

The Hunters



By: wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Journal.....1

Chapter 2: Another Day at the Office.....10

Chapter 3: I Hate My Life, and My Boss Hates it Too.....19

Chapter 4: Job Search.....34

Chapter 4: Job Search

I awoke with a start, it's an odd feeling waking up in your old bed after a year away. Admittedly, my back was no worse off for it. I made a mental note to try and drag this mattress away with me next time the elevators were working back at the apartment, also known as when the sea freezes over.

I rolled out and made it for the front door. It must be at least nine-thirty by now, and I needed to procure a new source of income before too much longer. There were only so many times I could come back home for a free meal.

Resting on the door handle was a small blue foil package. I'd seen it a hundred times before, of all people, my parents knew my sweet tooth best. I guess they were on side with me trying to find another job by myself.

The job center was the best place to start for a person like me, trying to go forth without connections. It was on this side of the city, so it should only take half an hour to get there. It's always unnerving to walk through the streets after the rush hour crowds had cleared off, everyone nicely filed away into their desks and offices.

There was a shout from the alleyway up ahead. Just my luck, as I walked past a form came bearling out. He gave me a shove, I went face first to the ground, getting a nice taste of concrete in the process. I felt a pop as my nose decided to make a good impression of an airbag, it did the job – my face went from sixty to zero in about a quarter inch.

This was of course followed up by a rose of pain, my vision went red as I rolled on my side and clasped my hands over my injured face. I could both smell and taste the burnt copper of my blood as it poured out. I remembered reading somewhere in one of my books that canines like me have more nerve endings in our noses than anywhere else. Might seem like an odd thing to recall at a time like this, but they were right. It felt like I'd just got kicked in the puppy makers.

I held on for a few more moments before looking up, now the shouting was coming from down the street where I'd been just moments ago. A tawny form jumped over me, casting a shadow for a split second, before landing with a scrape of claws a good seven feet ahead.

It was a lion, a big one at that. It wasn't much of a description, but it was all I could get out while I nursed my busted nose. The only other thing I could see was his bright red jacket.

A moment later another streak shot past, even through my red haze I'd recognize this one anywhere – it was the tiger that had given me a thrashing a few days ago, I'm sure of it. From what I could tell, they were off and chasing the fellow who had rearranged my nose.

They had to go all of about a hundred feet down the deserted street before they caught up, it was no contest. With an impressive thunk, that made me thankful for the lesser blow I'd just received, they went down. It was the tiger doing the wrestling, the lion just stood there cheering him on.

I stood up, and almost fell right over again when my nose popped back into place – the regeneration kicking in. Getting closer, I could see the guy on the ground was human, and a decent sized one at that, he must have been three hundred pounds.

That would explain the trouble the stripe was having, the lion was laughing now as the tiger cursed – some of his words were new, even to me.

With a snarl, that I'm not truly sure came from the cat, the human was up and off. The stripes was flat on his back, he was out of this battle whether he liked it or not – I doubt he could shake it off like me.

The leo must have been still a hundred feet away, but I could hear his laugh. Deep and rolling, sounding like something you'd expect from a drama program. Almost had 'Valiant Hero' monogrammed right on it, but in person it was a little creepy.

The human made off, darting for the nearest alley. The lion just stood, watching him until he skidded around the corner. Once he cleared the edge the cat put his hands down to the ground and wow, he moved like I'd never seen.

I shook the last few splatters of blood off my face and did my best to continue on my way. Carefully, I sidestepped the tiger still spread-eagled on the sidewalk. I'd learned long ago with the hunters not to bother people of his caliber – they're not usually very happy when they wake up, and it's best to keep out of reach when they're pissed.

Much to my surprise, the lion was still there when I crossed the alley. He looked a little worse for where, however. The human was pinned up against the dirty brick wall, turning and twisting in a way I would have thought required more vertebrae. The lion only had one arm to spare for holding him, the other hung uselessly at his side, a long nasty rip dripping across a jagged piece of sheet metal that lay on the ground.

As I past he looked my way, "Mate!" He jerked his head at me, "Yes, you. Mind giving me a hand here? As you can see, I'm a little indisposed at the moment." He still had that whole valiant hero thing going with his voice, but it was a bit put off by the nasal British accent. Made him sound as though he were about to start complaining about the severe lack of tea available.

"Pass me my cuffs, and I'd be much obliged." He nodded towards his belt where a massive pair of metal bands hung.

I didn't really want to get involved, but it was a little hard to walk away with the lion staring me down. He looked almost unconcerned, as though the withering form on the wall was nothing more important than a mouse in a cup.

