

Trembor sat in his living room, not relaxing. Even the nearly empty glass of alcohol hadn't helped his mood or body relax. He'd been ready to act, and having the pounce knocked out of him left him angry. He considered going directly to Flattooth, getting Marlot to find out where she lived, but the komodo dragon's comments about her having family problems were clearly an indication those criminals had gotten to her like they'd gotten to him.

Just who were they that they had that kind of reach? And why were they bothering with him, if they did? They had claws in the enforcers, within the prosecutor's offices, they had to have RIs already, even if Maoma implied they didn't. It wasn't like he could trust what she said.

At least Barany hadn't jumped on the chance of having the case dropped, but he'd warned Trembor that once he had the file, he couldn't take too long before they'd grow suspicious. No one in their right mind passed on being exonerated.

Trembor wasn't in his right mind. Hadn't been in months now. Part of him blamed Marlot, and he didn't like that. If Marlot had had the will to not take that case back in LowValley, they wouldn't have their falling out. He wouldn't have been out of sorts as did something as stupid as frame the criminal group for the crime Bo had been accused, and now he wouldn't be in this mess.

He was Bo's fault too. Why couldn't his brother listen to their father's advice and stay away from gambling? None of this would happen if not for that. Or Nikal, he was at fault too with butting into his and Marlot's life. Trying to get them back together by framing Bo.

Yeah, it really was that hunter's fault. If not for the hare, Trembor wouldn't be here right now. Contemplating ways of killing himself. There had to be one that would force those criminals to leave his family alone. If the hunter hadn't vanished out of the caging complex, he'd just visit him and offer himself.

He should just find a big and healthy bison and try to eat them. Once dead he wouldn't care what happened to his family, he thought miserably. What kind of son was he, that he thought no longer being able to care about his parents, his family, was a good thing? He looked at the empty glass.

"You're supposed to numb me to all that," he complained to it. Maybe that was another option. Become a drunk. Numb himself to everything with alcohol. Nip would act faster, although it might be more expensive. At least Nip would be more reliable. He stood as he considered if the numbness would be worth getting used to how horrible Nip tasted and smelled.

What would Marlot think of him for smoking Nip?

Why hadn't his wolf given up on him already? All of this would be so much easier if Marlot realized Trembor wasn't worth his time.

He chuckled. Wouldn't Gorrek be please to hear him admit that? Hadn't it been his mantra? How Trembor wasn't worth anyone's time; how he should be happy the lion had deigned to pay attention to him if only Trembor hadn't been an ingrate.

The door buzz redirected him on his way to the cooler. On the other side stood a

hyena. Trembor stared at her, trying to understand what she was doing here. He'd already said goodbye to that part of his life.

"Good to know you're still among the living," Derimak said, studying him.

Trembor debated closing the door. He didn't want to deal with old friends.

"How many of those have you had?" she asked, indicating the empty glass.

Not enough, Trembor thought. His thoughts were too clear, his misery too intense. But his reflexes weren't that great as he found himself no longer holding the glass, the hyena having plucked it out of his fingers.

"I timed this right," she said, putting the glass on the table by the door and grabbing his jacket off the peg. "Come on, you need to get out of this place before you just give up and do something stupid."

"Might be too late," he grumbled.

"Until you stop breathing, it isn't." She forced the jacket in his hands. "It's not so warm you can stand out here in just your shirt. Put that on."

"I'm not good company." He tried to put the jacket back on the peg.

"No kidding," she replied with a laugh, catching his arm. "Consider this punishment for all the times we wouldn't let me be miserable in peace. Now put the jacket on before I throw you over my shoulder and carry you."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You wouldn't dare."

She beamed. "You just try me. What will that wolf of yours say when he finds out a female swept you off your feet and carried you away?"

Trembor snorted. "You do know what Marlot has a habit of doing to people who threaten me, right?"

"Believe it or not, I saw that wolf fret over you being arrested. I'm confident he'll help throw you over my shoulder when he sees the state you're in. Now, are you coming, or am I calling Marlot?"

Trembor glared at the hyena. "I hate you," he said, putting the jacket on.

"Yeah, yeah," she replied. "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. 'Better Than Meat'. If he entered it and saw that mole, he was going to kill her and then Derimak for being in league with them.

"Come on, don't let the fact they serve artificial meat deter you. It's quite good when prepared properly." She held the door open for him.

Reluctantly, he stepped through and looked around. No mole in sight. Not a lot of people, really. "If this place is so good, where are all the customers?"

"You try to convince predators to eat artificial meat," she said in a low voice.

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

"Finally, your sense of humor is returning."

He glared at the back of her head as she led him to a table and a young hyena handed them menus.

“Family?” Trembor asked once the youth had left.

“Oh, no. You couldn’t get me to sit at a table with any of my brothers. Bunch of assholes, the lot of them.”

