

## Chapter 27

Marlot was out of his car before the engine was done shutting down and looking into the car in front of him. Trembor wasn't in it. He looked around at the houses, this was a middle-range neighborhood. How had the hunter drawn him here? Trembor was too smart to fall for some trick.

The house was a family unit owned by a Pavir Roughskin. He'd done a search on the address the hunter had given him on the drive over. He'd owned the house for seven years. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to find much more. He'd sent the name and address to his stalker program, and he'd see what it would come up when he was done with this. He needed to set up a connection to Stalker 2.0 after this.

He hurried to the front door; it was unlocked. He looked through the small window and saw no one in what he could see of the kitchen and living room, but someone stood on the other side of the back door. Marlot hurried around the house, climbing over the fence and slowing only as he reached the corner.

Could the hunter have a partner? There were a few documented cases where two worked together. Marlot thought it more likely he'd tricked someone. He glanced around; an enforcer uniform on someone with white fur. A second glance turned into a stare as he realized it wasn't white fur.

He hurried to the unmoving form. The uniform didn't fit the mannequin properly when he was close enough. An inspection showed no alarm attached to it or the door. The lock was also turned off. He gently cracked the door open and listened. No sound. A sniff brought up scents of vegetables, faint cleaners, something he thought was a prey species. No blood, fresh or otherwise.

Marlot tried not to think of the fact the hunter killed by breaking necks, so there wouldn't be blood, and not enough time had passed for the smell of death to spread. Trembor wasn't dead.

He looked into the kitchen; it had an eating area. The living room had a large screen, an expensive model too. The couch was large, built for a more massive species. He stepped in, silently closed the door, and listened again. Still no sound.

The hallway was the only possibility, and he caught Trembor's scent as he approached it. Fresh, too. He stayed still to keep from running. He wouldn't help by barging into whatever trouble the lion was in. Four scents; four people. One was older than the others and close enough to be the same species as the strongest one. The fourth was recent, like Trembor, and also registered as prey.

Where was the hunter's scent?

He edged to the first door, a bathroom, no one in it. The next door was storage, a mess of boxes and disturbed dust. There might have been a fight there, but more likely someone had been in a hurry to take their things out of there. Also no one there.

He eyed the last door, the only one closed. Of course.

He turned the knob, stopping when it clicked. Nothing happened, so he pushed it in enough to look. Wall and a dresser. He opened it more, the corner of a bed with feet visible on the floor.

He hurried in and stopped when he saw the lion slumped on a chair on the other side of the room; a hare in enforcer uniform standing behind him. The incongruity of the large restrained lion with the smaller hare behind him shorted Marlot's brain long enough he noticed Trembor breathing.

He was alive. Marlot's mind reengaged with a deep breath of his own. Robe around his arms and chest held the unconscious lion to the chair. The rope looked normal, and he couldn't tell how solid the knots were, but he figured once Trembor woke up, he'd break the chair to free himself if he had to.

The hare was smiling at him.

"Who are you?" Marlot asked.

"I'm the one holding Registered Investigator Trembor Goldenmane."

Marlot looked around for where the hunter might be hiding. He sniffed the air, but only the same four scents from the living room, and all were present.

"How put you up to this?" how was the hunter masking his scent?

The hare looked offended. "Put me up to this?" He looked at Marlot, cleared his throat. "But he's about to be inside a home," he said, the inflection, the voice identical to that on his pad. "That's going to be enough this time."

Marlot stared at the hare. "You're prey." He couldn't be the hunter. He was too small, prey didn't kill. It just wasn't how things were.

The hare snorted. "I am anything but."

"How are you," Marlot asked again, then shook his head. "What is your name?"

The hare, the hunter, smiled. Marlot could wrap his head around that one. Yes, prey had killed predators, he'd brought one in not too long ago, but he'd been a moose. Larger than Marlot was. This was a hare. He barely made it to the wolf's chest. He couldn't. He looked at Trembor, tied to the chair.

Obviously, he could subdue someone larger than he was. The hunter cleared his throat and Marlot looked at him again, annoyed his mind had wandered.

"Do I have your attention?" the hare asked. "Good. I'm not giving you my name. You can find out when you take my ID off my body."

Marlot remembered something the hunter had said in their first conversation. "I'm not killing you. I will stop you, but by bringing you in."

The hare leaned against Tremor, arms crossed over the lion's shoulder. "Why? You didn't bother bringing in Ruxul."

"I really wish everyone would stop bringing him up," Marlot growled. "For one thing, it was a group effort. I'm not the one who killed him. I was just the youngest, and the fresh face so the newsies all focused on me. For a second, we didn't get into this to kill him. He just didn't give us a choice."

The hare smiled. "I see, so what I need to do, is make sure you want to turn me into meat." He took a handful of Trembor's mane and pulled the lion's head up. He placed the other hand, the claws against his throat. "I think that can be arranged."

"Don't!" Marlot yelled. The claws looked a lot sharper than prey's claws usually were. He reminded himself this was a hunter; a killer, despite the small size or the fact he

was prey.

The hunter canted his head. “Why ever not?” he moved the hand, the claws approaching the lion’s jugular. “Whatever might you do if I were to kill this lion?”

Thoughts stopped. “Don’t touch him,” Marlot growled, his vision narrowing on the hare.

“There it is,” the hare said, grinning. “Try and stop me.” He moved his hand away from Trembor’s neck, muscles tensing, preparing himself to strike.

