

Chapter 32

Trembor sat in his living room, unable to relax. Not even the nearly empty glass of alcohol had helped.

He'd been ready to act. To throw himself into whatever Flattooth might have wanted him to do. To have the pounce knocked out of him had left him angry. He'd wanted to go to the hippopotamus himself, despite what Barany wanted. Marlot could get him her address. That Hardskin's comment about her family's problems had been directed at him. They'd wanted him to know they'd gotten to her in the same way they'd gotten to his family.

Who were they that they had that kind of reach? And why risk getting the entire judicial system against them just for him? They couldn't have too many people like Hardskin working for them. If they did. They'd control the system and they wouldn't have to bother with convincing him to work for them. They could set it up through some legal process.

He couldn't believe this was just about him being an RI. There were easier RIs to gain control of. Plenty weren't as determined to do things legally as he was.

He finished his drink and stood to get more.

"It's Marlot's fault," he grumbled. And hated how much he wanted to blame the wolf. If he'd had the willpower not to take that case in Low Valley, there wouldn't have been the falling out. Trembor would have been in a better mental state to deal with Bo being accused of underage predation, and he'd never have run afoul of criminals.

It was Bo's fault too. If he'd listened to their father's advice, had learned from his experience, and stayed away from gambling, none of this would have happened. That hunter, Nikal, was also to blame. For butting into Marlot's life, intervening in their breakup, playing them because he had a sick need to see them back together.

Yes, the hare was the one responsible for Trembor being back to considering how to kill himself again. There had to be some way to make it happened that would force those criminals to leave his family alone. If the hunter hadn't vanished out of the caging complex, Trembor would visit him and tell him to finish the job.

He should go out, find some big prey, a bison, a bull elephant, a moose, try to eat them in his current state. Once he was dead, he wouldn't care what happened to his family, he thought miserably.

What kind of son was he that he thought no longer caring about his parents, his family, was a good thing? He pulled the bottle out of the cupboard and glared at it.

"You're supposed to make me numb to all this."

Maybe this was another option, alcohol. Use it to numb himself, let everything happen as it will, and not care about any of it. Nip would be faster and more reliable, but would he get numb to its taste? The smell?

What would Marlot think of him for smoking Nip? Why hadn't his wolf given up on him already? This would be easier if Marlot realized Trembor wasn't worth his time.

He chuckled bitterly, pouring alcohol into his glass. Wouldn't Gorrek be pleased to hear him admit that? Hadn't that been the lion's mantra? How Trembor should be happy the lion bothered with him since no one should. And that if Trembor hadn't been an ingrate, he

would have stayed where the lion had forced him down.

The door buzzed as he raised the glass to his lips. He'd ignore them. He wasn't worth anyone's time. They'd go away. Why would they bother with him?

They pounded on the door as he brought the glass to his lips again. He cursed. Didn't they realize he didn't want whatever they were offering? They pounded harder and someone raised their voice.

He put the glass down and stomped to the door. He was going to give them a piece of his mind. He pulled the door open and stared at a hyena. Word fled as he tried to understand what she was doing here. He'd already said goodbye to that part of his life.

"So you're still among the living," Derimak said, studying him. She leaned in and sniffed. "Barely?"

He considered closing the door. He was in no mood to deal with anyone right now. She pushed him out of the way and entered his house, invaded his territory. "How much have you had?"

Not enough, he thought. He bared his teeth at her and growled.

She flicked him on the nose, hard. "Don't growl at me, Trem."

"That stings," he snapped, hand over his muzzle.

"Then there's still some sensation left in you and I'm not too late."

"That's the problem," he growled, "I don't want to feel." He rubbed his nose pad carefully.

She threw his jacket at him. "Too bad. We decided I was going to keep you from doing something stupid."

"Might be too late," Trembor grumbled.

"Put that on. You're still breathing, so there's still time."

He looked at the jacket. "Look Der, I'm not good company. Come back later." He placed the jacket back on the hook.

She laughed. "No kidding." She took the jacket and shoved it at him. "Then this is punishment for all those times you wouldn't let me be miserable in peace. Put that on, or I'm taking out outside without it, and it's cold enough it'll take more alcohol than you have in you to keep you warm."

"I'm not going out," Trembor stated, crossing his arms over his chest.

She grinned and rubbed her hands together. "Good. Then I get to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out."

He glared at her. "You wouldn't dare."

Her smile broadened. "Trying me, Trem. What is that wolf of yours going to say when he finds out a female swept you off your feet and carried you away?"

Trembor snorted. "Do you have any idea what Marlot does to people who threaten me?"

