

THE HUNT

BY KALANSPHANTOM

"Go on! Get it down!" "Let's go!" "What are you waiting for?" The voices chattered and broke the stillness of the dark Halloween night as a red dragon perched nervously on the end of a patio and glanced back at those gathered around eagerly behind him.

The moonlight filtered through trees that had shed their leaves and those few that still clung to their foliage were whipping and shaking in the air. Ashtalon nervously shifted his paws on the ground and stared at the glowing yellow potion that was gripped in a forepaw and lashed his tail back and forth. He had never felt so nervous in his life, he wanted to fling the thing away and demand that they continue the perfectly lovely party inside instead, there was no reason to go through with a practical joke that was beyond detestable. He glanced over to the sergal who was leaned up lightly against one of the posts on the back deck, the yellow eyes fixated on him intently, almost seeming to dare him to put the potion down and refuse to go through with it. They were more accusing than his other roommate, the tan and buff gryphon crouched on a step with his feathers up and roused, but Chester had always been more mild than the more dominant sergal, Sen.

"I... Do you really want to go through with this? I'll just end up beating you all out, it's not like you could find me in the forest either which way." He stammered after a moment, his tail snapping roughly behind him.

It had all started as a joke, a casual jest that they should have a Halloween party in tune with the old tradition that held grand wild hunts and drunken revelry that was lost as people tended to remain in costume and simply lose themselves in drink. Halloween had never been that, at least not for himself and most of his friends, it was supposed to be a night where they could hunt at will, wild and free with little chance at being captured and killed. It was a time mortals were supposed to fear and they typically celebrated it with a hunt in the forest for a bit of deer or rabbit, not the traditional bit of real prey. Tonight was supposed to add spice to it, and his heart was pounding as Sen stepped away from the edge of the deck and gave him a sly smile.

"You were the one to suggest it. You know as well as I do that if you can make it to the other side of the wood near the farm you're free." The sergal flicked his tongue out a little playfully.

"And he has wings, chances are that won't be terribly hard." Kobie drawled out in support, the dark furred wolf tilting his head down a slight, he looked more relaxed than the others, less on edge. "I can't fly, so it's not like you really have to worry about all of us."

"I suppose not..." Ash licked his lips a little bit. That was the ending of the party, a real hunt, he would have his size adjusted and be set loose in the wood with the rest hunting him. As long as he made it to the farm just across the valley he'd be free, but if not...

"Come on! A fine thing to invite us here and back out at the last moment. Are you hoping that one of us will take your place?" Vyxy snapped, the fox-dragon hybrid's tail snapping a bit harder to hit the deck behind him.

“No!” Ashtalon protested and swallowed, the red drake bracing himself before lifting up the potion. He was fast, if he was smaller, they’d have a harder time tracking him and finding him.

Five predators all aimed at him at once and running through the woods, it sent a shiver down his spine before he lifted up the vial in his paw and braced himself, a slight leap in his heart making him nearly set it down again. He could do this, he could make it past all of them and hit the farm on the other side, he even knew the area and if he was smaller he had a chance to dodge them simply by virtue of being hard to spot in the darkness. It would be a night for everyone to remember and that was a part of all the fun, of course, but it still made him shiver as the gryphon, Chester, gave him an encouraging gesture that sealed the deal and the dragon tipped the potion back and poured it into his maw before he could overthink what he was doing and back out.

Chester or Sen will be the one to catch me, they’ll give me a token wound and let me go to reach the farm house, but the others don’t need to know that. He reassured himself, letting his breath out with a bit of a shaking sound.

The moment the liquid touched his tongue he began to change, just as advertised, but it still shocked Ash as his entire body began to grow smaller, dropping down towards the ground as he gulped down the last of the potion and he let out a short noise. It came out as more of a squeak as he dropped lower towards the ground, his large wings shrinking in proportion to his upper body, fading away as he saw the people around him starting to surge upwards, or rather, he grew smaller and they towered above him. They were all watching him, their eyes bright and glittering as the boards had larger cracks compared to his paws, the expanse of the deck seemed more like the spread of a lawn compared to the small area that had he been standing on. It was too big, everything was suddenly too big. The vial that the potion had been rolled away as he jumped back and saw the ring of predators staring down at him eagerly.

“Run..” Sen spoke up, his voice a low growl as Claw, a blue and black patterned shark clicked his teeth together meaningfully. “Or fly, but you only have twenty seconds to make it count.”

