

The Hunters



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Chapter 3: I Hate My Life, and My Boss Hates it Too

The sun came up again like it always did; a Tuesday doesn't look all that different from a Monday from where I'm sitting. Somehow during the night I'd succeeded in wrapping myself around the back of the chair to keep from falling off.

It didn't work after I woke up though. I opened my eyes and managed to immediately fall flat on my face. Why do my mornings always seem to start with me getting a face full of floor?

I pushed myself back up as my stomach grumbled with a sharp pain. Or more to the point, the hole where my stomach should have been. For a moment the dirt on the floor looked as edible as anything else in this forsaken place.

I shook my head and got moving. I wasn't yet late, for a change, and with a little luck I might just be able to keep it that way.

The walk to work was as crowded and noisy as yesterday. We were in a lull between storms, but the sky held the same low gray clouds that had dumped so much on me just hours ago.

I waited in line for security again. Amazingly, Ralph waved me through, hardly looking up. Perhaps for once a stupid rule had been struck down rather than added to?

I managed to get to my desk with plenty of time for today. To be honest, I was feeling a little light headed by now. The last thing I'd had to eat was lunch yesterday, and it hadn't been all that much, even by my standards. I just sat down and closed my eyes for a few moments; my respite, however, was not to last. Much like yesterday, I heard the tapping of feet coming my way, this time though most definitely feminine. I cracked open one eye to peer down the hallway.

It was one of the HR ladies (they all seem to be ladies), and she was unquestioningly aimed in my direction. What did I do now?

"Mr. Tommy James Taggart, employee number fourteen sixty-eight?"

This can't be good, anyone who uses my full name is never happy with me. "Tommy Taggart, that would be me." I sat up, trying vainly to look a little more respectable.

"Please come with me, Mr. Taggart. You have a meeting scheduled with Mr. Heyfair, and Mr. Jameswell, the department administrator." Oh bugger all. This was going from 'can't be good' to 'somebody just kill me now'.

I dragged myself to my feet and followed her down hallway after hallway. "Mind telling me

what this is about?" I asked.

She smiled, not a happy, friendly smile, but more of a 'you're not going to die yet' polite concession. "You needn't worry, Mr. Taggart, this is simply your yearly review. Stranded procedure, you understand."

I leaned against the wall for a moment and breathed a sigh of relief. Still not happy to be stuck in the same room as Heyfair, but least I hadn't managed to throw the world out of balance.

She stood by an unmarked door before ushering me in, shutting it between us with a click. So much for any backup I might have from her.

The meeting room was neither small nor cramped this time; this department guy must have pull. The place was massive, with a huge oak table sitting in the center. And dark.

The two of them sat on one side of the table; the only other chair was opposite them. I'm lucky that my night vision is good, otherwise I'd likely have tripped over something or other and fallen face first - that would have been a classy entrance. The only light was suspended over my chair. I sat down, wondering if they were going to ask me if I were a member of the communist party.

I smiled into the darkness where the vague shadows of their faces floated; they weren't going to make this easy for me.

"Thank you for joining us, Mr. Taggart." That was a new voice, must be the department guy. Not seeing his face, all I had to go by was his voice and scent. Seemed like a cat of some type, his voice was suave and smooth. Any moment you'd almost expect him to ask Mr. Bond if he expected to die.

"Great to be here, folks." I smiled again to hide a grimace. I could feel my gut start to roll as my nerves kicked in. "Pity all the lights seem to be out, maintenance is a bugger, eh?"

"Very droll, Mr. Taggart." That voice again, the only people who call a joke 'droll' are the ones who think you should have kept your trap shut in the first place. He'd barely spoken two words to me and I was already coming to not like him much. "As I'm sure you're aware, you are here regarding your one year performance review."

"You really don't have to call me 'Mr. Taggart' you know, that's my father's name. You can just call me Tommy, Tom, or even 'hey you' works."

"Thank you for the offer, Mr. Taggart, but I don't think that would be appropriate." I heard a snort from Heyfair's direction, this was going downhill fast, and I don't think the sled has any brakes. "As I was saying, we're here to conduct your one year review, and to address some... discrepancies in your agreed upon performance." There had been a pause as though he had been looking for just the right word, but it was too smooth, too perfect. He had this spiel polished to a mirror shine. You could almost feel the touch of oil on your fingers when he spoke, like an off-color rainbow.

"Pardon? I'm sorry, discrepancies?" I let out a sigh. I could smell where this was going even if my nose were plugged with a cold. It was my imagination, but I would swear I could see Heyfair's smile in the darkness.

"When you were hired, mongrel, you signed this." It was Heyfair talking this time as he slid a stack of papers into the light. Beside him I could feel the other man bristle, the bull had over stepped his bounds.

The stack must have been fifty pages thick of fine print, written in that particular parody of English lawyers seem to so enjoy. I took a moment to try and read it, but it meant nothing to me beyond its title, 'Standard Employment Contract'. Thumbing through the ink I got to the last page, it had my paw-print scrawled across it.

I was starting to get annoyed now. "OK boys, I'm sure you're laying down something here, but I'm too stupid to pick up the scent. Just spit it out. What I'm I dealing with?"

"The bottom line, Mr. Taggert, is that you are not living up to our expectations. This contract states that you will process a minimum of ten records a month. Your average over the last four months has been two."

I blinked for a moment, speechless. There were a lot of things they could take me to task on, being late, fighting with Heyfair, even the freaking dress code, but this wasn't one of them. "I complete the wok I'm given every day. There's been less as of late, but I do everything you elder gods in management see fit to hand down."

"That may be so, Mr. Taggert, but you are not living up to your agreement."

