

The Hunters



By: wwwolf

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Chapter 1: Journal

My stomach was growling and clawing at the inside of my gut in a vain effort to fight its way free. It's the only thing I own that's emptier than my wallet, but its got way more personality.

I rubbed the cream fur of my belly absently with one hand, the other still hovering over a half-finished entry in my journal. It's been a long time since I'd last gotten around to writing anything, and I'd just as well prefer to finish it. Another twinge from my stomach sent me doubling over forward, almost smacking my muzzle into the cheap wood of the desk.

Looks like my gut was winning, writing would have to wait. I'd been putting off buying dinner for as long as possible -- I only had enough cash left for one more meal before payday.

I set down my pen and reached the narrow distance to the other side of the apartment; these days the walls keep looking closer and closer together, almost as if they're trying to squeeze me out. Outstretched, I could just snag the pile of blankets I charitably called a bed, and my jacket laying atop.

It was an ugly florescent orange thing, my employer had made me shell out for it when I'd first been hired. The company's name was stitched across the back in mile high letters -- I can't even go for a walk without providing free advertising.

I shrugged into the eyesore, letting it fall over my narrow, brown, fur-covered shoulders. In case I haven't mentioned yet, my name is Tommy, and I'm a wolf. Humans have been in the minority since the Cataclysm hit a hundred years ago, and I'm not among their number.

Basically, I like to think of myself as a happy medium between man and wolf. My head looks more or less wolfish with a muzzle, ears, whiskers, and all that. However, other than the full length fur coat, I'm pretty much human from the nipples to the knees. My feet... not so much. I'm digitigrade, like a true canine. Saves money on shoes, but it makes walking on broken glass more than a little unpleasant. Oh yeah, and I've got a tail. To me it's the most natural thing in the world, but you'd be surprised the number of people who get annoyed when I leave that out. I'll bet they're just jealous. My mother says I'm beautiful; the ladies, well, I'm working on that.

Onto a slightly lighter note, it's a fresh Sunday evening and I'm sitting here gazing longingly through the window of my hole in the wall apartment. I've got a decent view of V-town, just out of sight to the west I can almost see the sun glinting off the frigid waves of the Pacific. It's funny, I've seen pictures of Tokyo, London, and the rest, these days they don't seem all that different, sprawled masses

of cities slowly crumbling back to the earth. The ground far beneath me is a maze of gutters and alleyways.

My gut is telling me it wants food, so I'd best keep moving lest it stage a revolt. I let the door slam behind me as I began padding down the hallway to the stairs. I'm lucky in the fact that my building actually has a working elevator. That's an 'a' as in singular. What do you think this is, Uptown? Anyway, it's not like I'm stupid enough to try and take the rusted thing again. This part of V-town gets blackouts every few hours, and knowing my luck I'd get stuck in there with my horny, three hundred pound neighbor again. The less remembered about those forty-five minutes in the dark with her the better.

Down ten flights of stairs and out into that decomposing scrapyard they call a lobby. Some of my friends say I'm fit, but I just tell them I'm poor. You can't help but work off the flab when you've got no way to afford an apartment closer to the ground. The entire first month I lived here I nearly had a heart attack every time I had to hike up those gods forsaken stairs to get home. I learned quick why my Dad doesn't like this place.

Anyway, out of the stairwell and through the lobby. I'm off and scampering across the mushy, once red carpet. I've seen photos of the material they used to floor cinemas with, it's kinda of like that stuff after having been left to its own devices for a few hundred years. This is where I really hate the fact my feet will never fit a single pair of shoes. I can feel the carpet clinging to my toes with every step, like some mutant moss trying to suck me under. Gods help me should I trip; if I ever touched this stuff with my hands I think I'd be eating with rubber gloves for the rest of my life.

The front door is only a few steps away, but it feels like a mile. Amazingly, it's still on its hinges and swings after only a few sharp shoves. Squinting, I'm out into the late fall sun. Luck more than skill saves me from being run over by anyone in the sea of people pressed wall to wall across the street.

