

PREDATORS EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

The lion blinked and shifted its weight to one side hoping the dull pain that deprived him of sleep would abate. It didn't.

A pregnant moon painted thin clouds silver as they scudded across a star splashed sky. This extraordinary beauty, which would cause visitors to catch their breath in wonder, was lost on the lion. The wind shifted. The scent of the nomad, the young male, in search of a pride drifted to him. He blinked and yawned. Tomorrow, at first light, the interloper, who had spent the previous afternoon bellowing challenges at him, would come in, the future of the pride at stake.

The cub lying next to him stretched and yawned, imitating his father. In two years, if he lived that long, his plaintive squeak would become an earsplitting roar. But he might not get that chance. His prospects hung precariously on the strength and ferocity of the old male next to him and that, in turn, teetered dangerously on the cusp.

The guides who led game drives from the hotels in Kasane had named him Sekoa, the Setswana word for invalid, because of his apparent illness. How the other beasts referred to him, if at all, is not known. He shifted his weight again. The pain increased. He let out a ferocious roar; a roar heard as far away as six kilometers and which caused the eyes of the hundreds of species within hearing, to pop open in panic. Males from distant prides answered. The nomad padded away into the bush. It would be only a temporary retreat. In the morning, at daybreak, he would shuffle back, head lowered, shoulders hunched, and determined.

The females had had no success hunting that night but would try again at daybreak. Desperate times call for desperate measures. They lay with their cubs and two older adolescent males within a few meters of Sekoa. Normally they would be separated by several meters, perhaps more, but not this night. Perhaps they sensed his failing health, perhaps not. He ruled an unlucky pride. Disease and inbreeding had reduced its numbers. Probably the reason he'd managed it so long.

The old male had no way of knowing that his body was slowly and inexorably being destroyed by bovine tuberculosis exacerbated by FIV/AIDS, the leonine variant of human immunodeficiency virus, HIV/AIDS, that he shared with those bipedal creatures that alternately feared and admired him. Normally, it would be a benign presence, but his reduced immune system had left him vulnerable to the tuberculosis which daily ravaged his lungs. It was a disease he might otherwise have been able to resist or at least, endure. The combination meant that his remaining time as the alpha male of his pride might be numbered in hours, his life in days, perhaps, if he were lucky, weeks.

The only certainty in his existence was that on the morrow, soon or late, he would have to face this young pretender. If, by some chance, he succeeded in driving him off, there would be another after him, and then another. Holding his territory and place had defined his existence since he'd taken the pride from an older lion four years previously. The image of those lurking, waiting, males caused him to growl—a low rumble.

If he failed, if he lost the pride, his cubs would be killed to bring the adult females back into estrous. He knew that. He'd done the same when he took over this pride. One of the females, as if her thoughts resonated with his, gathered her cubs closer to her, and licked them with her tongue, an organ rough enough on its surface to scrape raw meat

from a bone, but soft enough to smooth her cub's fur. The cub batted at her and tried to attack her massive paw. The female swatted it, an act of love.

In the moonlight, Sekoa, the four females, the cubs, and the adolescent males appeared a uniform gray. At daybreak, they would become tawny brown, and on parts of his otherwise darker mane, almost orange. But these colors would not register on their functionally colorblind eyes. Day or night, their world was uniform in coloration, bright or dim, but predominantly gray.

His night vision, on the other hand, was near perfect. He swiveled his massive head right and then left. That fact and the moonlight allowed him to assess his surroundings. He could make out a slight rise at his front, leading toward the heaviest growth in the bush. His rival would charge from that direction, using the grade to propel him down and into the grassy patch in front of the sleeping pride. If Sekoa were to stand there, the attacker's momentum would surely knock him off his feet and leave him open to teeth and claws. He would have to find a better place to engage this usurper.

Another sharp stab of pain blocked this intuitive rumination. If he didn't sleep, he'd never have the strength to fight. If he did drift off, he might not wake. He shifted once more and growled in pain and frustration.