"So what, I'm to go out on the streets and scrounge up an additional eight births? What do you want me to do – sell aphrodisiac on the sidewalk? Run sex ed classes? I'd offer to go knock someone up, but we both know that wouldn't do any good – they'd come out looking like me."

"That is none of my concern, Mr. Taggert. What is my concern, is that you have not honored the contract, and that authorizes us to instigate disciplinary measures as listed in section..."

I rubbed my temples, "Skip it, Jameswell." I was getting really pissed now, they were going to whack me anyway, no reason to be polite about it. "Just tell me what you're going to do. I haven't a doubt that anything you want is fully legal; Korksen wrote the book on covering their tails. Save us both the trouble, and skip to the punch line."

There was a polite cough from the other side of the table, I couldn't tell who it was, but I'm guessing they were neither expecting, nor prepared for me to jump ahead in their little script. To be honest, neither was I. I'm not normally like this. Perhaps I was just fed up with this job, perhaps it was the empty pit in my stomach, or maybe I just didn't like being kicked around by a cat and a grass muncher.

"Ahem, our agreement states that if you don't meet the minimum requirements, we are authorized us to reduce your salary by twenty percent in addition to..."

"No." He was trying to get himself back up to speed, like a bear running downhill. My single word was enough to stop him like a brick wall.

He paused for a moment. Rather than a cough this time, it was a choke from the other side of the table. "No? No what?"

I stood up and walked to the door, I'm sure they expected me to storm out, but my vision was just good enough to grope for the light switch. Snapping on the overhead bulbs caused the two of them to cringe and cover as their eyes adjusted. I stalked back towards them.

"No to a lot of things, but I'll give you the short list." I'd already thrown my job away by now, might as well go out with a bang. "To start with, no to having the two of you stare at me from the shadows, like a pair of vultures ready to jump my rotting bones." I took a good look at them; Heyfair was as much a lurch as he'd ever been. Surprisingly, now that he wasn't lording over me, he seemed to have lost another foot in height. The other one was a feline, gods only knew what kind exactly, but I was more than fed up taking anything from him. I was fully on edge now, and I'm sure it must show well enough with the way the two of them hunched down in their seats. I may not be a hunter myself, but people keep trying to tell me I could be, and I was bloody well going to use it for all it's worth today. My hair stood on end, straight out, filling my jacket and making me feel twice my size.

"For a second thing, I'm sick and tired of being dragged around by you freaking bottom feeders. I've given you the last twelve months of my life. I'm walked when you told me to, worked when you've told me, I've shuddered and jumped every time you've screamed my name. What do I get for it? Wads all is what. I come in here, and you're trying to cut me down to pennies a day! I can barely get by with what you're paying me now, and you think I'm going to sit by and meekly nod when you leave me sleeping in the gutter?"

Heyfair seemed to have regained some of his composure as I ranted, he sat up and tried to look me in the eye, couldn't quite do it. "Don't start thinking you're irreplaceable, you loud mouthed little mongrel." OK, now I'll admit it, I was mad. No, change that, I wasn't mad, mad is something normal, mad is something you get when someone steals your lunch. I swear to the gods, I was just this side of being ready to kill him, and his little kitty friend too.

If I'd taken a moment to stand back and look at myself, I wouldn't have been doing this, I would have been scared tail-less and running for that door. I'd never done this before, seriously, never. I'd only ever seen my Dad snarl like this twice, back in his hunting days, and both times had ended with blood on the floor. The second time, one of his business partners hadn't walked away.

I lunged forward across the table. Reaching down, I held Heyfair's jaw in my hand. This was no gentle grasp, and it was no theater move either, my claws dug in, right off the bat I could feel his warm blood seeping between my fingers, "Listen up, gutbust. I've had my fill of you unloading on me every day. I may work for you, but I'm not your personal punching bag. You want to play this game? Then let's make it a fair fight, horn head. I feel like a steak tonight." I let go of his chin with a flick that snapped his head back.

"You're psycho, Taggert. You'll never get away with this - they'll have you sent to the renderers." The cat stayed quiet while Heyfair ranted through a split lip, smart man.

I just smiled, I'd never used it before but I had an ace up my sleeve. "Just try it, mulcher. You know the laws apply differently for hunters."

A look passed between them, the cat smiled, "You're no hunter."

Now it was his turn as I rounded to face him, "Who do you think I am, kitty? A Taggert, you morons. My father was the most famous hunter in the last fifty years."

His smile grew wider, teeth showing. "But you're no hunter." He repeated it, relishing the words as they slid across his barbed tongue.

I didn't lay a finger on him, but I leaned forward until our noses all but touched. "My father's been a hunter all his life, what do you think he did the day I was born? He enlisted me in the scribe of hunters, kitty-cat. I've been a hunter since before I could walk." Now that was a bit of a lie, technicality you need to go out on a real hunt before they'd call you a hunter, but I didn't really want to bring that up now. "I could rip the two of you apart and scatter your guts across the room, I could write my name in your blood and all but walk. As long as the courts believe you triggered my chase reflex, I can get off with little more than a slap on the wrist."

It was funny in a way, being so close to the cat I could smell his fear. Really, I could. I can't say I've ever noticed it before. It hung about him like a cloud I could taste on the back of my tongue, a sour stench that made me want to retch in the stuffy air. Heyfair, beside him, stank of it. This room was quickly becoming far too small for me.

Despite what I was saying, I really needed out of here. I may be listed as a hunter, but I've never killed anything bigger than a mouse, and the shakes were kicking in. I was starting to see what I was doing, and I didn't like it. It scared me almost as much as I was scaring them.

