

Predator and Prey Meet

Hunger pains were becoming all he could focus upon. Beaux knew he needed sustenance. And he knew he needed it now. Although the summer sun was setting and the golden light was fading around him, this cat's crepuscular abilities were all coming online. The diurnal ones would soon be retreating for safety and avoiding the danger of what comes after dusk. But this crepuscular cat's instincts were telling him it was time to begin the hunt.

Beaux may appear to most humans to merely be an eight-pound house cat, but this being was a fearless feline warrior. His desire to hunt not only stemmed from his innate drive to survive, but it originated from his species' lineage. His living ancestors are desert cats. This is a kindred species who evolved to instinctively know that successful hunts for their species begin at dusk; evening temperatures are cooler, and prey is more available.

That time was now.

Unlike the prey he was laser-focused upon, this modern descent of a desert species was able to see exceptionally well in low light on this humid summer night. Needing only one sixth of the light we humans require to decipher shapes, the specialized muscles of Beaux's iris (the area surrounding the pupils) were allowing his eyes to open fully in this now very dim light; allowing maximum illumination of this unfamiliar environment. With his highly-evolved elliptical eye shape and large corneas, this feline predator was well suited to see everything in this new and unfamiliar environment now that the light was fading. The tapetum inside his golden eyes also aided the hunt by shifting the wavelengths of sunlight, making his prey silhouetted against the dusky sky more prominent.

The highly-evolved reflective layer behind Beaux's retina was effectively reflecting the remaining incoming light. As the last remaining daylight entered the tapetum lucidum, it bounced off of his species' incredibly specialized color-sensitive cells or "cones", making more use of the existing sunlight, while the rod cells in his retinas remained responsible for detecting motion. Although his prey was making movements at a distance, this predator could accurately detect every motion that was being made. With a field of view around 200 degrees, Beaux's

range of peripheral vision was making this hunt all the more effective to watch his prey while they prodded and poked away at the seeds in the overgrown grass.

This feline predator's finely-tuned ear tufts and pinna were additional essential hunting tools, assisting him to pick up the faintest sound and vibrations from his prey who were still poking away, unaware of the danger that lurked in the dusk. Resembling furry satellite-dish antennae, Beaux's ears were swiveling independently of each other, moving up and down, and rotating 180 degrees, courtesy of this cat's thirty-two exquisite ear muscles. Being able to detect the smallest variances in sound, while distinguishing differences of as little as one-tenth of a tone, Beaux was able to identify each type and size of prey emitting sounds. Although he was now just over three feet away from his prey, this formidable feline was accurately identifying the origin of each sound that reverberated in front of him. While in waiting, Beaux was precisely pinpointing his prey's location within a few inches and also in six one-hundredths of a second.

Being a master of concealment, Beaux's instincts were telling him to use every available depression in the soil and the height of overgrown grass to conceal himself while he crept closer to his prey. Silently poised and focused, cautious and acutely aware of his surroundings, Beaux sat perfectly still, blending in with the dimming background. Patience, stealth, and silence were his allies. Ten thousand years of feline evolution pulsed through his perfectly designed Earth vessel; this body had evolved for exact moments like this.

Sitting motionless, Beaux savored the scents drifting on the breeze. It was as if the warm summer evening was offering the aroma of the feathered ones' directly to him. Grateful for this gift, Beaux honed onto their scent. With the 200 million odor-sensitive cells in his delicate feline nose, Beaux was able to receive a taste of what was to come after the hunt was complete.

His exquisite whiskers were also working in his favor. Being superbly programmed, they moved as the breeze brought him another feathered flavor to savor. A whisker only needed to move one two-hundredth of the width of a human hair to be triggered, sending a signal to Beaux's brain. There were no movements in the air or on land that this formidable feline was not aware.

His supple, low-slung body, finely molded head, sophisticated satellites sitting atop it, super-sensitive whiskers, and long panther-like tail, all aided his balance, poise, precision, sight, scent, auditory abilities, and calculated movement across the sunset-swept lawn. Paired with finely coordinated hunting skills and refined movements, these were powerful, specialized tools in this hunter's toolbox.

The scene was now set. As the feathered prey focused intently while picking and poking at the scattered seed among the soil, the black house panther sat silently, fully prepared for the long-awaited hunt. The moment Beaux had been waiting for had finally arrived. Leaving the safety and cover of the deep-rooted live oak tree trunk, and without a sound, Beaux crept closer to the family of doves as they foraged for their evening meal.