Bodies were flowing around me, rushing down the street like a living tide that threatened to carry me off by nothing more than sheer mass alone. I bumped shoulders with people running the full gambit of V-town. Wolves like me, cats, elves, even a golem. A single centaur strode past in the distance, gliding along on four legs.

Whatever. I've seen it all before, every day of my life. I dived in like everyone else, into the churning pool of sights, sounds, and smells. Smells, mostly. I'm not sure how to describe it, something to do with my warped up wolf DNA. When I'm by myself I navigate much like a human would, mostly by sight. But submerged in a turbulent pool of people, where I can't see more than two feet in front of me, my nose takes over. Not that it helps much. If I can't see very far, then I can smell even less. A troll, three people in front of me, is rank enough to make me think he hasn't bathed in a month. If you think a canine can stink then you've never been within retching distance of a troll – they smell bad on a good day. I had a troll teacher back in school; she nearly burned out my nose by the end of the first week.

There really isn't much to note as I worked my way down the street that I haven't seen a thousand times before. I've taken this walk a lot recently, mostly for the simple fact that I'm a bad cook. No, strike that, I'm a horrible, blood curdlingly awful cook. I tried feeding myself for a few days after I moved out -- bad idea. Not only did I set off every remaining smoke alarm in the building but I also set fire to a really ugly set of curtains that came with the apartment. OK, so maybe the experiment wasn't a total loss. Lucky for me most of my food doesn't need charring over an open flame. Otherwise I would have burnt down half the city by now.

I'm just about to the food district, just need to jog down an empty alleyway to cut across the last block. I was half way through when I heard a snarl behind me.

I barely had time to turn before a figure darted from the shadows, smacking into me face first and sending us both reeling to the grime soaked pavement. The snarl came again, deeper this time.

Whoever that was, it wasn't the skinny human that lay sprawled across me.

"Back away, fido."

I looked up to find myself nose to nose with the biggest tiger I'd ever seen. The guy was massive. I'm a measly hundred fifty pounds, but this brute must have been pushing four hundred.

And he was not happy. His slitted yellow eyes focused on me, but I was more concerned with the teeth that were on display right beneath them.

The next thing I knew the human was huddled behind me. He clung, shivering, to my back like I was some kind of savior. We both knew I was no such thing -- that cat could tare though me like wet tissue paper.

"I said back away. This doesn't concern you." The stripe's eyes narrowed as he glared over my shoulder at the form the cowering behind me. I heard a whimper from the pink skin as he tried to burrow into my jacket.

I did my best to get out of the line of fire, but the stowaway followed me like an overly touchy-feely shadow.

"What's going on?" I asked the cat, not daring to break eye contact as he slowly circled us.

"Don't let him take me in, please!" The human's voice was shrill behind me.

The scrap of inattention was all the cat needed. He flew straight at us, knocking me aside off handedly as he clutched the human in his massive claws.

The cat's lips were parted in a pleased grin now, though human's didn't follow. I was no longer important enough to rate being anything more than part of the scenery now. He pried the whimpering stowaway from my back and tossed me without a thought to the other side of the alley. My head smacked against the stained brickwork with a nice meaty crunch.

"I'd read you your rights, scum, but you heard them from E at the beginning of this chase." The tiger didn't seem to have any mode of speech but a menacing growl, I was just happy enough it wasn't directed at me anymore.

I'm sure the human said something, but it didn't come across as anything but a fleeting meep. The guy seemed to fold in upon himself within the tiger's grasp, almost shrinking as I watched.

That was it. The tiger turned, the black of his stripes bleeding into the shadows around us in the gathering dusk.

He peered over his shoulder for a moment, looking at me dazed and crumpled against the wall. "Thanks for your help, fido. Don't try to follow us."

His silhouette stalked around the corner. I could just make out a red jacket emblazoned with a bright yellow lightning bolt.

I lay there for a moment, feeling the dirt and grime seep into me as my head cleared.

What, the smeg, was that?