I spun and high tailed it towards the door, I didn't want them to see my hands as they started to tremble. I tried to pull the tie from my neck, but it wouldn't come. With a single yank it ripped, the sound of its cheap fabric tearing hung in the air. My neck was going to hurt later. Oh well, I never liked the ugly thing anyway.

I tossed it over my shoulder, never looking to see if it landed on the table. "I'm leaving now. You can call our so called contract null and void. If I ever so much as see nose or tail of either of you again, I'll use your guts to stock my larder." We both knew my threats about eating them was a flat lies, any hunter that eats another person is put down as fast as he can be found. It did make for a nice

parting line nonetheless.

I've always had a thing for a good parting line; the problem is that I normally think of them about twenty minutes late.

I let the door slam shut behind me, hard enough I thought it would dent the frame. For a moment I almost found myself heading back to my desk, before realizing I'd nothing of value in the whole gods forsaken building. I didn't see anyone in the hallways as I searched for a stairwell up, not sure if it was just good luck, or they'd gotten on the phone and cleared a way for the murderous wolf loose in the paper mill.

It took a few minutes, but I found a way up eventually. The shaking in my hands had spread, now I could barely walk. I was glad I hadn't seen anyone; a two year old calf could take me down right now. I walked out the front doors, brazen as day; I most certainly didn't want to be dealing with Ralph or the other security guards.

Made it as far as the other side of the street before I collapsed, almost landing in the gutter. I sat on the sidewalk looking back towards the KDP building. "Well, there goes my meal ticket." I could feel tears at the edges of my eyes, it wasn't much of a place, but I didn't have anywhere else to go.

"Are you going to try and eat me too?"

I almost jumped out of my pelt. Max was sitting right beside me, his huge red face looking about as worn out as I felt. "Are you trying to get yourself killed? I just about ripped apart two guys, and you're dumb enough to be a sitting arm's length from me?"

He grunted. "But you didn't kill them, did you? I've known you long enough, Tommy. You may be a hunter, the gods only know, but you're no killer. At least not the psychotic kind, we've already got enough of those." He cracked a smile, "It was nice working with you, man. Now Heyfair might actually have to do some of his own work for a change, gods save us all."

I laughed, not much, but enough. I needed that.

"So, what are you going to do now, Tommy?"

I just shrugged. "I wasn't really planning this. I'm sure I'll get a job somewhere..." I hoped I sounded more upbeat than I felt.

"You will, you're better than you think." He pulled an envelope out of his coat and dropped it in my lap. "If anyone asks, I was nowhere near payroll, and I've got no idea how your last month's take ended up out here."

I smiled a bit wider. At least I could eat again, if only for a few days. "Thanks, Max. I really appreciate this."

"Don't mention it," He got up, dusting off his gray suit. "Seriously, don't mention it to anyone. I'll give you a call when Kate gets back in, we'll have you over for a proper dinner."

He walked off into the crowded street, quickly disappearing amongst the milling tangle of bodies. Well, that left me off with one month's pay more than I had a few moments ago, but still nowhere to go from here.

I almost doubled over for a moment; it felt as though someone had punched me in the gut. My stomach was still empty, and it was informing me that it wanted its share of my brand new wad of bills.

The closest place was a human style Chinese take-out. Not my preference, but right now anything would do. I've never really understood the obsession some people have with the human-style cooked food. If the prey is sick, then you'll get sick too, doesn't matter whether you've burnt it to a crisp or not. And anyway, it doesn't improve the taste in any event.

Had to stand in line to get my food, but they tend to move fast once you start drooling on the floor, so it worked out for me. I was only half acting - even the normally repulsive smell of human food was enough to get me leaking like a water main.

Oddly, there wasn't a single human in the whole place. Winged things of some description ran the restaurant, and the customers were a mix of all sorts. They had some tacky posters pinned to the walls to try and give it an Asian feel. But this was V-town; I could get more authentic by walking down a random street in china town.

I grabbed a super-size of chow mein, and sat back down on the sidewalk to start eating. It came in a flimsy little paper box with a red dragon logo on the side, but it worked for me, kept my hands clean as I ate straight from the carton. My pocket was a little lighter now, but with a month's pay I should be able to stretch it for a while. Rent would be a problem soon enough, but I'd just have to deal with that when I got there.

After eating, I sat on the sidewalk for a while and watched the people stream past. I was out of sight of the KDP building now, and all the more grateful for it. I didn't want to stare at that granite blight of a place any longer. I took a deep breath of fresh air, trying to cough the dust of the last year from my lungs. I had no clue how I'd even managed to stay there that long without going feral.

It took a few moments to clear my head, but I got back to my old habit of people watching. Sitting here with a full belly always makes me sleepy, and now that I could afford to think of something else, the masses that snaked about me were irresistible.

It's really quite amazing to see just how diverse the mixture was; almost anything you could imagine was walking down the street. Feathers, scales, translucent skin, and heights anywhere from one foot six to fifteen. These days the government is pretty lenient on the requirements for citizenship. There are really only three things you need:

One) You have to want it, well that's pretty self-explanatory.

Two) You need to be able communicate the fact you want to apply for citizenship. Asking the person at the government desk has always solved this, no brainer.

Three) You need a minimum level of intelligence, this one is a little bit stickier. The generally accepted test IS if you can fill out the form they give you. More or less, if you can sign your name on the dotted line, you're in.

Anyone who can pass the test is a citizen in the government's eyes, you're covered by the laws such as hunting, but more importantly you can pay taxes. Food and taxes, they never change.

Speaking of taxes, I better register my newly found lack of employment with said government before they try and tax me for a day I haven't worked. I may have some cash, but not enough to start handing it out to our friendly tax collectors.

Just my luck of course, city hall is on the other side of town. But it's on the way to my parent's house, so I guess it's not a total wash.