She tilted an ear. "The wolf I saw was in a near panic while you were in the interrogation room. If he knew the state you're in, I'm pretty sure he'd be siding with me, not you. So how about this? You come with me willingly, or I call your wolf and we get to find out who he's siding with?"

The idea Marlot might smell how much alcohol he'd ingested scared him. "I hate you," he said, putting the jacket on.

"Yeah, yeah," she replied dismissively. "You and the whole precinct. I'm just that horrible of a female."

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He stared at the name of the restaurant.

"You can't be serious," he said. He was nowhere near drunk enough to eat at a place like this.

Better Than Meat was in bold red letters above the door, on the window, and on a sign hanging off the side of the building. If not for what the name implied, it looked like one of those family-owned restaurants no one wanted to talk about, out of fear they'd become popular and inaccessible.

"Don't let the fact they serve artificial meat scare you," Derimak said, pulling him along with her. "The stuff's good when it's prepared properly."

The inside looked just like a family-owned restaurant, with a dozen tables widely spaced, scents of roasted meat and greens. The walls were burnished wood. He searched the room for a mole and breathed easier when he didn't find one. In fact...

"If this place is so good," he asked, "where are all the customers?"

"You try convincing predators to eat artificial meat," she replied, lowering her voice.

"You can always throw them over your shoulder and force them to come here," he replied, his annoyance resurfacing.

She grinned at him. "Your sense of humor's back, we're making progress."

She was walking by the time he glared at her and defeated, he followed to a table. A young hyena joined them once they were seated and offered menus before stepping away.

"Family?" Trembor asked, nodding to the door the hyena vanished in.

Derimak snorted. "No way. You couldn't get me to sit at a table with my brothers, let alone consider eating at any place one of them works in." She shuddered. "A bunch of slobs and assholes, the lot of them."

"So the fact this restaurant is a hyena operation is what? Pure coincidence?"

She shrugged. "Who else is going to give artificial meat a chance? Even the best of us pales compared to you lot as predators, and not every family can own a processing store and get your scraps. Try the Varnian Sweet Meats," She said, without looking at the menu. "It's what I'm having."

Trembor opened the menu and looked at what was offered. The names were almost fancy, like the Varnian Sweet Meats, or the Burnt Galebret Steak, or the Tomoto Multicolored Stew. Below the name was a description of the dish, and instead of listing the kind of meat used, it described the composition of the artificial meat.

Trembor slammed the menu closed.

Derimak grinned at him as the young hyena returned and put a glass of water before each of them. "We're going to have the Varnian, Fallin." The youth hurried back to the kitchen.

"First name basis?" Trembor asked, ear tilted. "You sure they aren't family?"

She snorted. “Like you don’t learn everyone’s name on meeting them. And you know I don’t call any of my brothers by their names. I have too many good insults to use.” She grinned, then sobered. “Now, how about you tell me what’s going on with you?”

“I’d think that was obvious,” he replied, then took a long drink of water to keep the forming headache at bay.

“That lawsuit wouldn’t have you standing in the precinct and looking at us like you’d never see us again.”

Trembor cursed silently and put the glass down, looking at it as he tried to find an answer that would keep her from scratching any deeper.

“Or keep you from looking at me because I asked the question.”

He sighed and grumbled. “I didn’t think you’d noticed.”

She leaned in and lowered her voice. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret. I’m an enforcer. Noticing stuff is kind of what I trained to do.” Trembor began smiling in spite of himself. “I’m not the only either.”

The smile fell. There was no escaping the questions now. If he didn’t satisfy her, one of the others would take over. Maybe he could track down her brothers and convince them to start a feud? Only that wouldn’t stop the rest.

“How about I tell you what we worked out,” she said, and grinned as he stared at her, ears folded back in horror. “You can tell me how close we are to the right scent.”

He stood. “No.” If he wasn’t there, she couldn’t get herself any deeper.

She had his arm in her hand before he could step away. “Trem, you walking away isn’t going to make us stop. We’re your friends.” He let her pull him back to his seat. “Now, we know this starts with your brother, Bo. You, being you, weren’t going to let him take the fall, so you planted evidence. Took some digging, but Ceilin found out who you’d framed is the Underdark Cartel, which is gutsy, considering how entrenched they are in the city.” She grinned. “But you were never one to do things small.”

Trembor’s ears folded back again. It couldn’t be them. “You have to be wrong. Bo got in trouble with an illegal gambling house. Underdark would never bother with those. Last I checked, they were involved in political manipulation.” That had been years ago, back when he was an enforcer, and it explained Maoma’s confidence. If that was who was backing her, no wonder she’d known she could end the trial in his favor, or how they’d gotten to Flattooth’s family. If he’d know this was who he was going up against... he sighed. He’d have done the same thing. He couldn’t let his brother take the fall like that. He might have tried for more safeguards, though.