I pried myself up from the concrete, trying vainly to brush myself off. All I really managed was to smear the muck around a bit. Looking down, my hands shivered like autumn leaves in a cold wind. I'd been worn out before, and the fallout from my short-lived adrenaline rush wasn't doing me any favors. Limping the rest of the way from the alley, I pulled myself from the shadows as quickly as I could. I suddenly felt cold inside, and needed the press of people about me again.

The light of the food district opened up before me, welcoming anyone with money. The signs along the road threw garnish images of almost anything you could imagine. With so few cities left, all the remaining cultures mixed together into one big mash. No one can really tell where one stopped and the next began. Pretty much all of what was left from western North America made its way up to V-town after the other places began to crumble. The other major minority we've got around here are the Japanese, Tokyo being the only real place you can reach by boat.

Garnish signs advertised everything from toasters to tail, the latter being both literal and figurative. Some people have an unhealthy obsession with their tails, as opposed to the totally healthy one I have with mine. Anyone who'd strap on a prosthetic, just to go for a look, is about as messed up as it gets in my book.

Anyway, here I am surrounded by food stalls, where you can get anything you want, and, quite frankly, more than a few things that turn my stomach. There are a few places along here where I can't even look at the so called 'food' they're selling, I'd just as soon vomit. I mean really, who in their right mind would eat squid? Same thing for fruit, some people just have sick tastes.

It's only a few steps to my normal place, the Cub-Caf kiosk. Mostly us canines here, everywhere else is repulsive. I grab my regular from the short-muzzle across the counter: a slab of moose meat, two mice, and a large chocolate cookie. I'll admit it, I have a sweet tooth. I can't resist anything with chocolate, even if it does make me sick. I kinda feel for the kid across the counter, if anything pays less than my job - it's his. I'd leave him a tip, but my cash doesn't stretch that far.

Now that I've picked up my sugar fix I'm feeling a little bit more alive as I start looking for a bench somewhere along the street. Not even the rancid smells from the other shops can kill my appetite as long as I'm clutching my prize.

It took a little bit of searching, but I found a spot next to a big-eared cat of some sort. Dozing, he's slumped over the arm of the bench with a nest of wrappers in his lap.

I hadn't even the chance to get my meal out after sitting down before an overweight dachshund came storming down the street, bright yellow T-shirt reading 'Evolution, it's us or them!' in block caps. Each hand held flyers that he tossed seemingly randomly at people, whether they wanted them or not.

The cat beside me was knocked out of his nap with a start, a flyer clinging to his face. There are two kinds of protesters; the less common is the happy indigent who will willingly share his grievances with you, politely explaining his problems. The second are the folks who just seem to march around pointlessly, a scowl permanently etched on their faces that could just as easily be caused by unrighted injustice as a bad case of constipation.

This guy was definitely of the later type. He didn't even look at me as he stormed past, a paper dropping from his hand to stick to my food. I gave the pamphlet a little yank and it popped free of my meat, stains already smearing it. Idly I glanced through, seeing if there was anything new in this one.

Nope, not really.

It was a cheap copy of an even more cheaply produced original; slogans like 'Us vs. Them' and 'Keep society moving forward' were scattered across in sloppy bold print. The point? Some folks have a hard-on for getting rid of the humans. Had to do with 'purity', or some such wannabe logical spin. Whatever, I tossed the paper over my shoulder and let it spin off on the breeze. I had better things to think about right now – namely my stomach, and how there wasn't enough in it.

I pulled back the rest of the wax paper to reveal my prize. No disappointment here, the moose is perfect, dark red, with just a little bit of fat around the edge. I know it's been frozen of course, but they warm it up to the right temperature so at least it feels fresh. Chowing down, the blood squished on my tongue just the way it's supposed to. I've never actually hunted a day in my life, and I'm sorry to say my attempt to was the kind of thing I don't talk about. But in any event, you can't beat this stuff. No meat is cheap here, it all has to be hunted and that gets expensive. I was spoiled long ago, even if it bankrupts me, I could never eat anything else.

The moose is gone in a few seconds, I never could slow down. Now it's onto the fun stuff. The mice are in a couple of paper cups with lids on them so they can't escape. I considered taking them back to my apartment for a quick chase, but with my skills they'd find some way to make a break for it. I'm not sure how I'd explain mouse bites all over my hands tomorrow at the office.