I got up and dusted myself off. A quick look in the Chinese-food carton was disappointing; I'd licked it clean without even thinking. More would be good, but I'd best wait for another time – otherwise I'd eat through my whole paycheck in one day.

The walk to city hall was uneventful, in its normal psychedelic way. Almost got run over a twice, even saw a motor vehicle for the first time in a couple of weeks – they're more common than computers, but not by much. A few of the richer folks in the city own them, but they're so expensive to keep running that it really doesn't make sense. Who could ever have thought creating a vehicle that only runs off stuff you have to dig from the earth could be a good idea?

These days it was just cheaper to hire some massive porter to carry around anything you need. I know some horses with slipping standards of self-esteem will even let you ride them around if you've got the coin.

City hall looked about as stoic as I remember it. Last time I'd been here was when I signed up with KDP, that was just after I first moved out. The place was one of those big white stone buildings with the old style columns out front. At least I could walk in the front doors of this place.

If the human section at KDP was deserted, then this was where all the people had gone, other than the fact there was nary a human among them.

It's nice to see the bureaucratic process is alive and well at the government. Just to tell them I was out a job I had to stand in a line to know where to go, stand in a line to prove who I was, get the paper work, drop off the paper work, and finally stand in line one last time to just get to the freaking toilets.

There's no better way to tell if you're in a civilized society then if people will line up just to take a piss. I mean really, if there is anything worth starting a war over, it's having to wait just to pee. Hang the food and liberty, ask someone who's been standing in line for fifteen minutes and they'll sign up for anything just to see a little green grass.

I'd heard it once said that culture is having bathrooms, civilization is going to jail if you don't use them.

It's a government place, so by virtue of merely being, it's smelly and packed. The restroom is another one of those things that must have been a lot simpler back when there were only humans around. These days they have to worry about piss-ants like me, but also quadrupeds and above. I will admit however, it's kind of funny to watch a two foot elf try and use a standard sized toilet. Or better yet, his look of abject horror if the only thing left is an over-sized designed for a fella in the ten foot range.

I learned my lesson a long time ago. Stick to the urinals when you can, and try to stay away from the big folks who levels are about on par with your face.

Thankfully, I managed to get out of there without anything of note. That's why bears go in the woods I guess, keeps them sane.

City hall had taken forever; it was getting close to five o'clock now. I wasn't really expected at my parents' for some time, but it wasn't like I had anything better to do.

The old neighborhood was more than a few steps above where I was now, not exactly snob hill, but clean, with trees. My Dad wouldn't live anywhere where he couldn't find himself a tree and a little patch of dirt. He'd spent so much time out of the city, that I don't think he ever felt quite at home with the concrete under his feet.

The house was looking a little more run down then I remembered it, white paint not quite peeling off the simple bungalow. Like all the houses here, it dated back to before the Cataclysm. It wasn't much to speak of, but it still smelled like home.

Walking up the street, there were pups playing on the neighbor's lawn. This is primarily a canine neighborhood, but I'm happy to say that unlike some other places in the city, we do have a nice mix of different people here.

I smiled as I walked past the pups; they rushed up to see who I was, sniffing my feet. I was careful not to step off the sidewalk. Some people really, really, don't like it if you do. I can't say I blame them, I'd be territorial too, if I had anything worth protecting.

There were three of them, all little ginger and cream huskies. I think I remember their parents; the whelps must have been born just before I moved out.

Two of them ran around me in a circle, yipping and trying to grab my tail. I held it just out of reach, not wanting to let them get their teeth in it. The third one was slower, his eyes closed, moving completely by scent. I held my hand out to him, he approached, not quite sure who I was. After a

moment he must have decided I smelled familiar enough, he took the skin of my knuckle in his mouth and began gently sucking.

"Hey there little one, I need that hand." I picked him up, trying to dislodge my wayward finger. It took some doing, not only did he not want to let go, but I had his sharp little teeth to contend with, and I really did want the finger back in working order.

Once I got it free he started mewling, still not having opened his eyes. He must have taken a liking to me, because now I couldn't get him untangled from my fur.

"Don't I know you?" A voice floated from the nearby house, I looked up. Their mother stood at the door, not looking angry yet, but you can just tell with parents when you have about three seconds to prove you aren't a threat before they started digging their claws in.

I smiled, my luck was holding for a change. I knew her – kind of. "Tommy Taggart." I gave a little bow as I continued to try untangling the kid. "I used to live with my parents, next door."

Now she smiled back, "I'm Rose Adams. Let me help you with Brian." She reached out and gave the child a sharp tug. With a squeak, he came free. I'm not sure who the complaint came from, he was now in possession of a mat of my chest hair.

Brian opened his eyes for the first time and looked at me. He giggled, throwing his handfuls of my fur in the air to watch it float down around him.

"Back to visit your parents?"

"Yep, just back for dinner," I said. I tried to step out of the circle the other two kids were spinning around me, but they just followed like it was a game.

"Working for KDP now?" She pointed at my jacket; I'd forgotten I was still wearing it.

"Huh?" I looked up, I'd still been wondering how to answer that question from my parents, and this was a little sooner than I expected. "No, not really anymore. We kinda parted ways recently."

"That's too bad, but it's really not a place for a hunter like you anyway." One hand came down to scoop up half of the spinning circle at my feet.

"That's what people keep telling me." I wasn't smiling anymore, with a little bit more walking room I began edging away. "I have to get running, say hello to everyone for me."

"Nice seeing you again, Tommy."

"Yah." I waved over my shoulder, behind me I could hear the children laughing.

I walked up the cracked concrete steps to my parent's house; the door was still painted the bright blue I remembered. A quick knock and it flew open, a second later and my Mom's arms were around me. She only comes up to my chest, but she makes it worth it.

