

Once home Marlot changed into something more comfortable before getting meat out of the cooler. He didn't have much choice left. He took out two of the four pieces left and put them in the heater. Good thing he was going hunting after eating. He emptied the last of the blood in a glass and rinsed the bottle. It wouldn't be much, but if he wanted to have something left for the morning, he had to sacrifice tonight.

At least he wouldn't be hunting on an empty stomach. Hunting hungry always caused him to act impulsively. He'd lost more than one prey that way.

Once the meat was warm, he preferred his close to body temperature; he brought the food and drink to his office and sat in front of the computer.

He brought up his tracking program, which he'd written himself, and three names came up. This morning there had been twelve. The names of prey he'd encounter in his daily life and who looked appetizing. These were the three whose results had shown the most promises, based on light automated research through the public information network. He changed the display and now, each name was joined with a picture of the person, as well as information on them, the company they worked for, their position there, where they lived.

There was a lot more information on them that he didn't need right now. Each time he added someone to his list, he did as much research as he could himself. The more information he fed his program, but better the results.

Once he picked the three this morning, he set his program on their scent. It rummaged through every database accessible and used everything it found to calculate their productivity rating. It used their position within the company they worked for, the company's profit rating as well as related news stories. It also dug into their past for anything that could affect their worth to society.

The final number wasn't exact, but after four years of tweaking his program, it was accurate enough Marlot could plan his food expenses with it.

Trembor liked to rib him about how he hunted; a techy, the lion called him. Trembor had neighborhoods he hunted in. Places he was familiar with so he had an idea how much he'd end up paying for a kill.

Marlot didn't find that an efficient way to hunt. By hunting in the same places prey got used to it and adapted, which made the hunt more difficult. Not to say he could end up killing someone outside the local average and have to pay a premium for it.

With the technology that was available these days, Marlot didn't see a need to hunt that way. With only a little leg work, and his well-designed program, he could get all the information he needed about his prey before he left home. And he didn't create a hunting pattern for the prey to learn.

He read the file on the prey at the top of the list, the one is the three his programs told him had the most affordable rating for the amount of meat he'd get out of him. Today his prey was male, a horse.

He filed his claws as he read, looking for any details his program might not have taken into account that could affect the rating. He worked at a warehouse on the other side of the city.

Based on the company records, he took the promotion tests twice and failed both times. He had a gym membership, which he only used occasionally. He also had two convictions for shoplifting, three and five years ago.

This led him to agree with the result his program gave him. His prey was low on the productivity ladder. Labor work was an entry-level position for those who couldn't get the academic marks to come in at a higher level. that he failed the promotion test twice indicated he wasn't the best worker there. Even if there were a few years old, his conviction still affected his rating. Those usually stayed in the system a decade for something minor.

All this put his rating at the lower end, and it didn't help his prey that the company he worked for had been sliding down in the markets. Marlot nodded to himself. This shouldn't cost him more than half his budget.

It wouldn't be an easy hunt, horses were strong by nature and this one could know how to fight, but that just made it more exhilarating. He transferred the file to his pad, then made sure his claws were sharp. Sharpening them was something he only did when he expected to get in a fight. The rest of the time he didn't care how dull they got.

His prey had the afternoon shift, so he didn't have to hurry. That wasn't an accident. Everyone Marlot kept on his list finished working after he did. He hated hunting on his rest days. He firmly believed those days were to relax, so he arranged it to do his hunting after work.

He washed his dishes before heading out and had a leisurely drive. He parked in a public lot, away from the warehouse where his prey worked, and walked to a juice bar located across the street from the building's exit. He wasn't the only predator here, watching. A lot of laborers were prey species, so they attracted crowds, predators looking to see what was available, or just looking to whet their appetite.

He didn't have to wait long until his prey's shift let out. Most headed for the parking lot, or the bus stop, traveling in groups whenever they could. Marlot had no trouble locating his prey among the crowd. His height and palomino markings were distinctive. The horse kept walking when the group he was with stopped at the bus stop; he lives only a fifteen-minute walk away.

Marlot finished his drink and started after him. He kept the distance wide enough his prey wouldn't notice him, but not so wide

Marlot could lose sight of him. He was downwind of the horse so that was to his advantage, but that didn't stop him to look around nervously, ears jittering side to side. That was an ancestral reaction, dating back to when they lived in wide-open spaces and it was possible to pick out noises that didn't belong.

Other predators moved about the sidewalk in both directions, going about their own business and not paying attention to anyone around them. They ensured the horse couldn't pick Marlot's scent as the wind shifted.

His prey quickened his pace, as if he still sensed he was being hunted. Marlot matched him, he didn't how, but no matter how careful he was, they always seemed to know the hunt was on. He'd talked with other predators, who confirmed it, so it wasn't something he did that gave him away.

Marlot could take him down right now if he wanted. Predation was allowed everywhere except for the academy grounds and hospitals. But he didn't like getting in a fight in public. For one thing, it disrupted other people's days, and for another, someone might come to the horse's defense. That's why he preferred waiting until they were in a much less crowded area.