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Fifteen kilometers to the east, in a small cluster of rondvals outside Kazungula, the village elders pondered the fate of Lovemore Ndlovu. He had crossed the line. He had acquired a bad reputation. The other young men from the village worked hard at whatever they could turn their hand to. For some it meant gathering firewood, which they would sell on the roadside. Travelers journeying to and from Francistown or Nata would stop sometimes, but most of the sales were local. Or they could work in one of the safari lodges on the Chobe River, work which paid well but was hard to get and not steady. A few of the older girls and boys danced in costume for the hotel guests. Sometimes a tourist from America would tip them as well. The majority of the young men and women made the long walk to school willingly. Education would bring them advancement and open doors. But always, their thoughts and eyes turned south to the capitol, to Gaborone. There they could find good jobs, earn much pula. Each year, a few from the village escaped to the city and came back wearing new clothes and with spending money in their pockets. The cities, Gaborone, Maun, Palapye, were the goal—for all but Lovemore.

He'd slipped across the border from Zimbabwe along with the growing exodus of persecuted Kalanga tribesmen and economically strapped citizens. But Lovemore did not come to Botswana because of persecution or penury. There were certain authorities in Harare who had a keen interest in him which, in turn, spurred his decision to immigrate and join his cousins among the Ndebele speaking Kalangans clustered close to the Chobe River, near Kazungula. There he knew he could fit in. And, of course, everyone spoke English with some level of proficiency. He'd met Sami Mokole by chance on the road leading from the ferry across the river into Zambia. They struck up a friendship. Later he moved in with his new "cousin." Lovemore paid for his share of the food with cigarettes he stole from the Chinaman's shop. When Sami left to join his family at their cattle post, Lovemore had to find a new means of support.

It came to him late one afternoon when he stumbled upon a car jack by the side of the road. Some careless traveler, probably a tourist, must have changed a tire and left it by mistake. A jack like that, he thought, could come in handy. After some thinking on the

matter, he'd put it to use that night. Tires can be expensive, especially up in the north, away from the cities. The jack, and moonless nights, put him in the used tire and wheel business. A risky business, as the car parks in Kasane were very public, but he had become used to risk-taking in Harare. He borrowed his cousin's roadside shed and painted a new sign—Ndlovu Spares 'N Wheels. He thought to call his business Bosigogare Tyres—Midnight Tires, but decided it might beg the question and he didn't need that. No mathata.

There were many flat tires produced by the numerous potholes on the sixty kilometers of road between Nata and Kasane. Finding buyers turned out to be simple enough. Always shrewd, he made a point of repainting the wheels lest some previous owner appear and cause trouble. He had a spray can in hand and had managed to start on the first of his latest acquisitions when the old men appeared.

Theft, they declared, was not acceptable. Not for anyone and certainly not for a guest from Zimbabwe. Theft reflected badly on the village. These thefts, they said, must end. They confiscated his jack and the wheels, and were taking him to the police when they decided a session in the kgotla following Customary Law would be in order first. Punishment, in the form of a sound beating, should precede a turning over to the police, they decided. That sort of justice had been taken from them with Independence—a fact they accepted, but with which they disagreed strongly. They dragged him toward the kgotla. Lovemore did not fear the thrashing. He had been through that many times. But the thought of police, who would surely deport him, threw him into a panic. He bolted away, zigzagging through the alleys of Kazungula and into the bush across the Kasane road.

Lovemore's bad attitude, the behavior which inevitably got him into trouble, stemmed from a disinclination to listen and learn from those wiser and more experienced than he. The bush, as every young person on either side of the border learned at an early age, was life giver, and life taker. It was to be shared. By day, it cautiously belonged to people; at night it absolutely belonged to the animals. Lovemore had missed that last part. His dash into the bush to evade the old men lasted about three hundred meters. It was there he met an immature, still mane-less, but very hungry lion recently driven off as it came into sexual maturity by his pride's alpha male.

Lovemore never had a chance.