"You're here early." Her voice was muffled. She spoke with her face buried in my chest, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. And well, it was.

"Well, um, yah..." I was cut off as she dragged me into the living room.

The house was small and clean, the way my father kept it, with the concession of a plant in every room for my mother. It was kind of strange, I'd moved out a year ago, but it always looked as though it'd only been a day.

"Your father's out back. You're early, so it'll be a few moments until dinner."

"Do you need any help?" I followed her as she went back to the kitchen.

"No, I'm fine," She said, patting my arm. "You're the guest here, Tommy. Enjoy it for a change."

"It's hard to feel like a guest in the place you've lived your entire life."

She smiled and gave me a shove towards the back door.

Our backyard wasn't big, but by the standards of the city, it was an extravagant luxury to have one at all. Most people, ourselves included, had pulled up those silly decks, brickwork and lawns that

the humans had put in long ago and let the land fall back to its natural state. There was something therapeutic about having your own little patch of soil that no one else laid claim to, and not being able to feel the soil between your toes just ruined the effect.

The trusty illusion worked, as it always did. The moment I touched down from the final step and felt the earth give just so, the tension seemed to drop from my bones. I'd spent my childhood crisscrossing this little patch of land and marking it. Somehow, it was hard to stay angry at anyone, even myself, when I was here.

My father was right where I expected him to be. Laying under his favorite tree, the image could have been out of any day from my childhood. The trees had always been here, so had my father, the only change was a few more wiry hairs on in his still immaculate gray coat. And more jarringly, the cane that had followed him everywhere for the last few years.

I didn't say anything as I peeled off my gods ugly KDP jacket, hopefully for the last time, and laid down beside him.

"It's been a long time, Tommy." He spoke slowly, not opening his eyes.

"It's been a month, Dad." I found the little hollow in the ground beside him that I'd always loved.

"You smell nervous." It wasn't a question, it was a statement. "What is it?"

"I... I'd rather wait until Mom is around." I turned my head away; this was not going to be fun.

"Does it have anything to do with the blood beneath your claws?" I started for a moment, he hadn't moved, hadn't opened his eyes.

"How did you..."

"I was a hunter for a quarter century, son. Fifteen of those years I was the best in the city." He lifted his lips in a smile. "I may be off the job, but I still know the scent of blood anywhere. This should make for an interesting story."

My father had a smile that most people referred to as hideous. It wasn't a trait I'd inherited, thankfully. I could smile and folks relaxed, humans, wolves, felines, whoever. My Dad smiled and people began looking for the nearest exit. I'd never really understood, it's not as though his teeth are any larger than mine, we're basically the same. But when I smile, I look happy; when he smiles, he looks like he's going to remove a pound of flesh.

I'd gone years of my life without realizing this. To me, he's my Dad, a smile is a smile. Not that I regret it mind you, it made the parent teacher meetings a lot easier.

"Your uncle Gowan was here yesterday." He continued, changing the subject, for which I was grateful. Gowan was my Dad's younger brother, he used to be the second best hunter before my Dad's accident, they'd been a team. Three guesses who the best was now. "He dropped off some of his latest kill." He didn't need say another word, I didn't even know what it was and my mouth was already watering. I'd have to watch that, Mom didn't like me drooling on the floor. "He and his pack brought down a moose yesterday." It's been so long since I'd had truly fresh meat I could almost taste it.

He finally turned his head and looked at me, "How's everything going? How's the apartment? You know that isn't a good place for someone like you. Humans and birds roost in the sky, not us."

I sighed; we'd gone through this before. My Dad didn't like living apart from the earth at the best of times. With his leg out of commission, he had only been to my apartment once, and I had to carry him up the stairs – it didn't go well. "I need to get on my own feet, Dad. You can't keep covering for me forever. I know you hate the place, I hate it too, but it's all I can afford."

He was looking at me now, but I was staring straight up into the latticework of the branches above. "Dad, I know you just want the best for me, but I need to start living for myself. I've spent my entire life being the son of the great hunter, Griss." His hair didn't so much as ruffle, but I could feel I'd

touched a nerve. Great, I'm just full of it today.

"Tommy, there's a problem. What is it?" He hadn't moved a muscle, but yet he'd somehow morphed from being the Dad who'd chased me around the backyard with a hand-puppet to the father that had single handedly killed five moose in one day, all to get the money to put me through school. I may be his son, and he may love me, but this was a man who could instill fear in anyone, even his own flesh and blood.

"I..." An entire day to think about it and I still hadn't the right words. "I almost killed two people today."

"Oh?" That was all he said. Somehow I had expected something more. OK, I'd expected a lot more of a reaction. What do you do when you tell your Dad you almost murdered two people, and he takes it in stride? "This was an 'almost' was it, no bodies, correct?"

"Yah, almost. We all walked out of the room."

"So unless they transferred you to the dead beat collections, I'm going to assume you don't have a job there anymore."

"That's pretty much the smell of it," I said. I could feel my tail curling between my legs.

"Do you mind me asking what brought this on?" Sometime, when I hadn't noticed it, he'd changed back to the Dad I could hug.

"I had my yearly review this morning, they didn't like me much." He grunted, letting me continue. "They were going to demote me on some technicality of a contract. I just... I flipped out. I stood up to them and said 'no'. When they fought back with words, I fought back with claws." My breathing had quickened, I could see myself in the room. I'd never lost control like that before. What scared me more than anything was how natural it had felt. Like my paws on the earth beneath me, I'd just moved without thinking. If my brain hadn't kicked in the two of them might not have walked out of there.

"Tommy, you're not going to believe me, but I've been waiting twenty years for this." He was smiling again. Bigger this time, I could count his worn and stained teeth.