Fortunately for Marlot, his prey's nervousness prevented him from thinking clearly. Instead of staying on the busy sidewalk, he cut through an alley in an attempt to get home faster.

The horse was looking over his shoulder when Marlot turned the corner and his eyes went wide. He ran off.

Marlot smiled and ran after him. The horse was faster, but Marlot hadn't spent the day exerting himself, and he did endurance training. His prey hadn't thought it through; he was still too far from his home. Marlot didn't expect him to be able to maintain the pace long enough to reach it.

He lost sight of his prey twice, but his scent was thick with fear and he had no trouble staying on his trail. It was even stronger than the stench emanating from the vagrant sprawled on the ground against the wall.

The horse's scent took him out of the alley and back on a street, and he saw he was now catching up. It was a smaller street and didn't have anyone currently walking along it, so Marlot wouldn't have to worry about someone intervening.

When he was close enough Marlot threw himself on the horse's back and they both went down. The horse didn't waste a moment and threw him off. Marlot rolled and got back to his feet.

An elderly rabbit shrieked in fear and ran off.

The horse stood before him, breathing heavily and hands clenched in fists. He couldn't run away anymore. If he was going to survive, he had to take Marlot down.

Marlot wasn't worried about being killed. Prey hardly ever killed predators, and when they did, it was by accident. He didn't know if

what made them prey made them incapable of killing, or if it simply didn't occur to them, but the worse he had to worry about was broken bones and bruises. And he wasn't even worried about that right now.

The horse closed the distance between them and swung. Marlot easily avoided the blow. Like most prey he hunted over the year, this one didn't know how to fight. He was throwing punches, hoping one would connect.

Marlot had seen the kind of gyms prey went to, all they had were weights. It made them stronger, but what was the point of that they didn't know how to fight? How did having a good looking body help them survive?

One of the punches connected with Marlot's shoulder, sending him flying back. Mind on the hunt, he chided himself as he rolled, just in time to avoid the horse's foot landing where he had been.

Marlot stood and punched the horse across the face, fist closed. He tried to avoid using his claws when hunting since that means the prey would lose blood. He only used them if his prey ended up being a better fighter than he expected. He wasn't going to need them here.

The horse continues swinging, almost blindly. Marlot focused on avoiding them, only throwing one of his own when he had a clear opening. He was letting the horse exhaust himself. His prey didn't know enough to realize what was happening, so he fought with all he had.

It didn't take long for the horse's breathing to become labored. His punches were now easier to avoid as he slowed down. Marlot waiting for an opening and clocked the horse across the muzzle with a double-handed fist.

The horse's head spun, taking his body with it and making him buckle at the knees. Before he could shake off the dizziness, Marlot took his head in both hands and twisted it hard.

The horse crumbled to the ground, neck broken.

Marlot closed and opened his hands, trying to force the pain to recede. the horse's muzzle had been a lot harder than he'd expected. He wondered if he should look into getting the protective gloves he'd seen advertised on the vids.

Once he trusted his fingers to be able to do finer work, he searched through the horse's pockets, looking for his wallet. He took the ID card out of it and put it back in the pocket. He pocketed the card and lifted the horse over his shoulder.

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On the walk back to his car, predators Marlot passed smiled, and nodded in silent congratulations, while prey gave me a wide berth. Some even threw him angry glares, but he didn't pay attention to those. He quickly became used to them once he started hunting in the city. He also got used to feeling eyes follow him.

Scavengers and less scrupulous predators preferred stealing prey rather than doing their own hunting. Marlot had learned early on to

pay for a kill only after locking the body in the trunk of his car.

He dumped the body next to his car and undressed it. He put the naked form in the trunk, closed it, and set the alarm. Marlot watched as his shadowy entourage dispersed, now they couldn't get to it easily. He rolled the prey's clothing into a ball and crossed the parking lot to reach the payment kiosk.

He swiped his ID card, and the screen lit up with his name, address, and job. It then asked him to confirm the information was accurate. He shook his head in annoyance. Why would he use someone else's ID? and if he'd stolen it, he'd just say it was accurate. This always felt like a waste of his time.

He confirmed it was him and then picked the option to pay off his kill from the list and appeared. The kiosk asked for the kill's ID, and Marlot swiped that card. The screen went dark while it processed the information.

The next question the kiosk asked was if he was returning the kill's possessions. He said yes. Returning the possessions wasn't mandatory; in fact, from listening to other predators talk, many of them liked to keep them as proof of their kill. Marlot didn't have a need to do that. As far as he was concerned, hunting was about putting food on the table and nothing more. The government encouraged their return by giving a small discount on the kill's price.

The front panel opened, and he took the empty plastic bag from it. The bundle of clothes went in, and the ID card went in the holder on the bag. He sealed everything and placed it back in the kiosk.

The horse's family would be advised of his demise, as normal, but they now had the comfort of knowing that anything he had of value, both monetary and sentimental, was coming back to them.

Then the amount he had to pay appeared. It was a little higher than his program had calculated. This was the third kill where it had underestimated the value. He'd have to take a look at the calculations and see where the flaw was. It was still within his budget.

