeless.

Karbek had stopped by to check if Trembor needed anything, and he'd asked about the hyena. She had been moved to another precinct to keep them from coordinating their stories.

Trembor leaned back against the wall. He could have used her company, someone to talk with so he wouldn't have to think about what Marlot was asking of him. How could his wolf expect him to go along with a plan where the most likely result would be Trembor losing him? He wanted to scream. He wanted to get out, to find Marlot and shake sense into him.

The door to the section opened and closed, and Karbek was back. This time the bull opened his cage. "Your lawyer and that hippo from the prosecutor's office are finally here," he said as he escorted Trembor to an interrogation room. "There were problems on one side or another is what I got from them arguing when they arrived, not sure which one."

The hippopotamus smiled at him as he entered, showing the flat teeth her family took their name from. No matter how she tried, it didn't appear threatening, and Trembor had to fight the urge to smile back, if only to show her how someone silently threatened someone else.

"I guess you thought you were going to get away with it, didn't you?" She asked as he sat. The bull took position in the corner, under the camera. "Well, unfortunately for you, your lawyer dropped the bale, and I got to the judge before that farce of a deal was finalized. I don't know how you got that lizard to agree to it but it's been erased."

"Don't say anything," Barany said, raising his hand as Trembor was about to tell the prosecutor it was insulting for her to refer to her colleague as a lizard, even if komodo dragons were part of that group.

Flattooth turned in her seat to glare at the bull. "I want you out of here. This is a private interview."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but I can't do that." He smiled, showing teeth in an imitation of her earlier one. "The criminal has a history of killing people. We can't take the risk he might turn you and his lawyer into meat before one of us could get in."

The hippopotamus fumed as she faced the armadillo again. Trembor had to fight to keep his ears from canting in puzzlement as he noticed Karbek's pad poking out of his breast pocket, turned on, and he could just make out the top of his mane on the sliver of the screen that was visible. The pad's camera was on.

The bear caught him looking and winked. So it wasn't an accident.

Trembor tried to remember if the pad had been there when the bull took him from the cage. Even if it hadn't. As he walked to the corner, out of sight of the room's camera, he'd have had the time to move it.

Why make an independent recording of the interrogation? How might want it? Or

was it transmitting this? Could that be done, or were there safeties against that in the precinct? People could pad out, so this would be the same, right? Was it Marlot? He had no problem imagining his wolf watching to ensure everything went according to his plan, but wouldn't that mean he was nearby? He'd have to be, to intervene if something went wrong. Bahamel had told him to trust Marlot, but when he'd pleaded for an explanation, she'd shaken her head. She either knew no more than he did, or didn't want to say anything where they could be overheard.

He sighed. Why couldn't Marlot have stayed out of this?

"Finally understanding the futility of your situation, I see," Flattooth said with a grin.

"Don't answer that," Barany replied.

"It was a statement," she said in annoyance.

"And you would have happily twisted anything my client said into some form of admission of guilt."

"Oh, I don't need him to admit to anything. So much had come to light since I returned to work that all I have to do is show this to a judge and your client will disappear within the caging system for the rest of time."

The armadillo snorted. "All you have are allegations, Taray, and none of it has been corroborated." Barany glanced at the bull in annoyance. "Why are you pushing this so hard, I told you what is—"

"You told me some fairytale about how one of those so-called cartels got my grandmother sick so I'd have to excuse myself and they then had Hardskin offer to dismiss everything. If you expected me to believe that, Barany, you need to go back to the academy. And it's Prosecutor Flattooth."

"Fine, Prosecutor Flattooth, you still have nothing but allegations."

"I have witnesses," she countered

"Yeah, like those are so reliable," the armadillo replied with a snort. "Not to say how easily they can end up someone's meal before they're even brought up to testify."

"Are you threatening my witnesses?" she demanded.

"I'm stating a fact," he replied, "Something like seventy percent of cases where witnesses are the primary evidence get dropped because they were eaten. Recorded testimonies only go so far when the defense can't further question the witness. So I hope you have all your witnesses under protection, otherwise, you're not looking at a win here, Prosecutor."

She smiled. "Oh, don't worry yourself over this. Before your client ends up in court, I will have plenty of corroborating evidence. I'm here to make his life easier. I'm sure a male like him, a lion, doesn't want his family's good name to be dragged through offal because of his actions."