“So it’s just a coincidence this restaurant is a hyena operation?”

She shrugged. “Who else is going to give artificial meat a chance? We’ve never been the best hunters, and not all of us can start processing stores to get some of your scraps. You should try the Varnian Sweet Meats,” she said without looking at the menu. “It’s what I’m having.”

He looked at the names and description of the offering, noticed the section describing what went into the artificial meats, and actively looked away. He didn’t think he could stomach eating if he knew what he wasn’t in his food. Maybe he could have a plate of greens? Nope, they’d thought of that and didn’t offer it. Did dying of food poisoning qualify as Derimak killing him, since she’d taken him here, or would the restaurant be on the hook?

The youth returned with a hopeful expression, and Trembor couldn’t disappoint him. “What did you say that platter was called?” he asked Derimak.

“We’ll have a Varnian each, Fallin.”

The young hyena beamed and ran to the kitchen.

“First name basis? You sure you aren’t family?”

“Like you don’t learn everyone’s name on meeting them,” she answered. He couldn’t really contradict her. “Now, what’s going on with you?”

He looked at her. “I’d think that’s obvious.”

“A lawsuit wouldn’t cause you to stand on the side of the precinct looking at all of us like you weren’t ever going to see us again.”

Trembor looked at the tabletop.

“Or cause you to not be able to look at me when I ask you that question.”

“I didn’t think you’d noticed,” Trembor mumbled.

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 sort of what I do.”

Trembor felt himself smile in spite of himself.

“I’m not the only one either.”

His burgeoning smile fell. Now he was going to have to field the questions, find ways of diverting her attention away from his problems. Maybe he could find her brothers and start them feuding?

“Let me tell you what we work out,” she said and smiled as he stared at her, ears folded back in horror. “You can tell me how close we got to the truth.”

“No.” He stood, but she grabbed his arm.

“Trembor, you walking out isn’t going to make us go away. We’re your friends.”

He let her pull him back to his seat.

“No, we know it started with your bother, Bo. You being you, weren’t going to let him take the fall, so you planted evidence. Took some digging, but we found that you framed the Underdark Cartel, which is gutsy, considering how entrenched they are in the

city, but you were never one to do thing small.”

“You’re kidding, that’s who they are? What are they doing running gambling houses? I thought they were involved in political stuff.” At least it explained how they’d gotten to Flattooth. The Cartel had always been rumored to have their claws in every level of the government. If he’d know it was them he’d... he’d probably have done the same thing, Bo had been in trouble, after all.

“They started small. Gambling, protection, as they grew larger, so did their ambitions. They went after more powerful prey but never released what they already had. I thought you knew.”

“I thought it was just a small group of criminals running one, maybe a handful of gambling houses. I thought they were the ones framing Bo as a way of getting him to go along with what they wanted.”

“And now they’re planting their claws into you as payback.”

Trembor sighed. So much for dealing with this without anyone noticing.

“A bunch of us at the precinct talked and we figure that if we pool our money, we can take out a handful of will places operators. You tell us who, and we will—”

“No.”

“Trembor, we aren’t leaving you to—”

“You aren’t ruining yourself financially or professionally on my account. And they’ll know before you try anything. They have their claws in the enforcers.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course they do. We know who they are.”

Trembor stared. “Why haven’t they been arrested?”

She smiled. “That’s why you’re better as an RI than an enforcer. If we arrest them, the Cartel will just get their claws in someone else. This way we can control what they find out. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than being suspicious of everyone.”

“Okay, but I still don’t want you to do anything, Derimak, even with pooling every enforcer in the city, you can’t afford the tax on the people high enough in the Cartel to make a difference, those people have the veneer of legitimacy and the tax rating to back it. All you’d end up doing is start a war and everyone loses if that happens.”

“And you think that you being eaten is going to solve anything?”

Trembor sighed. “I don’t know what else to do.”

She watched him silently as the youth returned with amazing smelling platters of meats with greens on the side. He studied the platter, looking for any indications the strips were other than meat, but the smell was right, as was the appearance.

“Have you considered being an inside agent?” she asked as she cut a strip of meat and ate.

“I did, but they have their claws within the prosecutor’s office.” He cut a small piece and tentatively bit into it. The texture was okay. Quite good, actually. This was nothing like the packages of dried artificial meats he’d tried.

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

Trembor stared at her. “The rules.”

She smirked. “Their offices have been clawed. Fuck the rules.”

Trembor went back to chewing, to enjoying the meat. And considered what Derimak offered. If he could get himself to play the part, he could get damaging evidence. Enough and even the bosses' tax rating would plummet, then even if they couldn't take them legally, they eat a chunk of the Cartel.

Trembor smiled and found the meat tasted even better. "How difficult do you think it'll be to arrange?"