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Twenty seconds, as it turned out, wasn’t nearly enough for Ash as his wings burned while he threw himself into the forest and pumped them rapidly. He didn’t dare go up into the open sky, he knew that Chester would have taken to the skies above the tree line in the hopes of catching him, so he had to flit from branch to branch into the forest, his wings pumping wildly, straining them until they were shaking, but still he tried to put on more speed while the forest was filled with the sounds of the hunters calling out to one another, signaling their positions. They would work together until they brought down their prey, and then it would be a free for all and that left Ash’s heart in his throat as he leapt to a tree branch and scabbled down a few dozen feet before running on again, trying to maintain hops from branch to branch instead of flying on aching wings.

The night was lit by the nearly full moon above, so bright that there were shadows being cast from his running as he evaded the sudden surge of a tan form beneath him. Vyxy let out a call of excitement, the fennec fox-dragon hybrid trying to scabble up the tree before the dragon took to wing again, he had to get away from them. The valley was deep and long, taking the trees meant going through every last mile, but if he went above and dared the short way... He shivered at the idea of Chester taking him down. The gryphon was a sure flyer and he had no doubt that the talons would be razor sharp and

ready. Likely, he was hovering above the sounds of victory each time the red drake was spotted by the others below.

He jumped wildly towards the next tree and hit hard, his talons scrabbling roughly against the bark, tearing at it, trying to stop himself before going forward again. His chest was rising and falling, his jaws opened to show his tongue as he made a wild bold move which was to leap forward and take wing, gliding down in a steep plunge that built up speed and flicked his tail to guide him through the worst of the tangles. His paws jerked up tight against his chest, holding there while he kept his eyes on the ground in fear that one of the hunters would be close enough to actually catch him. Instead, he saw only the trees whipping by, the bushes and empty land as he gained a few dozen yards ahead of them and began to continue his run.

From somewhere behind them Kobie set up a deep throaty howl, announcing the scent while the drake hit the ground itself and bolted, tearing through the leaves as he had hope he could just evade them through the simple act of going to the ground while they were staring at the trees. He knew the woods, he knew the little hills and ditches he could leap into, his entire body alert and terrified every time he heard a noise behind him, waiting to feel the scrape of claws against his chest or back to take him down, but the sounds faded. He knew that the shark would be the first to drop out, Claw wasn't used to running, but the rest were on relatively even ground together. He twisted his head around to look behind him before leaping up onto a log, his wings flashing open to struggle back into the air. He was nearly the same size as a small cat and that meant it was surprisingly easy to gain air rapidly with his new lighter size.

He heard them now, they were further back, his lips twisted in a smile, they were lost, they were looking at the tree line and branches when he had taken to the ground. He didn't dare stop, instead he tore forward again, sometimes flying, sometimes dropping down to run along a branch, his entire body alert as he felt victory within his grasp. There was little reason for him to doubt reaching the farm house, he'd be able to change back and spend the night mocking the rest of them for their poor skills. They'd still have time for a hunt for deer or even a moose if they were feeling-

SKRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEE!

The trees above him erupted in feathers and branches, his only sight before a heavy fist hit hard against the back of his shoulders and clawed hand pinned him down and drove him to the ground. Ashtalon screeched out in fear, twisting and writhing, his body caught as the buff and tan feathered gryphon slammed him down to the ground, ripping a broad hole in the trees above them. The gryphon's eyes glowing nearly blue in the eyes as his feathered tail whipped back and forth, forcing the dragon hard against the ground while he struggled to catch his breath, his body throbbing from the hard blow to his shoulders, seeing the edge of stars. He had to shake his head several times to clear it, but eventually his vision straightened back out and he was able to fixate his eyes on his captor.

Oh thank god, Chester. He thought, his momentary panic relieved at his roommate pinning him down. They had made a go show of it, but he knew that there was little chance of danger at the gryphon's claws or the sergal's, they had been friends too long.

It had been a good little game, one that had made the blood pump and he had no illusion that he would have survived if anyone else had caught him. That had been the risk for him, but it was a risk that was worth it considering the adrenaline rush. His heart was still leaping in his throat, fluttering wildly as he

thought about how close he had come several times to being caught, but in the end, things had happened just as they had all planned. The rest would eventually catch up, but by that time he'd have been given enough time to actually make it to the farm. He wouldn't be unscarred, that much was true, but at the same time it would make this party the talk of the town for years to come. A real hunt, with living thinking prey, they'd probably demand all the sordid details for next year.