I popped the lid on the first cup with a claw. The mouse made a little squeak and tried to scamper away. Beside me, the sleeping cat's ear twitched. I reached in and grabbed it by the tail, you've got to be careful - they're small, but a bite can be a sharp pain that I don't need. With a quick snap of my wrist I tossed the little morsel into my mouth, it popped just the way it should. Eating these things can get addictive.

I did the same with the second one; these guys always remind me of my Dad. I remember him teaching me to chase them around the house when I was young. He'd always held the things in his mouth for a few seconds before swallowing; he said he liked the feeling of them squirming on his tongue. I don't know - that's a bit much for me.

My Dad had been a hunter before he got his leg busted up. He'd been the best in the city. Luckily my parents have enough money saved up they should be good - as long as I don't come crawling home on my belly too often. I always knew he didn't like the fact I couldn't follow in his footsteps as a hunter. I'm just... well, let's just say it didn't work out. Like I said, I've never hunted a day in my life. I'm just not cut out for it.

The only thing I had left was my cookie, and the gods themselves would have to wrestle that from me. I had to eat slowly, my mouth really wasn't designed for this type of thing - the dough kept getting stuck in my teeth. But this was my addiction, and I wouldn't let a little thing like biology get in my way.

Oh well, so be it. I'm done here, the last of the crumbs fell to my lap. I got moving, they don't like washouts like me hanging around the place and taking up seats.

On my way west now, I avoided the alleyway and set off through the high rent business district. Of course they back onto the park, slotted beside it on the waterfront. Those who have the money get the good territory. Around here you don't see buildings like mine, racing to find who gets to the ground first. The Cataclysm left a lot of places in pretty bad shape, but there are no signs of that in this neighborhood. Everything here is steel and chrome, mirrors and glass. During the week I might get some funny looks from the high and mighty people in business suits, but on the weekend I practically have the place to myself.

Not so long ago this would have been one of the best places to go human watching, up until a decade ago humans still tended to run the top tiers of society. Not that they were truly any better at it, but more out of some kind of nostalgic 'what we once were', or some archaic romantic notion like that.

These days there are so few real humans left that they've just kind of faded away. I remember my Mom taking me to see a human friend of hers once when I was young. She'd had a fair number of human friends back then as she looked almost human herself, you had to look close to see that she had the green shoots of a sprigen in her hair.

My march through the towers left me with a feeling more like that of a graveyard. I hardly saw a single soul the entire time, and those that did pass hardly seem interested in stopping for a light chat. In the distance, I could hear the shout of a cop of some kind. At least I assume it was a cop, they tend to be the only ones who bark like that. Crime had gotten so bad over the last ten years that the government opened up the contracts to chasing down people with private bounty hunting companies. They used to say that before the bounty hunters food was cheaper, as there were more hunters in the wild. Off-putting thought, never would have considered a criminal as prey.

There's just something revolting about eating another person, good thing it's not done. The mere mention turns me off more than even the squid. If either of those mice had looked me in the eye and said "No", I would have dropped them from numb hands. I'd heard there used to be the occasional accident back in the old days where a person would actually get hunted down, even slaughtered. But I just can't see that happening now; all you need to do is turn around and say one word, and you're off the

menu for good.

Thankfully, that was it for that thought. I'd never dreamed I would be so happy to see the crumbling stonework of my own building again, in all its sagging glory. Now I just had ten flights of the gods' own stairs to contend with. Oh joy.

I was on my way, scampering across the lobby, when a familiar large red head hove into view, and boy do I mean large. I'd know Max's cranium anywhere, not that there were many to confuse it with. He was an Oni daemon, not the evil kind, with the Oni everything that's not human is a daemon. He was bright red, but his body was more or less human with the exception of his head, it was about three feet tall and almost as wide.

"Tommy, over here!" He waved. In front of that noggin his hand looked more like that of a doll's.

"Hey, Max." I gritted my teeth as the carpet beneath me clung to my feet with loving tendrils.