“The political actions are just what’s more visible,” she said, pausing as the young hyena returned with two plates of amazing smelling meats with vegetables on the side.

“What will you want to drink?” the youth asked.

“Just a glass of blood for me,” she answered.

“Cut mine with two fingers of alcohol,” Trembor said, studying the plate, looking for any sign the meat wasn’t real. Even the smell was right, although the sauces were probably responsible for that.

“They’ve always had claws in smaller stuff, probably where they started, way back

when. Those were also hidden under subsidiaries, other crime organizations we didn't know worked for Underdark, or were them under a different name."

"I thought I was dealing with a small group, a few illegal houses that banded together to extort more from their customers." He poked at a piece of meat, and it felt real enough. "I thought they were the ones framing Bo as a way to encourage him to repay them. Or force him into whatever else they might want."

She raised an eyebrow as she popped meat in her mouth. "Stopped eying it, it's not going to attack you. And how did you justify them using something as drastic as underage predation as a means to control him?"

"I didn't. With dealing with the breakup, I needed to lash out at someone, they were a convenient target." Resigned he took a slice and ate it, debating chewing carefully so he can explain to her just how wrong it was, or swallowing outright to get it done with.

"Chew," she said with a smirk.

He glared at her and did as told. The texture wasn't bad, he decided. In fact, it felt sort of like real meat.

"Is this a trick? You're telling me it's artificial, but they use real meat?"

"It is artificial," the youth said, placing the glasses before each of them.

"I've had artificial meat. The stuff's slimy or grainy. This has the same stinginess real meat has."

"It is all in how it is prepared," the hyena replied, smiling, then walked away.

"I told you it'd be good," Derimak said, smirking. "Back to your situation. Now you're stuck with their claws into your tender places."

He nodded and comforted himself with eating. He still had trouble believing this was artificial meat.

"It's what we'd figured. A bunch of us talked, looked at our finances. Working together, we can pay for a handful of well places operators. You tell us who and—"

"No," he stated.

"Trem, we aren't letting them—"

"I said no." He fixed his gaze on her. Kept his ears up, she'd smell his concern, but he wouldn't show it. "I'm not going to let any of you ruin yourselves on my account. They're going to know before you try anything. They have claws within the enforcers."

"Of course they do," she replied, rolling her eyes. "We know who they are."

Trembor stared. "Why haven't they been arrested?"

She chuckled. "That's why you're a better RI than an enforcer. If we arrest them, the cartel will just get their claws in someone else and we're not going to know who for a while. This way, not only do we know who, but we can control what they find out."

"You're letting them break the law within the precinct because it helps you." He sipped his blood and let the burn settle his protesting stomach.

"It's not perfect, but it's better than not being able to trust anyone."

He nodded, eating for a minute, forcing himself to come to terms with the enforcers not being the perfect place he imagined it to be. He was too old for fantasies like that, but this one had persisted.

“It doesn’t change the fact I don’t want you to get involved in this, Der. Even if you were to reach out to every trustworthy enforcer in the city, you wouldn’t be able to afford to get to the top of the cartel. And they will hit you back hard enough your ancestors will feel it.”

She leaned back in her chair. “So you think getting yourself eaten is going to solve anything?”

“I don’t know what else to do, Der!” he sighed. “Do you have any idea how hard this is? I have Marl back. But this is going to spill on him at some point. They promised not to touch my family, and they’ve found a way to ruin them, anyway. If I’m dead, at least I’m not going to be scared and miserable all the time.” He took a long swallow of his drink and when she didn’t immediately reply, he went back to eating.

“Have you considered working as an undercover agent?” she asked, pausing in her eating.

He nodded. “I was going to offer myself to the prosecution, but the cartel got to them first.” He used a finger to wipe more of the sauce. As good as the meat was, the sauce was the star of the plate.

“Who says you need to go through their offices?” she asked,

“The rules,” he replied without having to think about it.

She smirked. “You just said they have their claws in that office, so why should we bother with the rules?”

Trembor stared at her, fighting his discomfort. Procedures were in place as much to protect him, as they were to protect the prosecutor’s offices. But in the end, what they needed was evidence. Going undercover happened so often the prosecution had a division dedicated to that, so they wouldn’t be breaking the rules. At worse, they were bending them by doing it themselves. With enough evidence and the right timing, they could bring even the person in charge of the cartel down to a level where they’d be affordable.

He smiled and waved his clean plate toward the kitchen, where the young hyena was looking out the door. He was going to have to be well fed to take on the cartel like this.

“How difficult do you think it’s going to be to set up?” he asked, and she grinned at him, motioning for a second plate for her also.