And next year, perhaps we can convince a real bit of prey to run for us. After all, if I prove that I can survive this, why wouldn't they want to join in the fun and think they could win too? He got the last of the stars out with that thought, feeling smug.

"Sen!" The gryphon panted out loudly as Ash tried to jerk upwards, wriggling forward. "You were right, he went right for the ground back there."

"I told you so." The sergal's voice came from close by, a bit of shadow separating into the white and dark shape, the long tail twisting and curling. "Oh Ash, did you really think that'd fool me?"

"Fine..f-fine you win.." The drake panted and squirmed a bit. "Let me up now."

"Not very much meat at this size." The avian claws closed around him and pinned his wings down, forcing them against his back. "Barely enough to fill the stomach."

"Mm you always were too concerned about quantity. It's quality that we're after." Sen purred and reached out, one hooked claw caught under Ash's chin. "And as long as he's still warm and wiggling, he'll be a treat."

"Not whole? Or we could split him?" Chester asked, the gryphon still panting from his flight and Ash hissed and twisted.

"Stop teasing!" He admonished, only to squeak as the claws dug down and the sergal suddenly leaned forward to wrap a hand around the long red tail.

"Teasing? You've lost, Ash, your life is forfeit." Sen licked his lips and tilted his head down. "First taste is yours Chester, but don't be a glutton, we've not had real prey in so terribly long, I don't want it to be over too soon."

"W-wait! This was a set up! A game!" He struggled harder as the hard edge of the gryphon's beak reached down towards him and suddenly the hooked tip caught right at the base of his tail. "AHHHHHHH!!!"

All the world went red with pain, he screamed out as the hooked beak raked downwards and ripped along the base of his spine all the way down the length of his tail. The scales should have been thicker and tough enough to withstand the beak on him, but not at this size. They were torn open, hot blood welled up to dribble down his limp hanging tail as the strip was ripped free and Chester tossed his head up with relish. His ruby scales glittered in the moonlight as they hung from the red flesh before it was gulped down along the open beak and swallowed with a bob of the throat, a neat movement that made him feel sick to his stomach as his injured tail throbbed and ached, he tried to shove harder against the paw holding him, only to feel the sergal's hands moving upwards to rub beneath his chin, stroking him.

The white and black muzzle came in closer, the yellow eyes were sinister looking as Ash felt real terror at the teeth coming in closer and he jerked his limbs in further. The gryphon moved his grip, instead of wrapping around him where his body was secured, he grabbed the fragile wing arms and held the small drake's entire body bared to Sen. He had lived with both of them for years and in all of that time he had never feared them, not even when they shared their own deviant desires about what they craved or dreamed of with prey. It had been normal, it had been simply who they were, but now there was nothing but terror as the jaws opened up and showed pink lined teeth before the lips slipped down and ran along his tail.

"STOP! STOP!!!" Ash shrielled, his voice breaking as the teeth grazed right at the base and he tried to twist away, kicking his small forelegs out to beat against the muzzle.

He soon screamed for another reason as the struggle jerking against his wings began to twist them, fouling and yanking against the elbows until there was a meaty pop as the joint slipped out and he shrieked. The pain was nothing compared to the teeth suddenly sliding along the base of his tail, the hot breath hitting him before the jaws closed down and the teeth sawed through scale and flesh alike. He tried to lash his tail in the jaw, to strike and fight, but the beast only dug down harder and started to tear into the flesh, twisting the head away. His former roommate made it last, drawing it out, scraping through the bone and the vertebrae that ran the length of the writhing appendage. The sergal didn't allow him any amount of remorse as the yellow eyes brightened just a bare instant before the head moved backwards.

Ash's body seized up, his dislocated wing felt a new stab of fire as his entire body locked up in agony while Sen dragged his head down and ripped the tail away. It wasn't neat, it wasn't clean, it was tearing the muscle apart through sheer force as his body was jerked and bobbed in the gryphon's hold. The dragon's shrill noise's being choked as he tasted blood, his own teeth snapping against his tongue as he watched his tail hanging from the muzzle edged in pink blood. The yellow eyes met his own, deliberately, making sure he was watching as the sergal slowly chewed through bone and sinew, making a show of the meal as the nerve endings of the tail still twitched. The little spasms nothing more than a death throe of the tail before it disappeared down the broad maw entirely.