"I haven't seen you since Friday, where have you been all weekend?"

"Oh, yeah." I grinned sheepishly, not an easy thing to do with my lips. "I've barely left my room, just popped out for something to eat."

He looked me up and down, "You look like you just took a roll in the gutter. What did you do, get run over by a mover?"

I'd almost forgotten about that. "Not quite, some stripe tail decided the world wasn't big enough for him, so he made some more room by pushing me out of it." I let my jaw drop open in a grin, Max wasn't perfect, but at least things seemed to lighten up a bit around him. Who knows, maybe he has a talent for it.

"Why don't you hit my place?" He suggested, "By the time you get any hot water up on your floor, you might just as well set out for the office."

That sounded like the best idea I'd heard all day, it had been so long since I'd had any truly hot water I couldn't really even remember. Max had somehow managed to beg, borrow, or steal himself an apartment on the third floor, a good thing for him – he didn't do well carrying that massive head of his up the steps.

Max's apartment was cleaner than mine, generally nicer too. He worked at the same office I did, but a few levels above me. While his pay wasn't much more than mine, it was enough to make the difference between the dark gray walls of my apartment and the relatively white ones of his.

"Where's Kate?" His raccoon live in girlfriend was nowhere to be seen; normally she was hyperactive enough to be all but standing on your toes the moment you walked through the door. Nothing got in her home without her knowing about it. Thankfully, she liked me enough not to send me flying back out the door on my nose.

"She's off to see her parents back home in Tokyo this month." Max let out a sigh as he eased into a chair with a custom-made head rest, "Saved up almost two years for the trip. Vacation for me too, I'm getting some peace and quiet."

I laughed, "I can understand that. She's a nice girl, but a bit quick on her feet for someone like you." That was an understatement, most of the time Max just stood in the middle of the room like a totem while Kate buzzed around him, a humming bird on a caffeine bender.

He smiled back. "You know where the bathroom is, go nuts. I just walked across town from the banking district, I'm going to chill for a while."

I made my way to the bathroom while Max nodded off. Once in I dropped my jacket on the floor, not much caring what happened to it, I'd worry about it later. Max didn't have a shower, wouldn't work well for him with the head, but he did have a big bathtub.

The thing took a good ten minutes to fill, but watching the steam waft up around me as I sat in

the slowly rising water was the best thing I'd felt since that moron human had decided to give me an extreme close-up of his face.

All around the room you could see the signs that Max had descended into the couple's life smoothly. When I'd met him a year ago his place was all but bare; a poster here, a half-finished bottle of sake there, and an astounding lack of much of anything else. These days that wasn't the case, even the bathroom was dressed up in a mosaic of some Japanese fairy tale or other.

I could just see Kate running about the room, practically climbing the walls. She almost could, and Max was more than happy that she couldn't quite make it. She'd fuss over a room for hours to get each bit just right, the light reflecting so, and then come back ten minutes later to change it all over again. For the moment though, I was going to follow Max's example and enjoy the peace and quiet. Kate was a great person to have around if you were planning an invasion of Europe, but not so good if you just need the kinks worked out of your back.

I let my body go slack, the water rushed up around my shoulders and head as I slipped under the surface. I like water, really I do, just not when I'm forced into taking a bath to drive the stink from me.

That brings up a whole new question, who in all the nine burning circles of Michigan was that anyway? When someone almost knocks me senseless, I kind of like to at least know their name. Call me old fashioned, but I'd at least like a kiss before I get slapped around like that. There was no question the cat was a bounty hunter though. I've seen that logo on his jacket before, no clue where, but that's the kind of company that sponsors the more violent sports these days.

You know those kinds of sports, the ones where it isn't a good game without the crunch of bone and at least one player being dragged off the field by their legs. That kind of game for the folks with cojones larger than their brains, the ones who swill beer like it's a cure for the stupid.

Anyway, I'm here for a reason, I best get moving or Max might be getting ideas about what I was doing behind closed doors. I reached around for something to get the rest of the mud out of my fur, anything that was a little more masculine than 'Rose body wash with apricot infusion', there was a lot of that in here. After a few moments I found a simple bottle of soap without anything like 'luscious' or 'cleansing' on the label.