"What?" I was creeped out enough when he took this in stride, but now he was happy?

"You're my son, Tommy. I'm a wolf, you're a wolf, we're hunters. We hunt, we kill - it's what we do." The words stumbled out of him, too fast. Like a speech he'd practiced over and over again, one that he just couldn't wait to get out, grinning like a fool the whole time.

"Dad, you're scaring me. I'm not a hunter, you know that."

His smile wained a bit, but came back in full force. "You're right, you've never been. While all the other children were out hunting mice or chasing their tails, you just seemed to read. I never understood you, Tommy. How can you say you're not a hunter? How can you trade a run in the grass, the scent of the prey? How can you trade that for your books and paper? I knew you wouldn't last in that desk filled mausoleum. That's a job for moles, not people like us."

"Your mother always said you were a late bloomer." He continued, licking his nose, the closest he could do to a wink with his eyes closed again. "I always laughed at her, but I guess she was right."

"Dad!" My hands went over my face; this was as bad as when he had tried to teach me about breeding by bringing home a pair of field mice. I'd eaten them thinking they were a snack.

He laughed, an arm came out to fall across my chest. He was older now, but it still weighed a ton, he hadn't put on any weight since he'd retired. I struggled for a few moments to try and untangle myself from him, but every twist I made, he seemed to keep me pinned without a move.

"Boys! Dinner." Yes, saved by the call. Once the food was ready, any games came to an end. Stand between my father and food, and you were likely to lose a limb.

I leapt off the ground, glad to be free. I was halfway to the house when I turned around,

remembering. He was still there. Face up in the dirt, stretching to reach his cane.

I came back of course, just pausing to watch him for a half-moment. This was the man who during my childhood could chase away any bully, and then follow it up with all but making their parents roll over dead. The man who could put fear of the gods in any teacher who wanted to make an example of me, just because I was his son.

The kids at school used to call him the 'big bad wolf' when they thought I wasn't listening. I didn't mind, in fact I kinda liked it. There was something to be said for having your own personal avenging angel. It meant the last thing I had to worry about was being macho. By the time I got older, people just kind of assumed I could rip their tails off with one hand, even if I'd never had to do it once.

I picked up his cane, an old fashioned oak affair, not a single bangle or embellishment on it. Rather than just pass it to him, I held out my hand to pull him up. It really wasn't much, but it did make me feel good to help him in at least some little way.

Pulling him to his feet wasn't easy mind you, he had at least a third of my weight on me. I don't know how he does it, but somehow he still manages to keep working out when he can barely walk.

The rest of the way back in was faster. His left leg looks fine; if he were sitting, you would never know that it couldn't take a pound of weight. By now he'd managed to work out a kind of hop-skip with the cane that was faster than the gait of some able people I know.

Dinner was just as it should be, a simple meal on the warm, warn, wooden kitchen table. If I were two feet shorter, I could just as well be looking forward to school tomorrow.

The moose was perfect. While it was never my pick of meals, it was incomparable to anything you could get on the street. Even the venison yesterday couldn't hold up to truly fresh food. While it might not still be warm, it's just not the same after it's been frozen.

As normal, our side of the meal lasted mere seconds. Mother never partook, it wasn't her nature. She always had a plain salad, straight from the garden in the corner of the backyard where she grew herbs for the occasional market sale.

From what she told me once, it had taken her three years from when they got married before she could handle my father's food. As I gather, it had taken until I was born for her to give in. There was no way she was going to leave feeding up to my Dad – he's where I got my cooking skills from.

I sat back, a warm late summer wind flowed in through the open door; it rustled my hair as the world seemed still. I could hear any number of sounds, children, birds, or even the rare truck, but yet it all seemed silent, just as the world should be.

"I think Tommy has something to tell us, Aggy dear." I looked up, he was smiling again. My ears flattened to my skull, so much for the perfect moment.

"I'm out of a job."

"How long were you there, dear?" Her voice was level, as though she'd expected this all along.

"One year to the day."

"I think you owe me some money, Griss honey." She fluttered her eyelashes. What in all the nine...?

He grumbled something under his breath and threw a bill across the table.

"Is someone going to tell me what's going on, or am I just going to go completely crazy? Everyone seems to be laughing about this but me!"

"Do you want to tell him, Griss? Or shall I?"

"I'll tell him, dear. We can't have him sulking from you for a week, he might starve." He sat up and put his hands on the table in a mock serious gesture that I've known since I was three. "Your mother and I had a bet on whether you would be able to hold down that rend of a job for a whole year. I'm very disappointed in you, son. You cost me a h-bill." He sat back down with a self-satisfied grin.

My Mom wouldn't look up from her salad.

Some days you just feel outnumbered.

"If you two have it so figured out, then what's next, hotshots?" I didn't bother getting annoyed, it wasn't worth it. The two of them didn't conspire against me often, but when they did, it didn't help to fight back.

"I mentioned Gowan was here yesterday, he's always on the lookout for new talent."

"Dad, no. I know you've got me pegged as the next big hunter, but I'm just not cut out for it. Do you really think I'd do uncle Gowan any good when I've never hunted a day in my life? I'd get all of two feet out of the city, just to be trampled by some mutant over-sized badger." I threw a bone at him, he saw it coming a mile away and caught it midair. "How would you like that? Spend twenty-five years raising me, just to have me turned into moss sludge?" He threw the bone back. Predictably, it beamed me right between the ears.

"I know, Tommy. But you have to see it our way, anyone can tell you're not happy where you are. Do you really want to be up to your teeth in paperwork for the rest of your life?"

"And what do you suggest? I've hardly been outside the city in my life; even the pull you've got can't get me a hunting job that doesn't involve killing."