"Poor little Ash, did you think you would get away free?" Sen rasped laughter before his tongue lavished the bloody stump of the dragon's tail to bring out a new sense of agony that made him scream. "Your turn, Chester, it looks like one of his wings is already broken.."

"Little meat on a wing.." The gryphon's beak slipped into view. "Then again, little meat on him at all, is there?"

"Please! PLEASE STOP!!" Ashtalon shrielled out wildly, trying to ask for mercy as his heart hammered in his throat, terrified and helpless. "YOU WIN YOU WIN ALRIGHT?!"

"Of course we win, we're just collecting the prize." Sen answered smugly before the gryphon's beak ran along the tender wing sail.

Chester's sharp hooked snagged right in the thin skin, a sudden pressure and tear followed by pain as blood welled out from the fragile wing opening. The gryphon took his time, as if savoring the slow drag of ripping the sail away from the bone as the dragon's haunches were grabbed up by the sergal. Sen's jaws opened up wide, sliding up and moving along one of his hind legs. He tried to jerk it in close against

his body as his eyes bulged, the white showing around the rims while he struggled to get free of the pair of predators, but the gryphon's beak was wrapping right around the base of his broad wing where the joint had popped out. He couldn't get away, he couldn't even flap or flail his blooded wing as a long tongue twisted itself up along his leg. They meant this, they weren't just roughly joking with him, they weren't teasing him, their hungry eyes were fixated on him as the gryphon's beak closed down at the wing base and the hard edges crushed bone.

His shrill piping scream turned into a gurgle, a wordless sound of shock as the sergal began to slide teeth along the height of his thigh, tearing against the scales roughly as he clawed at the tongue to try and break his way free. He no longer cared about the damage to his own body, he had to set the terror aside to struggle, to find a way free. He twisted and kicked out, claws ripping and tearing along the tongue before the gryphon yanked back on his wing with a snarl. The feathers briefly brushed the line of his back, a feel of softness before he felt his muscles being torn apart and the joint ripping free of the socket. Hot blood ran down his back, the copper scent mixed with the scent of terror, filling his nose as the wing sail was stripped away long his back, the light tan underside of his body streaked with red as blood dribbled down along his underside. His nerves screaming in pain before the sergal snarled out and snapped his jaws shut.

The sharp teeth clamped down into the muscle and bone, right at the join of his hip. He tore with his paws, snarling and twisting, his panic making the noises coming out in high pitches. The short eruptions growing in volume as his eyes bulged open as wide as they could go, barely seeing out of the corner of his eyes as his wing was snapped up by the gryphon. It was a messy meal, blood drooling along the corners of Chester's beak before it was swallowed down along the belly. He could feel the raw wound on his back, throbbing and beating in time with his blood while his leg was yanked harder and twisted as Sen's jaws moved. It wasn't fast, if it had been a quick snap it would have been over, but the sergal drew it out deliberately, making sure that it lasted as fangs dug down against the bone, chipping it before slicing clean through the ligaments.

It was agony, his entire body wrapped up in pounding pain, unable to think, unable to do anything except writhe in place as the leg was ripped backwards. He felt the joints straining, the nerves tearing, his vision darkened around the edges before he shut his eyes entirely shut and shrieked out again. The sound echoed around the forest before there was a crunching noise. No, not simply a noise, he felt the crunch and impact as the bone was shattered and the sergal ripped his leg off. Blood splattered out over the muscle as he watched his twitching helpless leg swallowed down whole, the eyes bright and eager before the long tongue pushed up to lavish a lick against the bleeding stump and jagged white bone. The movements dancing back and forth to leave it exposed before the gryphon's jaws closed down around his other wing.

Sen didn't wait for Chester to do more than grab the wing before the sergal had the other leg and stretched his body out between them. The dragon clawed with his forepaws, striking out as his upper thigh was torn into and his wing yanked backwards. His back popping slightly as he was stretched between the two predators like a prize. Everything hurt, even breathing hurt him, making his stomach twist up in knots while they tugged and ripped at his limbs. The gryphon's beak was brutal and instead of biting down he twisted and tore. Strips of scale and skin tore along Ash's back as they gave way when the wing sail was torn from him. His mutilated body twitching and shuddering before his last wing was ripped away and his brutalized body swung down and hung down from the sergal's jaws by one hind leg.