Anyone who's ever had a fur coat knows just how long it can take to get clean, namely forever. Luckily most of us don't have to wash often, as long as you can put up with a little shedding the fur more or less looks after its self.

Anyway, after thirty minutes or so, and a couple refreshes of bath water, I'm about as clean as I'm ever going to get. The second part of this ritual is a little bit trickier. Up in my own apartment I'd have no problem just shaking the water off, but for some reason I think Kate wouldn't look so kindly on me coating her priceless treasures with a layer of water and stray hair. Of course, Kate has shorter hair than I do, and Max none at all. This means that the dryer around here is about up to doing one square inch of me at a time.

I pulled up a foot and wiggled my toes. For a wolf I have big feet, for a human I have small ones. Like other canines I walk on my toes, my claws down there are pretty worn by the concrete that's always underfoot. When I was young, it used to hurt walking over the hard ground, these days my pads are so callused I hardly feel it at all.

The rest of my legs are pretty much the same, from the knees down I'm over-sized wolf, I guess I need those muscles to line up with my heels. From the knees up I'm human except for the pelt. My hands are the only real exception, they're human mostly, but I've got claws - not really useful ones though. That's the only place I kind of wish I was more feline, they get retractable claws that stay sharp enough to use for something, mine just kind of dangle off the end of my fingers like overgrown nails. They wear down fast, so all I've really got left are sharp little nubs, good for pressing those tiny little

buttons on the VCR, but not much else unless I'm desperate.

That just leaves my head, gah, I hate the feeling of the drier in my ears, it keeps making them itch and flick. Much like my feet, my head is more or less wolf, just larger. I've got the ears on top, muzzle, teeth and all the rest. Thankfully my lips and jaw are a heck of a lot more mobile than a real canine's; it would be hard to pass the citizenship test if I couldn't talk.

Quick peek in the mirror to make sure my hair is more or less in the right place, I've got just enough to make it look messy, but not enough to make it look good. Staring back at me are my dark brown eyes, one of the few things I inherited from my Mom. Don't get me wrong, I like what I've got, but that's the one thing I really wish I'd inherited from my father. His stark blue eyes made it a lot harder to lie when he's staring you down with those chips of ice.

At long last I was as dry as I was going to get. I knew I was going to smell like wet dog tomorrow, but at least I could keep people from gagging. I put things back in to as close to some semblance of order as I could, popping the window to try and clear at least some of the steam.

Max seemed to be coming back to life as I walked out, "You look like a million bucks, Tommy. Feeling less dead?" I grunted and smiled back. "So, what were you doing, punching above your weight class or something? I haven't known you to jump someone the size of a tiger before."

"Wasn't really my call," I said, "some pink decided I looked soft and fuzzy. He was the guy the tiger was interested in. I just had the bad luck to get between him and his quarry."

"And that got you a coating of crud?" Max furrowed his brow, his brain might be big, but sometimes he likes to ask a few too many questions.

"That's pretty much the smell of it." I'm not sure why, but I still didn't want to talk about my little getaway. I'd had already been crashed into once, call it force of habit, but I like to keep messy little details, like the fact I'd almost had a tiger rip me apart, to myself.

"This place is just going in a hand basket these days, not that it's anything new. Seems like it's been years since you could walk the streets with anything less than your own personal army." That brow kept going down, this was a bad sign. Get Max talking about the 'good old days' and I'll be here until I need another bath.

"You've got it backwards, Max. The bounty hunters were doing their job for once." I gritted my teeth; I didn't really want to be defending the overgrown house cat. "The guy was working for that company with the lightning logo."

"Storm Front?"

"Something like that, he grabbed the human that was making a run for it. Don't care much for his methods, but he seemed to get it done."

"What did the guy do?"

"Eh?"

"The human. What did he do, anyway?" Max sat back again, at least I'd gotten him thinking about something else.

"No clue. Once he got his claws around the bugger, he just hauled him off."