When prompted, he chose to have the amount deducted from his account. His ID card was set up to allow that. It asked for the confirmation code, and he entered it. The kiosk still accepted cash, although Marlot didn't think that was going to last much longer, he didn't like to carry that kind of money on him. It was far too easy to become prey with that as an incentive, and he preferred to keep cash for transactions he didn't want traced.

The receipt printed, and the kiosk asked if he wanted to see how his kill tally ranked within the neighborhood, city, his employment, or productivity class. He canceled that request. Marlot kept his own tally, and he didn't care how he rated compared to anyone else.

The tally option was a recent addition to the kiosk. The only reason Marlot could see for it was that the system was now able to calculate it.

Again, from listening to other predators talk, he suspected the

rank system got some of them to hunt prey above what they could afford, just so they could brag about it. Unfortunately, those most affected by ego tended to be the younger predators, those who couldn't afford it. They ended up racking up debt just so they could claim to be at the top of a list.

He wasn't the only one who felt that was. Multiple petitions to get the ranking removed from the kiosk had been handed to the city government. There was no indication things were going to change any time soon, much to the delight of the lending agencies.

Marlot had read there was talk of including debts in the productivity calculations. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Sure, he could see how that might discourage some from hunting above what they can afford, but how about everyone else? He had a couple of loans, for his house and his car, that didn't make him less productive. Hopefully, it was one of those things politicians kept talking about, but not do anything with.

Marlot entered the information about his kill in his pad, as well as how much the discrepancy on the value was.

Then he drove to his processing store, not far from his house. It was run by a hyena family and they did quality work, which was why he kept coming back here.

The door buzzed as he pushed it open; the horse slung over his shoulder. The space was well lit, separated in two by the large counter where the bodies were butchered and prepared. The wall display, behind the counter, where various meat products were normally arranged for sale, was almost empty due to the late hour.

The smell was that of blood, fresh meat, and hints of spices from the cooking that happened throughout the day in the kitchen behind the closed door at the back.

Earlier during the day, the place would be crowded with people placing orders, picking them up. Conversation would be loud and boisterous.

Because he was the only one here. The sound of laughter was quite loud. He walked to the counter and saw four of the five brothers huddled in a corner still wearing their blood covered apron. They were snickering and trying to catch their respective breath.

Ezk'Eriel, the oldest of the group, looked up and waved at Marlot. He stood and walked to the counter, getting some of the laughter under control and wiping his eyes with a sleeve, leaving a smear of blood over it.

From behind the counter, a hand appeared and gripped the edge. The fifth brother, Agasmil, pulled himself up, tears streaming down his eyes as he tried not to laugh. He put his other hand on the counter, his face contorted in an effort to keep it still. Then he was snickering. He lost control and was laughing hard. He lost his grip and fell back on the floor with a loud thud.

The three in the corner looked at their brother for a moment,

then exploded in laughter. One of them, Jarardem, Marlot thought, had been in the process of standing, and he went back down, sliding against the wall.

Even Ezk'Eriel had trouble keeping a straight face.

"Should I ask to be let in on the joke?" Marlot asked, finding himself smiling.

Ezk'Eriel shook his head. "You wouldn't get it." He had a fit of laughter and it was a moment before he could breathe enough to continue. "It's a hyena thing."

With a chuckle, Marlot decided not to press the point. He dropped the body on the counter.

Ezk'Eriel took a moment to put his professional face on and looked it over. "Your usual cuts?"

"Yeah."

Agasmil finally got up and joined his brothers, fighting to keep his laughter at bay.

Marlot chuckled and focused on Ezk'Eriel. "Can you leave a little more fat on this time? I'm healthy enough, I can take it."

The hyena nodded and wrote on the counter. "The usual for our cut?"

"Yeah, Skin, bone, extra fat, and head's yours." Normally the hyenas' price for processing a body was two pounds of meat, which Marlot had no issue paying, but since all he took was the meat and blood, leaving them everything else, they never felt to need to take meat from his kills. "You can take ten quarts of blood. I won't be able to drink everything you'll get out of him before it goes bad."

The hyenas were proficient at using everything that wasn't edible to earn extra money. They tanned the hides to resell to the clothing industry, the bones and fat went to the pharmas. Marlot never asked what they did with the heads. He didn't want to know.

"You're one of the few that leaves us the fat anymore," Ezk'Eriel commented as he traced the cut lines on the horse. "Ever since that new fake meat's hit the market the demand for fat's gone way up. Now predators are selling it direct to the pharmas."

Marlot shrugged. "I have enough to do already without having to navigate the markets. You guys are willing to do the work, you should earn the reward."

"Always appreciated, and that reminds me." Ezk'Eriel picked a pie off the display and handed it to Marlot. "Mom made it this morning."

"Thanks." Marlot ate it in a few bites. It was a mixture of meats and vegetables in a thick, slightly spicy, sauce wrapped in a crusty bread dough. It was delicious.

Marlot had trouble making sure he ate enough vegetables. He didn't particularly care for them, but if he ever managed to work up the patience to learn to cook like Ezk'Eriel's mother, he would never have that problem again.

"Thank your mother for me, this was delicious."

"Your meat's going to be ready tomorrow morning. If you come pick it up early, you can tell her yourself."