"What about a mentor, dear?" My Mom perked up, always ready to take any opportunity.

"Not with Gowan." This time it was father, I was thankful for the interruption, it's nice not to have to shoot down every idea that crosses the table. "He's got a full pack, and quotas to meet. He likes Tommy, but there is no way he could spend the time to bring him up from where he is now - it would be like raising a pup."

I suppose I should be offended, but it wasn't as though I hadn't been telling them just that for years. On the other hand, hearing it come from their lips did sting. They'd been pushing me for so long, it was surprising to hear my Dad actually admit that his own son was a disappointment.

"I'll make you a deal." I was annoyed now, but burn it all if I was going to have them trying to get me a pity job. "Give me a month with the two of you off my back. Give me one month to find a job that I know I was born for, that will make the two of you happy." Now this part hurt, "Or I'll go to uncle Gowan on my belly, and take a job cleaning his carcasses."

My father lolled out his tongue, "If you get a job with Gowan, I'll make sure it's a measure better than that. You might not be able to hunt, but I won't have you dressing his kills."

The dinner was pretty much over at that point. I wanted the issue closed, and there wasn't much else to talk about. I helped my father back out to the yard, he always said it was the only place where he didn't feel like a cripple. It may just be a little slice of the world, but at least it was enough for him to remember all the hunts he'd been on before becoming trapped in the city.

I made my way back inside, the kitchen was already almost clean, it wasn't as though there was much to wash. Raw meat and raw vegetables didn't require a whole lot of preparation.

"You know you're making it hard on your father." My mother always had a whisper like voice, but over the years I'd gotten good at hearing it, and ears the size of mine don't hurt either. "He really does care for you, and we both think you'll be happier in a job you were born for."

"I know, Mom, but I'm not him. He grew up hunting, it was that or starve, he's done it practically since the day he was born. How can I compete with that, how can I measure up? I could start hunting today, and I'll never be a shadow of who he was."

"Is, dear. Is, not was." She rested a hand on my shoulder, no mean feat as I was two feet taller than her. "Your father is a great man, he's done more than you'll ever know. That's why I married him. Just because he doesn't hunt anymore won't change that."

She led me off to the front room; the setting sun was blazing through the windows, setting

everything in an orange glow. The plants she so loved were lined up along the still, almost as if for sale. Though I knew she could never part with even one of her beloved flowers; they were practically her babies.

"I've never understood why you're so afraid to follow in your father's footsteps, Tommy." She fluttered onto the couch in a way only a sprig can. I sat down too, not nearly as elegant, but at least I managed to keep my feet off the table for a change. "You have advantages that he never had – the gods know what he would have given to be born with your gift."

I looked at my hands, I couldn't meet her eyes. I was just thankful my father wasn't in the room. "Would have been just as well if it were him rather than me, lot of good I've done with it." I mumbled.

"Don't say that." Her hand reached out to lift my chin, thumb digging into my nose, forcing me to lift my eyes to meet her. "Your father knew the risks when he became a hunter, we should be thankful he lasted as long as he did. Most boys like you were without a father by the time they were ten. He knew the odds, and did what he did to give you the life he knew you deserved to have. He truly believes you could be more than he ever was."

"Your smart, Tommy; you've had opportunities that he could never dream of. Your father never attended a day of school in his life. He grew up on the streets, and in nameless tracks of forest. If he wanted food he had to hunt it from the time he could fend for himself." She conveniently avoided talking about my grandparents, nobody ever did. I'd learned young that asking questions about them was a fast way to get an invitation to go play outside for the day.

"You're the only Taggart not only to attend school, but graduate. You know how hard he had to work to put you through college. Never once did he ask why you chose to study history. He knew it was what you wanted, so he threw everything he had into giving you what you needed to do it."

If she was trying to make me feel guilty, she was doing a good job. But that wasn't her way. She never forced you to do anything, just laid out the facts and let you come to your own obvious conclusions.

"I know he says he's proud of me, but I'm just not him."

"No, you're not, you're something much different. We've all known that since the day you ignored chasing a mouse to read one of those books of yours. You'll find your place, nobody knows where it is yet, but you'll find it, dear."

She got up and began walking out, "If you need me, dear, I'll be in the back with your father. We'll be having some private time."

That was one of those parental TMI things, it doesn't matter if you're five or twenty-five, walking in on your parents is a bad thing that was only cured with the mythical eye bleach. My Mom always knew how to get the last word.

I'm going to begin job searching tomorrow, so it just made sense to try and stack the odds in my favor as much as possible. When I'd moved out I'd taken only what I needed, and left anything of real value here. I opened the door to my old room with a crack, I would bet my last bone it hadn't been touched since I was last here.

Everything was just as I'd left it, for a moment I had that lightheaded feeling, I'd say it felt like I'd been here before – but that would be stupid.

My bookcase lined one wall, bed the other – it lay under a small window overlooking the side of the house. The smell of the trees out back permeated the room like they always had, despite this being the only room in the house not overrun with plants.

I reached out and gently ran a finger down the top ridge of my books, careful not to nick them with a claw. As unassuming as my parent's house may be, I must have one of the larger private collections of pre-Cataclysm books in the city.

Almost six dozen books meticulously arranged and lined up, I knew every word and every stain. Many of the books had been dredged from the deep roots of half collapsed buildings, I couldn't remember the times I'd spent a week searching for a single volume, just to find it covered in moss, or waterlogged beyond salvation.

The others, I'd spent every coin I'd had finding them. While they might not look like much to anyone but a collector, I'd begged borrowed, and yes, even stolen everything I could to get a hold of them. I'd dug to the bottom of every cart and crate of the rare merchants who had passed through V-town, all in hopes of finding just one more to buy. I'd even learned to read some of the long dead tongues to work my way through them.