Barany snapped an angry reply, and Trembor folded his ears back to block them out. He put his head in his hands as the weight of his decisions seemed to increase. Could he do this, put Marlot at risk? It didn't matter how his wolf said he was already involved. His investigation in a body couldn't put him in the danger this would once Maoma discovered what they'd done.

Could he even pull it off? Trembor wasn't much of an actor; he'd always depended on being straightforward to get what he was after. Marlot was the one adept as subterfuge. How often had Trembor chastised his wolf for using lies and borderline lies to get suspects to admit what they'd done? He missed his wolf so much. And in that, he found his answer.

"I can't do this anymore," he said, the exhaustion in his voice not an act. He *was* tired. Tired of being apart from his wolf. Tired of the nagging that kept insisting Marlot was only using him. For his family being in danger because he'd tried to protect his brother.

"What did you say?" Flattooth demanded and looked at the camera.

"Don't say anything," Barany ordered.

"I can't do this anymore," Trembor repeated, clear enough the camera would hear it.

"You're ready to admit to everything?" the hippopotamus asked, jubilant.

"I—" His voice cracked. He rubbed his face and ignored the glare his lawyer gave him. He should have told him about this. He would have if he'd been alone with the armadillo since Marlot's visit. This was unfair to him. He steadied himself. He had to sound convincing. "I covered up for him."

"What?" Flattooth's joy turned to confusion.

"Trembor, I'm advising you to remain silent. Prosecutor, I need time alone with my client so I can—"

"This is too much, Barany," Trembor said. "You didn't sign up for this. Fuck, I didn't sign up for this. All I wanted was to protect someone I love. I didn't know this would happen." He motioned to the room around them.

"What are you talking about?" Flattooth demanded as she sniffed the air. Trembor hoped she wasn't an expert at scent recognition, and that there was enough anger in the room to cover up the nuance of how he was barely sticking to the truth of things.

"His name is Marlot Blackclaw. He's my mate." He swallowed and looked away. The bear looked as confused as everyone else in the room. So he wasn't recording this for Marlot. Someone else with Maoma's claws into him then. Trembor sighed, used his anger at finding out someone he knew, had worked with, was corrupt. "He's who tampered with the evidence in my brother's case. I didn't know about the rest of it."

The hippopotamus stared at him in silence, then took her pad out and typed, reading the result. "You expect me to believe someone else is responsible when everything points to you?"

"You clearly don't know him," Trembor said, finding the derision easy to add. "He means everything to me and I didn't know what he was capable of." Because he hadn't bothered looking, he added silently to justify it as the truth. He was asking Marlot for lessons if they got out of this.

"So you're just going to betray him?" she asked in disbelief.

"I didn't know about the rest," Trembor snapped and surprised himself at how angry he was. Angry that a simple act had turned into this mess. That for all his good intentions, Bo was dead. His sons fatherless.

"Do you take me for an idiot?" she demanded. "You never mentioned this Blackclaw before. You're just trying to—"

“Have you ever loved someone?” Trembor was up, hand on the table, glaring at her, at the implication that what he felt for Marlot wasn’t real. He tried to calm himself and instead had thought of Gorrek. The Gorrek of the early days, before things had gone too far. “Loved him or her so much that you forgive their flaws? Excuse the things they do that you know are wrong. That you keep excusing them when they mistreat you? You tell yourself ‘they didn’t mean it, it was an accident, they won’t do it again.’ It doesn’t matter how often they do it to you. You just keep coming back for more until finally, you have enough.”

The two lawyers stared at him.

Trembor swallowed and looked for ways to bring this back to Marlot. As nice as it would be to dump all this on Gorrek instead of his wolf, that lion was dead and Trembor didn’t think any amount of evidence would convince the hippopotamus a dead male was being this.

“The Marlot I fell in love with was never the most law-abiding male. But I let it go because he bent the laws in ways that helped us close our case. As far as I know, he never falsified anything about our investigations. He’d just lead suspect on, let them think we had more on them than we did. More often than not it didn’t amount to anything because they were innocent, but a few of them panicked and admitted to something we could use against them.”