With perfectly positioned paw placement, Beaux pressed his black padded toes silently into the soil. Crouching low to the ground, he was practically invisible to his prey. With fur as black as midnight, black as pitch, this predator could not be seen due to the low light of dusk's amber and grey hues that hung like a low fog over the feathered ones.

Beaux was now nearly hugging the warm Earth with his chest. His muscles were moving with ease. His sleek black fur remained undetectable against the background. His deliberate movements continued without a sound. In the lowlight of dusk, this black furred creature looked incredibly like his Amazonian kin. If his desert and jungle cat cousins could see his successful stealthy stalking skills in the shimmer of twilight, they would surely be proud.

Without a detectable sound, he slowly raised his strong, lithe body just enough to stretch forward. Carefully propelling himself closer to his prey, the black house panther lifted one paw after another off the ground, all while creating not a single sound. As a digitigrade walker, Beaux was walking on the balls of the feet and fingertips, so to speak. His soft and petite paw pads enabled this house panther predator to move silently towards his prey through unfamiliar hunting terrain.

Remaining undetected, this predator was practiced in a particular gait. Moving both legs on one side of his body at the same time, this method of movement cut this predator's potential footfall volume in half, by evenly distributing all of his weight over his four limbs. For a specialized species who evolved to walk on their

tiptoes with claws contracted, Beaux was successfully maximizing stealthy movement for this critical hunt. Acutely aware of being both predator and prey, Beaux continued the need to avoid being seen by his prey, while also attempting to avoid being added to the food chain. This eight-pound predator instinctively knew that stealth and silence are supreme forms of both attack and defense. One who stalks their prey in silence can attack their prey undetected. On the flip side of the cat coin, one who hunts in silence will successfully prevent giving away their position to predators.

Waiting for the precise moment to move in, Beaux froze in mid stride, reassessing the situation once again. The doves continued to peck at the seeds scattered on the ground, still unaware of the predator in their midst. Pausing, heart pounding, eyes dilated, ears erect, whiskers forward, muscles elongated, claws contracting, Beaux was calculating his next move. Being in no rush, Beaux continued watching; waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

All at once, as if an unseen energy shared between the doves directed their behavior - the doves in unison dipped their delicate heads down to forage. This was the exact moment Beaux had been waiting for. The doves were distracted. Their heads were all down, pecking at the seeds at once. Within a split-second, Beaux's body responded to what his instinctual mind asked of it. His hind leg muscles contracted. His toes spread wide, digging his black paw pads into the grass and soil. With extraordinary strength and superior speed, Beaux bounded out of the grass, and into the air. As all four paws left the ground, he instantaneously extended his right forearm, claws fully extended, as he flew through the air. Responding in unison, the doves reacted to the threat coming in fast from above. Instantaneously, the doves took flight, while simultaneously vocalizing an alarm call. The aerial escape dance began.

As if a perfect physics equation had been completed, cat and dove collided on cue. Beaux's sharp claws captured one of the doves by her wing, just as she was taking flight in fright. Acting as fishhooks, both of Beaux's forepaws and razor-sharp claws firmly grasped the dove, all while both predator and prey remained tangled in the air.

Within seconds after making contact, both Beaux and the dove landed back on the ground with a soft thudding sound. With his feathered prey firmly in his grasp, Beaux crouched motionless as his prey struggled beneath him. Beaux held tightly to the feathered creature. He did not need to look directly at her. The finely tuned vibrissae on his forearms could feel every millimeter movement she made as she struggled to set herself free. As she struggled, he surveyed his surroundings to ensure his safety. The scene around him was clear. He could continue to focus all of his energy and senses on what struggled beneath him.

The beautiful feathered creature fought with all of her might to free herself from the weight and claws of this surprise predator. Yet with every feeble attempt to fly away, Beaux pulled her plump, feathered body closer to his chest and dug his claws and deeper into her down feathers. She was terrified. He was exhilarated.

“This will be over soon.” He told her through his thoughts.

“I will not let you suffer, but I need your sacrifice.”

The dove could clearly hear him in her mind, but her terror did not subside. She continued to struggle, desperate to set herself free from the clutches of this cat. Fighting with all of her might, the dove finally gave in to the inevitable. She closed her eyes gently, and prepared herself, knowing the end was here.

