

Chapter 24

Trembor stepped out of his car. With the weather being pleasant, and putting himself through the berating his nieces and nephews gave him—for all that Dayra was only five, she could give him the silent treatment only masters performed. Dania had left somewhere in the middle of Trembor explaining to one of them that even he had bad days and that he was sorry it had affected them, and that he'd do his best not to let it happen again.

He wished he shared a cub's belief that making a statement of intent was all that was needed to change a situation.

"Bo is no longer in the claws of criminals," he stated, looking at the clear sky. He chuckled. Like he had any way to check that one. "Barany had given up trying to save me." He looked at his pad for a new message from the lawyer telling him there was nothing he could do and Trembor was on his own.

Nothing.

One more attempt? "I don't need to—" he swallowed. He didn't want to voice it in case it came true in a way he didn't want. He wanted the events that led him here not to have happened. Not for things to change in such a way the option was taken from him. That was always how it went in vids. A well-intentioned wish twisted until everything was worse. They did it for drama, to keep people watching. But Trembor was left with the sense it was the only way it would happen.

He'd thought he had been driving randomly, giving into a need to get out of the confines of his house, a need to roam. Roam part of his territory, it seemed, as he recognized the area as the edge of Safe Knoll. Had his subconscious led him here because even if his sister had brought him meat, the need to hunt was still there?

Maybe all he needed was to walk. Roaming in a car wasn't the same as doing it on foot. He just wanted all of this to over, he thought, as he picked a direction. He hated being in his holding state, waiting for things to happen he couldn't affect. And the one thing he could make happen seemed to require ever more strength; going by how many excuses coming up with to delay going through with it.

Maybe he needed a hunt. Something to do. Something he had a say in what would happen right now. It wasn't like he had to worry about the tax. *That* would be out of his hands soon enough.

He glanced around him, intent on picking someone who would give him a workout; who might even win the hunt despite Trembor's best effort. If this hunt was his last the honest way, all the better.

Instead, he was surprised to realize he was in the middle of a crowd, others close enough to him he could claw one of them before anyone could react. Prey didn't do that; get so close to a predator they could die before they ran. Not unless they sense the predator was harmless.

The realization angered him—he wasn't harmless—and the crowd distanced itself from him. Somehow sensing the change in his mood, he was no longer one of the masses. He was a predator again.

Did mood play that large a part in social camouflage? Had his scent let them know he wasn't planning on living? Or was it his despair they picked up? That knowledge there was nothing he could do to have a meaningful effect on his fate. That others determined what would happen to him.

Just like predators determined what happened to prey. In a very general sense.

Everyone had a say in what happened to them. Prey raised their tax to make themselves less appealing. They traveled in herds to make themselves harder to single out. They fought back as hard as they could to live, and sometimes they won.

Wasn't he fighting back in his own way? Wasn't his plan a big "fuck you" to the people trying to screw with him? Who considered him their prey?

Or did it just prove them right?

Looking around, the people here looked alive, smelled alive. They might be prey, and maybe they were waiting to become someone's meal, but they still acted like they had something to live for, while he...

Here he was, a predator among prey, and somehow, they were the most alive.

He wasn't the only predator here. Others were at the edge of the crowd, most shopping, enjoying the warm weather, but he identifies four who were on the prowl, eying the crowd, evaluating who would be their meal.

He realized how archaic his mindset was when he called this neighborhood his hunting ground, his territory. If it really was, he should chase them off. Protecting the prey here from them, so they could feed him. Predators didn't share territory with other predators.

Even the idea of his territory as an RI wasn't real. It was created by the government; assigned to him. He didn't share it, not because he wanted to protect it, but because it made it easier to determine which RI dealt with which body.

He'd argue with an intruding RI, but he wouldn't have a deep-seated need to remove them, to fight them if they didn't obey. To kill them if it came to that. Just like the predators working on their hunts here. He didn't care. There was enough prey for all of them.

There had always been enough prey. They breed quickly enough it took a concerted effort to wipe them out.

Maybe going back before farming existed being territorial made sense. Then, prey was at the mercy of whatever green was available, so couldn't be as numerous as now. Then, an intruding predator could mean the difference between feeding yourself and your pride or not.