I pulled one of my favorites from the shelf, careful not to snap the already half peeled spine from the green hardcover. 'Science, practical and classroom for grade six Canadian students'. I'd bought it from a dealer who had found it in a ruined city, far to the northwest where the bitter winters had left nothing but bleached bones.

He hadn't known what a treasure he'd held when I bought it from him. I ran all the way home, feeling as if my tail was on fire. It was one of my few that had full color all the way through. The pages were yellowed, and the color off, but it was still readable, and read it I had.

I'd been sixteen when I'd found it, I'd begged with my parents to let me stay home for a week while I dug through it hungrily. Unlike so much I had seen, it was a book that had directly opened up worlds for me. I could put my mind to it and understand every word from page to page; almost nothing it referenced was completely foreign. While I'd never give up 'Introduction to GL+ programming', I'd had to read it verbatim as so much was simply beyond anything I could compare or reference it to.

This book was different, I'd used it, I'd applied it, I'd set the lawn on fire.

I'll admit the last one had caused me more than a little bit of grief, but it'd been worth it.

I flipped the book open to a random page; it had pictures of smiling human children and a drawing of the planets going around the sun. My eye hung on the photograph for a moment; I wondered what I would have looked like as a human? None of my books had a single picture of a wolf in them. Only one even referenced them, and it didn't sound like anyone, or for that matter anything, I'd ever met.

I'd also read books published more recently of course, but they seemed hardly worth mentioning. I'd taken this book into school once during my final year. Being so careful, packed in a large sack, surrounded by cloths and furs. I can still see myself showing it to my teacher, asking why we didn't have anything like this anymore. He'd started reading a random page, thick blue hands slowly tracing the lines. Pausing when he hit the word 'chlorophyll', he couldn't even pronounce it.

That was all the real explanation I needed, I redoubled my efforts to salvage what I could from the ruined monuments and tunnels.

Putting the book back, it slowly slid into place between 'Forests of the Night' and 'Watchmen'.

My trunk was where I'd left it at the foot of my bed, still covered in a faded blue blanket – if I looked hard enough I could probably still find my hair on it. I'd never really had anything of value more than my books, but I did have a few nice jackets, ties, even a single pair of pants for when I'm desperate. I wasn't that desperate yet.

The trunk was musty and clotting, but still held what I'd left for myself. I dug through the pile until near the bottom I found my old deep blue vest. It was long, half-way to my knees and open in the front with a stiff neck, it had been fashionable five years ago when I'd bought it. I glanced at it in the mirror pinned up on a wall, it was a little small, but I'd always like the way it looked on my brown fur.

Tucking my cash into the pocket of the vest, I lay down on my bed, a small puff of dust coming up around me. Everything was so familiar here, it would be so much easier to just do what my parents

wanted, get a job raking blood, make my Dad proud.

It wasn't the first time I'd felt like this, growing up I'd idolized him like any son would. He was known throughout the city, anyone would love to have him as a father. The problem was that he wasn't some other kid's Dad, he was mine.

I'd tried hunting on my own, even dreamed about it. It always ended the same; I just couldn't land the final blow. I just couldn't kill. I would always pause at the last moment, as though my own will had betrayed me. It didn't matter the prey, I'd always see its eyes and see a person, hear a voice pleading. I couldn't kill another person, and I couldn't kill prey.

It didn't matter how good a tracker I was, didn't matter how well I hunted them down and cornered them, if I couldn't land the blow then I was no good to anyone.

Today though, today had been different – I'd been ready to kill those two.

My hands started shaking again, shadows of the adrenalin coursing through me. Was that what my Dad felt when he hunted? I could have ripped their necks open, felt their blood pour out and not feel a thing inside but glee.

I fell over onto the bed, not bothering to try and get up. If this is what it felt like, I'm not sure I could do it, it would rip me apart.

When I was young all my friends had hunted and killed without a second thought, been covered in blood from a fresh kill, laughing and cartwheeling. Was that what there was to it, just to forget how close we were to what we killed? To not see myself in their eyes?

I pulled my hands up to my face, blocking out the early evening sun, the room was painted red by the failing light. While I could tell you what caused it, and even make a good guess at the gases involved, it really didn't matter right now. The room was red, and right now it just looked too much like blood.

The next few hours moved slowly, I didn't move much either. I heard my parents come in, the neighborhood fall asleep. The sky died from vivid red to a dark blue of the stars, I still lay there.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow I'll prove I can control..." I wasn't sure just what I would be controlling, but it felt good to say it.

Finally, I succeeded in managing the energy to roll myself onto my back, staring up at the ceiling I could see the maps I'd pasted up there so long ago.

I had maps of the globe above me, marked with small squiggly lines of where there used to be countries. They always looked silly and arbitrary to me, like some young hyperactive kid had come by with a marker to draw where she'd seen fit.

I'd entertained dreams back then of venturing to those foreign lands, climbing the mountains and dredging their long forgotten cities for lost words, a completely different kind of hunter.

It wasn't to be. Travel was rare and expensive by sailing ship, and there were few other options. While one could make it west to Tokyo, much of the south was rendered less than inviting by the Cataclysm. The southern reaches were barren of most life, and the northern reaches were hospitable only in the summer. V-town was where it was for a reason. Without a reason of my own it didn't make much sense to leave it.

I couldn't even last a year across town from my parents, what luck would a weak willed whelp like me have in the world beyond?

I knew I really should return to the apartment, but my old bed was so much softer than anything I would have back on the tenth floor.

How easy would it be to just give over, let myself be carried along in the flow of those around me?