Beaux opened his jaws, exposed his carnivorous teeth, lowered his head, and began to sink his canines into the thick feathers surrounding the dove’s neck.

A sudden change in pressure occurred over Beaux’s body.

“Whoooooossh!” a nearly undetectable sound surrounded them both.

Simultaneously, the air changed. Within the next instant, a burning, piercing pain penetrated Beaux’s upper back. Beaux was being lifted off the ground. Something strong and swift had him in its grip.

Confused, startled, yet determined to keep hold of his prey, Beaux bit down firmly into the dove. Within seconds of this, Beaux was hurled upward. Both predator and prey were being lifted into the air together by some unseen force.

The pain was excruciating. Beaux howled in agony. Inadvertently, while screaming in pain, he instinctively pulled his legs closer to his body. In turn, this behavior retracted his claws, which released the dove.

She dropped like a feathered missile to the Earth. Laying still for only a few seconds, instinct kicked in, and within moments she was in flight. Not knowing where to land to catch her breath, the dove soon found herself in the safety of her familiar friend, the ancient oak tree.

Unable to free himself from the unknown predator, Beaux was now in flight. No sounds surrounded him now, except for the air rushing violently over his ears as he was soaring across the yard, steered by an unseen formidable force. Terror was attempting to overtake him. Unable to think clearly Beaux could barely comprehend what was happening. But he instinctively knew he was going to die.

“Fight.” He heard, from a voice not of his own.

This voice successfully shook him out of his terror-stricken and stunned state. Instinct began to kick in, allowing Beaux to do exactly what the voice instructed him to do; fight. Swinging wildly and thrashing about while in the grip of certain death, Beaux writhed and howled. With every breath that he was able to inhale, he exhaled with a loud yowl, summoning strength from within. Beaux was now fighting for his life. At this moment, Beaux knew he was not ready to die.

Still unaware of what or who had him in its death grip, Beaux pushed through the pain of the searing knife-like stabbing in his back. As he wriggled wildly while being wisped through the air at a frantic speed, Beaux began to realize that to escape, he needed to dislodge whatever had fish-hooked into his back.

With all the strength he could muster, Beaux began to turn his neck so that his mouth could reach the object lodged deep into his left shoulder muscle. Biting harder than he had ever bitten anything before, Beaux sank his canines into the formidable flying foe. The sharp object remained embedded deep into his tissue, while another dug deeper into his ribs and shoulder, tearing his flesh.

“Fight harder. You will die.” The voice came to him again.

Without questioning how he was hearing this, Beaux believed the voice. At the same time, Beaux intuitively noticed there was no fear in this voice; only a certainty – a knowing.

As Beaux continued to fly through the air, being carried by this unknown formidable force, he summoned and embraced every ounce of feline ferocity within his mind and body. With no thought to the consequences of his actions, Beaux instinctively fought for his life, twisting his flexible feline frame. Writhing and wriggling while soaring through the darkening sky, the light around him was fading fast. After several seconds of struggling in this new empowered position, Beaux successfully swung his right forearm up and over his head to the left, allowing him to grasp onto what was attached into his flesh. Sinking his cat claws deep into something both oddly familiar, yet unknown, Beaux clenched his claws with all of his might. Simultaneously, a loud screeching boomed above Beaux.

Beaux could now smell blood. Immediately he knew this was a new but strangely familiar scent. Within less than a second after smelling the blood, Beaux was falling through the air. He now knew he had successfully freed himself from the grip of death. But now another death seemed certain. The ground was closing in quickly. Bracing for impact, Beaux was certain this was going to hurt like hell, if he survived at all. Earth was closing in quickly. Only seconds stood between Beaux and the unforgiving and unfamiliar landscape. Landing hard with an excruciatingly painful thud, the Earth rose to meet him.

Incredibly, Beaux saved himself from further injury by landing with nearly all four of his feline feet planted firmly beneath him. A less than graceful fall, but the height at which he was released from the grip of death greatly assisted Beaux with breaking the fall. Beaux knew that if he had been any higher in the sky, the scavengers would have feasted well tonight.

Shaken, stunned, injured, and in excruciating pain, Beaux stood motionless on the ground as the darkness descended upon him. Catching his breath, Beaux quickly glanced up attempting to get a view of the being above him. Silhouetted in the darkened sky, a female barn owl flew silently but swiftly out of sight.

Beaux, the predator, had become the prey.

End of Chapter 33, Book 1 of 3



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