Had he ever felt the deep-seated need to protect what was his that he imagined had existed back then? He smiled. Yes, he had felt it. Had almost killed a male just because he'd dared hurt Marlot. It had nothing to do with feeding himself, even if the male had been a hare. He would have ripped him apart until there was nothing left. He would have left him there to rot because someone who would hurt his wolf didn't deserve to become a meal.

The anger he felt toward Nikal should have been because he'd kidnapped his

brother. But that hadn't occurred to him until after it was all over. He'd seen Marlot on the ground, possibly dead, and the hare had had to pay for endangering the love of his life.

He growled at himself as thoughts of Marlot, how he felt for him, brought with it how little time they had left together.

The crowd moved further away from him, unaware his anger was directed at himself.

A cry made him look up, then it was many cries as the crowd panicked. A predator had made their selection and was actively hunting now. A cougar ran after a deer.

Trembor stared, waiting for the outrage to come. The cougar wasn't just looking anymore, they were hunting on his territory. They were taking prey away from him.

Nothing. As he'd worked out, the idea of this being his territory wasn't real.

But if it was, he wondered. What if he went after the cougar for hunting his prey? They'd defend themselves.

But would they kill him?

Trembor hadn't dressed to look low productivity, so just on that, they might prefer litigation over paying his tax. And unlike prey, a predator had the self-control in a fight not to kill.

And the two of them were out of sight.

His inability to decide bothered him. Was it because he didn't have the strength to go through with it? Or was it the lack of certainty? Another thing that wasn't under his control, as much as he'd want it to be. How could there be so much uncertainty in his life? He was a predator. He should be the one in control of it, but now it looked like even his death would ultimately be out of his control since even another predator might not end him.

He rubbed his face. "Snap out of it, Trembor," he grumbled. "There's never been a thing like a certain death for anyone." He'd seen it, back when he was an enforcer. Someone would throw themselves off a roof to end everything, but they'd survive, broken, and then had to deal with hospital bills, debilitating injuries.

They probably hadn't lived long, but there still had been no certainty.

He looked around again and wondered if any of this was the improvement it seemed. Back before technology and society, survival was all there was. Hunt, reproduce, protect. There couldn't have been time left for worries over if what he planned would work, or leave him in a worse position.

He liked enjoying his life. Watching a vid, holding Marlot, answering the cubs' questions. But was this stress a worthwhile cost? Could they go back to the wild if they decided, or was this an ever-forward path? And if it was, where would it lead?

The crowd reformed, still leaving space around him. For as philosophical as his thoughts had turned, they still sensed him as a predator.

But were they in danger?

Not from him, he decided. He was too... something to focus on finding a suitable prey for his needs, be them food or death. He turned around. If he was going to be

thinking deep thoughts, he'd rather do that at home. And stopped as a fox and hyena walked toward him.

Not in his direction, their intent was fixed on him. Dressed too well to be locals who considered this their territory. He didn't know them, so that left few possibilities.

He waited.

The fox looked him over with a leer and licked his lips hungrily.

"I'm mated," Trembor said before the fox made a different offer than the one he was expecting.

"And I care why?" the fox replied, his voice high and strident. "Unless you're saying we should be calling her over for me to have my fun with once I'm done with you?"

"Shut it," the hyena told the fox, then looked at Trembor. "Someone wants to see you."

Trembor considered reaching out and snapping the fox's neck for that leer and implication he'd have his way with Marlot. Maybe he could get the hyena to kill him in the process. That was someone he wouldn't mind saddling with this tax, and he wondered what Maoma would do as punishment.

Except he expected the hyena would let himself die rather than cross her.

"What is it with your group that you never use someone's name?" he asked.

"Someone wants to see me? Just say it's Maoma. Unless someone else replaced her."

The fox grinned. "Oh, he's got a mouth on him." He licked his lips. "I can't wait to see what he can do with it when he's not busy talking."

"I can use it to bite that thing off," Trembor said before the hyena could snap at the fox.

"Maoma wants to see him," the hyena said. "And I'm not going to help you if you piss him off to the point he rips you apart, so keep that cock of yours in your pants until you're wherever you go to get your fun." He looked at Trembor. "Having said that, reason or not. Maoma will be pissed if you hurt either one of us. So do everyone a favor and ignore him. Please don't make things difficult."

"Oh," the fox said, "I really hope you—" He doubled over from the fist the hyena slammed into his stomach.

"I hate working with you."

"Just lead the way," Trembor said. "It's not like whatever she has to say will make my day worse."