

## Chapter 14

Trembor changed into an older pair of pants as soon as he got home, a padded shirt, thick hide jacket, and boots with ankle guard. He had a small glass of blood, noted he was low on alcohol, and drove to a large neighborhood that intersected his territory. He parked outside, at the edge, and walked in.

The area was old, almost as old as the city itself, and had been named after the hill that has been the entirety of the original housing, Safe Knoll. As the city grew and housing spread from under the ground to over it, it spread down the hill as more herbivores sought the safety of ever-larger crowds. Now, it was a zone of fifty square blocks where only prey lived.

City regulations didn't allow for the exclusion of anyone in neighborhoods, but behaviors didn't have to be written down to affect how people behaved. Just walking around it, Trembor sense he wasn't wanted here. No one did anything overt. It was the glances, the way the groups of prey wouldn't get out of his way. Demonstrating they were stronger than he was. Or how the larger ones moved to stand between him and the weaker members.

He didn't mind prey congregating like this. It meant he knew where to find them. No need for complicated programs, no need to spend hours searching through databases to work out who was worth what. All he had to do was walk through this neighborhood, look at the people, how they acted and dressed; if they were included in the circle of protection that formed, and he could reliably work out who was worth going after.

It wasn't like he was the only predator there, not even the only one on the prowl, but most were there just shopping at the stores that lined the main street. The wall of commerce, which rose up to try to keep the rest of the city from intruding. A defense against predators that turned out to have the opposite effect, offering good that appealed to them as much as the prey who lived here and gave Trembor enough camouflage not to send everyone running away.

He picked his target by the way she was dressed; old clothing, worn at the knees and elbows. The elephant was a menial worker who hadn't been able to replace them. The clothing had been good quality when bought, so the drop in productivity was a relatively recent thing, no more than a year, he guessed. She'd held onto them in the hopes her fortune would change any longer and she'll have to replace them with lower quality clothing, things she could afford at her lowered rating.

She was aware of the risk she was in. Trembor watched as she approached a group of pachyderms, and how they shied away from her. She'd done something to ostracized herself from the people here. Or possibly her health was failing. Scent would reveal that, and others might consider her a risk that could draw predators to them. One they could handle. The group of seven might be able to deal with four or five predators, more if they weren't as organized. But predators who hunted together became much more dangerous.

She nervously looked around, her trunk darting this way and that, searching for any threatening scent. She even looked over her shoulder in his direction, an indication that she sensed someone on her scent, even if she couldn't make him out of the crowd.

Trembor couldn't track her by scent, even being downwind of her, because the crowd hid it, but he could see her nervousness. He kept his distance. Waiting until she let her guard down as she came closer to her home, to where she'd finally be safe.

Her ears settled down, no longer in need of picking the smallest sound out of place. Her shoulders relaxed.

Trembor ran. Someone yelled in surprise, their fear scent filling his nostrils, preventing him from picking up his target's, but it didn't matter. He had her in his sight as she turned, her attention drawn by the sounds. She stared at him, her eyes growing wide as what his presence represented. He used her hesitation to angle himself toward the alley she'd been going for, where her safety lay. He made his intentions clear by grinning, baring his teeth.

She bolted in the opposite direction of where he was going. Her terror clouding her judgment, making her forget where safety lay. She crossed the street to the honking of cars, screeching of brakes, and Trembor followed her, taking advantage of the lull in traffic she caused.

He had her scent now. Thick with fear. Healthy, so she was socially ostracized. She trumpeted for help, and he glanced around in case someone decided the severity of her mistake was less than her need for help. No one came and, realizing that, she made the mistake that would take her from a person, to meat.

She entered an alley, thinking the maze they would keep her safe from him.

He smiled. This was what life was about. The hunt, running after his meal. The exhilaration of the coming fight, followed by the satisfaction of the kill, then the feeding. Delayed, in these civilized times, but no less satisfying.

He gained on her, her desperation growing as exhaustion mixed in her scent. She bellowed, a panicked sound as she stumbled, regained her footing, and pushed on. She wouldn't give him, and he respected her for that. Meat was meat, but having to earn his meal added to it. She stumbled again, nearly fell, caught herself against the wall. She was done running.

He slowed. Let her catch her breath, make the decision on how she would end her life. That it was ending was certain, but she still had some say in how it would happen. She squared her shoulders. She wouldn't lie down.

Trembor nodded and smiled.

The form came out of the shadows, and he made out running behind him. He ducked, letting it pass over him. Had she led him into a trap? Had someone decided she should live? He put her out of her mind as scents registered now that he wasn't focusing solely on his prey. Wolf; and he froze and the next thought hit him. Marlot?

The gray wolf took advantage of his hesitation and ran at him, swinging, fist closed. Trembor blocked it badly, the impact traveling to his shoulder, then he kicked out, hard, angry his hunt was interrupted, that the wolf reminded him of Marlot, that he wasn't Marlot.