Marlot was across the room with a snarl. The hare was meat. He’d taste his blood, his flesh, he’d—

Marlot’s back hit the floor, his breath coming back in a wheeze. He rolled, got to his feet, ignored the pain, and threw himself at the hare, at his prey. A hand closed on his arm, then Marlot was in the air, landing on the bed, bouncing off. He tried to twist to land on his feet. They touched the floor; he lost his balance, his head hit the wall, and he saw stars.

He shook it to clear them away, and his bloodlust left with them.

He straightened, using the wall for support. Trembor had tipped over with the chair, still unconscious. The hare looked up from the rip in his uniform. Marlot didn’t remember his claws catching in the fabric.

“I thought you wanted to die,” Marlot snarled.

“You think that’s easy to do?” the hare sneered.

“Lie down, bare your throat.” Marlot stepped forward but kept away from Trembor. “Let me finish you.” The bedroom was large enough he could keep the fighting away from the lion.

“I don’t surrender,” the hunter said through gritted teeth. “I can’t. They saw to that.”

They? Had someone—he shut down the thought. He couldn’t get distracted now.

He rushed the hare, hand closed in a fist, striking fast.

The hare was faster, moving before Marlot decided where he’d strike. He landed a kick, and the hare rolled back to his feet before hitting the wall, grinning. He ran at Marlot, claws out.

He blocked and parried, dodged, and staggered as the utter familiarity of the movements stuck him. Claws cut his arm. It had been a punch the last time. He stepped back, trying to reconcile conflicting information again.

“You’re the hare from the gym.”

“I told you,” he said with the next volley of attacks. “I thought fighting you would keep the urge away.”

Marlot dodged. You, not as in him personally, but as in them, predators. “Then why pick me? The gym has much better fighters than me. You fought dozens of them before I got to you.”

The hare looked at the lion and Marlot tense to put himself between the two.

“What you have,” the hare said. Turning back to Marlot.

There was no way they’d been the only couple at Grebor’s gym. “I lost that fight.”

The hare smiled. “You did. But then, it was just practice, wasn’t it? There was no stake to it. Just pride, I guess, for you. To be able to say you’d beaten the prey no one had. That was clearly not incentive enough. I think someone’s life is a better motivation, don’t you?” This time the hare stepped toward Trembor.

Marlot was between them, clawing at the uniform, smelling blood. He staggered back, holding his stomach. The kick had more strength behind it than Trembor’s. How did someone that small hit that hard?

“That’s more like it,” the hunter said, looking at the bleeding cuts on his arm. “Continue to remember that the instant you’re down, I’m going for the lion.”

Marlot snarled but fought the urge to leap. He backed away, pulled the hare with him, away from Trembor. Enough he could see the body, the one he’d been too stunned to look at when he’d landed on that said. Rhinoceros. He filed that for later.

He couldn’t just react. They’d fought, so the hare had a sense of what to expect from Marlot. Marlot barely remembered the fight. He wished he’d paid attention to the hunter’s style now.

The hunter attacked, a series of slashes Marlot avoided, and a kick he blocked. Before the hare stepped back, Marlot struck; a mix of punches and kicks, doing his best to borrow from other fights instead of his usual attacks. His fists connected a few times, as did one kick.

“You’re not going to beat me with closed fists,” the hare said, then struck again. He was faster than Marlot and more precise. So the only reason Marlot was still standing, still alive, was that the hare wasn’t looking to kill him. Like Marlot, he was holding back.

Marlot slipped between an attack and struck, taking the hare by surprise, but not landing the blow. He pushed the attack, kicked when his instinct said to strike with fists, punching when he wanted to use his feet.

The hare blocked and struck back, the kick staggering Marlot back. “Claws,” the hunter snarled, landing another kick.

Marlot ground his teeth and fought against the exhaustion. He wasn’t playing the hare’s games. He’d promised himself he was going to do this the right way. That meant handing the hare over to the Bureau for processing.

He aimed a series of punches; the hare blocked and parried. The kick stuck air and almost threw Marlot off balance.

Instead of taking advantage of the opening, the hare stepped back, shaking his head. “No, you’re not taking this seriously. You still think it’s a game, a way to prove yourself to him.” He nodded to the lion. “I’m done. You just aren’t worth the effort anymore.”

The hare stepped toward Trembor, and Marlot leaped, landed on the hare, pushing him to the floor and striking him in the face, hand closed. The grin on the hare’s face made Marlot pause, let his vision and his mind clear. His hand was open.

He looked into the hare’s puffy eyes as he closed his hand. “This is over. I have you.”

The hare chuckled, then laughed, stopping with a groan. “You think they can hold me?” he whispered. “I was trained to escape our enemies. You think the people here have anything on them? I’ll be out of any cage they put me in days, hours, and once I am out.” He smiled, blood-covered teeth showing. “You’re not getting his ID this time. Not until after I’m done with him.”

He couldn’t kill him. Marlot reminded himself. He needed to hand him over, but he saw in the hare’s eyes the promise. If he lived. Trembor would be in danger. The hare wouldn’t stop, he’d leave more bodies in his wake, but there was only one Marlot cared about.

He opened his hand. He wasn’t letting this monster threaten his lion. He’d find another way to show him he was worthy.

He tensed to strike as someone grabbed the back of his collar and threw him off the hare. Marlot landed on his back and hurried to get to his feet. How had he missed the hare had an ally? The rhinoceros? Had he been faking? He was on his feet and looked at the lion standing between him and the hare.

“Not this time,” Trembor growled.