He swallowed. Now for the hard part. “I covered up for him because I know he did what he did for Bo because of me. Because he does love me... I thought he did...” Fuck, how was he going to get them to believe the rest? There was no way he could use anything from his past to hand his emotions on.

“You thought he loved you?” Flattooth asked, sounding sympathetic.

He nodded. “He came to see me earlier. Karbek can attest to it. He got someone to turn the recorders off. Karbek might know about that too.” The bull shook his head vehemently. “He demanded I do what he told me. He went right back to ordering me after he said he hadn’t meant to before. That he’d just been stressed because of what had happened in his hometown. But now Bo’s dead, and me trying to protect my mate has me being some mastermind out of movies. I didn’t know he’d done so much. I’m told there’s something about replacing people in positions of power in the city. I—” he swallowed again. “I can’t be with someone with that kind of disregard for the law.”

He sat down and put his head back in his head, fighting not to throw up.

The silence broke under Flattooth’s laughter. “This has got to be the biggest pile of sit I’ve ever been asked to sit in, and trust me, I’ve dragged some pretty shitty people into court.”

Trembor looked at her in horror. She hadn’t bought it. This was going to fall apart before it even began.

She smiled. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m going to look into that Blackclaw character. With the bull to confirm he was here, I’m sure there won’t be any problem at least proving that ‘mate’ of yours is real.” Now the bull looked terrified. “I’m guessing you’re pretty scared now because you’re finally understanding that not everyone you speak to is an idiot. I’m going to have that bull under surveillance, so he isn’t going to be able to go out and fabricate

evidence to support this new fairytale. I'll admit it's a lot more creative than what your lawyer tried to sell me." She looked at the armadillo, who was reading on his pad. How long had his lawyer stopped paying attention? "What are you doing?" she asked Barany.

"I'm reading a report the investigation company my firm uses sent me; and trying to decide how long I should let you stretch your neck before clawing your head off."

"What are you talking about?"

"What? Did you think I'd just take a complete reversal from the prosecutor's office and not do some digging of my own? They're telling me there are interesting irregularities, starting about when you sent to take care of your grandmother."

"Are you accusing me of being dirty?" the hippopotamus demanded. "Is this some other fairytale, since I'm not buying this one either?"

"Unlike you," Barany said, "I'm not accusing anyone of anything, since I don't have definite proof. All I'm saying is that irregularities have been uncovered in your office. And any irregularities could mean someone's trying to influence this case, which means we might need to revisit it in its entirety. And before you go on about me making things up. Feel free to contact the expert who sent me this. Her name is Afirna Grabs. She's a security expert on network security."

Trembor frowned. Why did the name sound familiar?

"Whatever she claims to have uncovered, I had nothing to do with it," Flattooth stated.

"I have no doubt," Barany said, "but I think this is enough for us to pause this... interview until you've had a chance to look at your office and at least confirmed what evidence is real and what is from these irregularities, don't you think? While you do that. I'm going to have our investigator look into my client's allegation about his mate's actions."

"Don't tell me you believe that crap," she said.

"As you are fond of saying to your underlings, Taray, the law isn't about what we believe, it's about what we can prove. A quick search let me find a mating contract dated six months ago, so well before any of this started, which would support my client knew nothing of his mate's actions."

"You're just grabbing onto this because it'll let you make up something to get him out from under this mess," she replied angrily.

"I am saying this, because if my client is innocent, then you are abusing your position in the service of this very public vendetta you have against the enforcers. That, along with the irregularities might lead people to think you might have had enough of not getting traction on it the legal way." He looked at the bull, who'd regained control of his expression. "Take my client back to his cage. This interview is over."

Karbek took Trembor's arm. This close, he still smelled scared.

"What are you playing at?" Karbek whispered as they walked through the halls. "Do you have any idea what she's going to do to you?"

Trembor sighed. He hated having this suspicion confirmed. "I'm not playing. I never was. She knows that. And I thought you were better than that, Karbek."

The bull wasn't gentle when he shoved Trembor in the cage. The friendly bull was

gone. “Don’t judge me, you sanctimonious ass. Some of us have had to make hard decisions to survive. Something I’m sure a predator like you never had to do.”

Trembor sat. “We all have to make difficult decisions. Keeping our integrity is often one of the hardest ones. I know I can live with the decisions I made.” He smiled, showing teeth, and the bull took a step back. “Can you?”