"Sloppy." Max closed his eyes, "They need to read him his rights first and tell him what the charges are. At least that's what it was last I checked. They still answer to the police, they don't run the place."

"If you say so." I shrugged, about ready to take on the aerobics course that was the stairs up to my apartment.

"Want to hang around for something to eat?" He sat back up. Max did sushi, fish. For me, fish rates right up there with squid and other things that folks dredge from the ocean. If you can't catch it running on all fours, it's not for me.

"Not this time, dude. You know I don't do seafood." I smiled again as I got up, "I don't know what it is with you people. Eat beef, eat venison, chicken even, just not that nasty stuff you haul up. I can't touch anything with enough salt to make my teeth ache."

"It's good for you, seafood's great for the brain." He smiled, tapping his head.

"Define 'you'." I shot back, "Either way, I don't know what it is with you Japanese and tentacles."

"Don't knock it until you try it." He winked and walked me to the door.

"Anyway, thanks for the water," I said.

"Don't mention it. With your wage, I'm surprised that you can get along at all."

"Some days, so am I." With a wave the door closed, and I was alone in the dark hallway.

The walk back up to the tenth floor is as long as it has ever been, but I'm used to it by now. It may not give me six pack abs, but I'll bet I can outrun anyone who might try to make a meal of me.

My hallway was even darker than Max's. I think in the entire length there might be all of two lights that still work. And time will solve that omission, because the landlord certainly won't be falling over himself to clean up this floor anytime soon.

No real reason to put a lock on my door, nothing to take anyway. I kicked it open, the hinges screeched but decided to hold just this one more time.

The place had the scuzzyness that only countless owners and not a single cleaning can grow. Like the rest of the building, the walls had been white once, the key word being 'once'. Now they're more of a dark gray working their way towards a splotted black, like it was a race with the ugliest wall winning.

I peeled the jacket off my still damp fur. Drat, I should have cleaned it while I was still downstairs. A small miracle, my sink is actually working today. Plugging it with a wad of old paper is the best I can do, the stopper was lost long before I got here. A soak in cold water overnight is all my jacket going to get, with any luck they won't hassle me over it too much in the morning.

Back past the desk with my journal still on it. The closest thing I've got to a bed are a few not quite dirty blankets on an old mattress, forming a nest of sorts. Good thing it doesn't get too cold around here, a fur coat will only go so far.

My life in a nutshell, it's a Sunday evening at 8:30 and I'm already in bed. I'm awesome.

Author's Note

So, just a little history for any of those who might be interested.

The Hunters started out as an 'I know this isn't going to go anywhere, but I'll be buggered if I at least don't try' project back in august of '09. Wow, it doesn't seem that long – I suddenly feel old.

There were three reasons for this story. One, I wanted to learn the ins and outs of what was then still called Openoffice.org Writer. Two, I've always enjoyed writing, and I hadn't had the opportunity to set fingers to keyboard in something like a decade. And three, here's the real reason, everyone talks about how they want to be a author, how they've got so many awesome ideas floating around in their head, but so few want-to-be writers actually seem to write. I've encountered so many people in my life who want to be authors but never write anything, want to be artists, but never draw anything. I decided for better or for worse that I wasn't going to be one of those people.

I was going to write a f---ing book before I died, even if it killed me.

I knew starting out it wasn't going to be earth shatteringly amazing, I'm no Terry Goodkind here, nor William Gibson for that matter. I had realistic expectations. I was going to aim for the moon, but be more than happy if I just managed to get a few feet off the ground.

And that was more or less what happened. The Hunters took its initial form over August to September of 2009. That was what most surprised me about writing a full length novel – how fast the first draft came. I'd always had it in my mind that a novel, a real, honest to dog novel should take more along a year to write. Well, that's not the way it goes when you're averaging a little under three-thousand words a day.

And that's how it went. It took a lot longer to edit that it did to write – and I know for a fact I only found ten percent of my mistakes – but here it is.

Constructive criticism is more than welcome, but please keep in mind this was intended as a full length book and not a short story.

And a special thanks to Negger for the art. I hope he doesn't mind me whacking on it with a dull pair of scissors to add the title.