Further up the way he'd come a tigress and warthog ran in their direction. Whatever this was, it wasn't about who he'd been hunting. The two predators might be

after her too, but as dangerous as the warthog was, he was still prey and wouldn't take part in such a hunt.

Snarling, the wolf came at him again, Trembor dodged, kicked, missed as the wolf moved aside, his distraction having let the tigress tackle Trembor. He shoved her off him as they landed on the ground, got to his feet, and barely moved out of the way of the warthog's tusks in time.

"If this is a mugging," Trembor said, stepping back, keep the three in sight. "You're timing sucks, because you just cost me my meal." All that was left of her was her scent. Fear and relief. He adjusted his stance. "If this is some weird hunting practice, you better be able to afford two bodies, because I am taking one of you down with me."

The wolf snorted. "If we were here to eat you, you've been meat already."

"We're delivering a message," The warthog said. "To one Bo Goldenmane."

"Wrong brother," Trembor said, cursing his brother, just how deep was he in that they were after him?

The tigress smiled. "Oh no, we have exactly the brother we want. You're going to be the message. He's got to step up and pay up what he owes, or else." She unsheathed her claws. "Well, he as a large family, he'll understand eventually."

Trembor stilled. "Are you threatening my family?" he asked coldly.

The wolf shrugged. "These are dangerous times, aren't they? People get hurt so easily."

"Yes," the tigress said. "Hunts are so unpredictable, aren't they? You never know when some other predator might pick the same prey."

"Or that prey having friends to help them," the warthog added.

Trembor nodded, unsheathing his claws. "I'll give him the message."

"You aren't listening," the wolf said. "You're the message."

"Or rather, the state we're going to leave you in." The tigress grinned. A darker version of his showing of teeth. "I don't think you're going to be in a condition to say anything."

Trembor looked them over. "I will give him the message. You? I'm going to show you what happens to people who threaten my family."

He ran at them, and the unexpected direction caused them to hesitate. He plated a foot in the wolf's chest, sending him away. The tigress swung and he blocked, kneeling her in the side. The warthog impacted, but he turned enough to the planned goring became a shallow cut across his stomach. He then kicked him and sent the warthog headfirst into the wall.

The wolf tackled him and he hit the wall. The alley was too narrow to easily fight three of them. He elbowed the wolf in the face, bit back the pain of a punch in the side, then shoved him away into the tigress. But tight places worked to his advantage as much as against. All he had to do was ensure they got in each other's way.

The warthog ran at him again, tusks first, head down. That one was easy to deal with, Trembor stepped aside at the last moment and the charging prey impacted the wall. Trembor slammed his elbow in the back of his neck, and the warthog dropped.

The tigress was on him, swiping, claws coming too close. He blocked as best as he could, and what saved his arms from being shredded was the padding as she clawed the hide off his jacket. His hunting jacket would survive this fight. Finally, he was able to catch her arm and brought it down on his knee. She stumbled, then screams as it broke. Trembor kicked her away.

The wolf roared as he collided with him. Striking hard as Trembor fought to remain standing. He took the hits, found his footing, and kned the wolf, forcing him back, but he came at him again.

Trembor kept away from the walls, blocking and dodging and taking hits until the wolf left himself open. One spin kick sent the wolf to the ground, but he moved fast and the following foot down aimed for his neck hit the pavement.

“Barkon!” the tigress called to the wolf. “We did enough, let’s get out of here.” The wolf edged away from Trembor on his back until he could stand.

Trembor considered going on the offensive again, but most of his chest and arms hurt.

“Remember this,” the wolf snarled, “Because it’s going to happen to someone else in your family if your brother doesn’t come pay his debt.”

Trembor growled, which was the extent of the menace he could do. Once they were gone, he leaned against the wall. He looked at the body on the ground. At least he’d have meat.

“But how much are you going to cost me?” he demanded. The clothing was good quality, in good shape, so higher on the productivity chain of whatever job he had officially. But as a criminal, all it would take was a few arrests for that to drop. One conviction and he’d be downright affordable. He’d find out once he reached the kiosk.

He took out his pad and called Bo, only to find out he was still being blocked. He wished he had Marlot’s skill with tech; because he really wanted to scream at his brother right now.”

He groaned as he shifted to be able to type. *Bo, you need to contact me, I’m serious. The people you owe just paid me a visit and threatened our family. If you don’t pad me, I will hunt you down and you’re going to think that dad’s screaming at you was a bedtime story.*

He put the pad away and looked the warthog over. Muscular, so lots of meat, but also a lot of mass for him to carry in his injured state.

“There’s a reason I go for ostracized prey,” he grumbled as he pulled the body over his shoulder. “They never have friends who put up a fight for them.”