Blood ran down along his chest as he tried to grab the muzzle to keep himself up, the tacky substance was pounding out in time with his heart beat, making him dizzy as he watched Sen's jaws snap down with a sudden contraction. The sharply honed teeth snapped down and tore through his upper thigh, crushing bone and destroying muscle sharply, his weak scream choking him as blood ran down along the underside of his chin. The world was faded grey along the edges and only came back into view when a beak caught his foreleg and one bright blue eye came into view. His wordless calls for mercy were ignored, dismissed, they barely shifted as the hard sharp beak tore against his foreleg and they began to play tug of war with his body. Both of them leaning back, straining him with one foreleg and forepaw, making his back bow.

The stumps of his wings burned, the agony making it impossible to think as the pair jerked him back and forth, jerking and ripping at his joints until his hind leg was torn free, ripping away from his aching body as the sergal nearly purred. His entire bottom was little more than a stump of red raw flesh and white bone, pulses of blood drooling down as the gryphon's paw wrapped around his chest and stomach and used it to brace him before tearing away his foreleg. It was a wet sound, tearing flesh away from bone, muscle still quivering before it was gulped down the bloody red beak. The world was filled with dark edges and greyness, his vision blurring as he struggled to move, twisting his torso, his one leg scrabbling at the air, uselessly grabbing at nothing.

"Poor little thing, nearly all used up.." Sen licked his bloodied lips. "Do you want heads or tails, Chester?"

"Rrph.." The gryphon swallowed and blinked unfocused eyes slightly while Ash tried to force them to drop him.

He was struggling against the inevitable. There was no possible way that he could live through this, the blood loss was already making his mind weak, his body feel light, but he still struggled to get free. Hope springing no matter how bad it looked as the sergal neatly closed his jaws around his one remaining foreleg, suckling it in mockingly. He felt the heat and softness of the tongue, but it was a brief softness when the fangs suddenly snapped down and popped the joint out of place. His raw aching voice shifted into a shrill rasping noise of pain before the foreleg was ripped away neatly, his torso hanging and bleeding from the gryphon's hold. He could see his scaling was going pale pink, the blood loss robbing him of color as he tried to twist. Every movement was a torment, a torture, everything hurt and felt heavy as his eyes tried to close.

"I'll take the bottom half, more meat there at least." Chester answered, that voice was echoing wildly in the trapped dragon's mind, rippling and making it hard to concentrate.

The black and white sergal's muzzle was half painted pink and red with blood as it leaned forward closer to him, looming above his head. Ashtalon's eyes flashed open wide, bulging to show an edge of white, struggling to get his head away, but already the maw opened to show the pink forked tongue. It extended out to twist around his neck as he saw row after row of sharp hooked teeth while his roommate began to lower his head down. The wide beak was spread open below him, the gryphon's eyes fever bright as his stumpy bottom slipped into the hard edge, the sharp hooked tip pressing right against the line of his belly.

Ash was fading, his world darkening, the blood loss making the pain start to fall away so that he couldn't quite keep his attention on what was happening. His eye slid slightly shut while letting out a noise in his

throat, heart beating and fluttering as the hot mouth spread over his head and closed down, squeezing as teeth caught him just below the chest. There was no escaping, but he gave one last burst of movement, a twist and arch, a wriggle of his spine before the beak began to squeeze down and the teeth met them together. The hot length of tongue was rubbing along his back and behind his neck, he felt it shifting, the saliva coating along his scaling and dribbling down to mix with his weakly leaking blood. There wasn't enough blood left in him, it was flowing out without a single hope of stopping, nothing to save him as the two predators divvied up their prey.

It was a point just along his midsection that was grasped and held in place between teeth and beak both, the hold and pain building, clamping down hard enough that he let out a ragged noise, but he had no time for anything else before the pair of predators suddenly clamped down. He felt it, tearing pain, a red hot burst that made his eyes bulge and his jaws open, tongue twisting out before the jaws closed harder and he was ripped apart, his bottom half torn to one side as his body exploded in a rush of blood and meat both between the pair of them. His scream gargled with blood rolling up along the back of his throat as he stared into the darkness of the sergal's maw. His mind remaining alive and awake, a brief span of time when he felt half of his body sliding down the long tongue and towards the throat, the contracting muscles clutching around him before they bobbed and moved, turning him into nothing more than a lump slipping down Sen's throat and towards his stomach.

It was supposed to be a game.. Was the dragon's last thought, and then... only darkness.