"You bounty hunter, let me go! You're not cops. I haven't done anything." The human's voice was horse but strong.

"Not my job to decide if you've done anything wrong." He had the lion's undivided attention now. "There's a warrant out for you, and that makes you my bread and butter. If you're innocent, then prove it in the courts. I'll still make my bounty, and you'll still be innocent - everyone's happy. Come along with those cuffs, mate. We'd best get this moving."

I walked up with more than a little apprehension, I could see where the impromptu knife had come from; the alley was littered with jagged sheet metal shards from an overturned bin. With a quick

yank I pulled the cuffs free from the lion's belt, they popped free just as they were intended – someone it seemed could afford equipment that worked.

At first they were far too large for the human, almost a foot across; it took me a few moments to cinch the locks down over his flailing hands. I'm not sure if it was a good thing, but it seemed the cat had cut off the man's air, in any event it was preferable to have a little silence while I tried to get him under control.

"A little to the left, mate. Press it there, you'll find a hook... and good." It sounded like he was used to this, he recited off the instructions to the cuffs as though he'd done it a thousand times.

"Thank you for your help there, my good man." The lion lifted his hand from the human, who promptly slid to the ground. The cat arched his neck back, and tail up, with a crack and pop. "Nothing like a hunt, eh? Now pardon me a moment won't you, mate?" He pulled a small bottle and an over-sized bandage from a pouch on his belt and began patching his arm.

"Good thing you were there, my friend. I don't often smeg up the situation like that. Guess I got a little bit over excited when Huston took a nap out on the street."

"Don't mention it," I muttered awkwardly, edging away towards the alley's mouth.

"Where are my manners," the lion grinned as he pulled the bandage tight with his teeth. "The name's English. And you are?" He stuck out his good hand.

I shook it, he must have been twice my size, my hand practically disappeared. "Tommy."

"Aren't you the lad who got his face flattened just up the street? That's a freezing fast recovery, mate. You're hardly bleeding now."

I touched my nose a little self consciously, "That was me. I was born with regeneration."

The lion smiled, showing large white teeth that put mine to shame. "Regen, you're a lucky lad. I wish I'd had that."

A growl echoed from behind, making me jump. "You caught him then, English?"

The tiger walked up behind me, suddenly I felt vulnerable. "Not a trick at all, Huston," English said. "A hand from our friend Tommy here, and all went swimmingly."

The tiger grunted, sparing a quick glance in my direction. If he remembered me, it didn't show.

"Well that's just great for you two. Shouldn't we be hauling him in?"

"Just a tick, my pal. We've got to thank Tommy here,"

He reached out, but I shed back. "I'd really best be on my way."

"Have it your way lad, but take this." He flicked his thumb and a card neatly flipped through the air.

'Michael A. Jones, Storm Front Corporation. Bounty hunter, first class.'

I walked out the alleyway; looking back I could see the tiger lugging the human out in a fireman's carry. The lion led the way, whistling.

The job center was still a few blocks away. The rest of the walk was thankfully less eventful. While it might provide the office workers with a show, I wasn't looking to get my nose bloodied again.

The job center was about as governmental and institutionalized as city hall, you would think people designed these places to try and ward folks off. Well, it wasn't working. The line went out the front door and part way down the steps.

If it was ten by the time I got here, it must be eleven before I got to see another face, smiling or not.

"Mr. Taggart," The woman was a doe, hair pulled up in a bun so tight that you could almost hear it ready to go sproing. "Your paper work seems to be in order, now there is simply the matter of finding you a job."

"That's all?" I asked. "For a moment you had me worried."

She looked up over a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, I've got to learn to stop cracking jokes. Or at least trying to, no one ever seems to laugh.

She cleared her throat and started again "Very droll. First we will have to access your level of intelligence. There are five levels, please continue to answer the questions until you are unable." I nodded.

"First, what is your name?"

I almost laughed, "Tommy James Taggert." I felt like adding 'The third.' just to see if she'd notice.

"Very good," She made a note, "Second, how many days are there in a year?"

That was the first level? Wow, I'd been out of school so long I'd forgotten what a joke these tests were. "Three hundred and sixty five days -"

"Very good," She cut me off.

"- three hundred sixty-six in a leap year."

"Pardon?" She lifted her pencil from the paper.

"Three hundred and sixty-six days on a leap year, every four years." I paused and scratched my chin, "Except for years ending in a double zero. And, oh, not if the year is divisional by four hundred."

She just stared at me for a moment "Of course, Mr. Taggert." She picked up her pencil again and continued on as if I hadn't said a thing. "Three. Pre-Cataclysm, what country was V-town located in?"

"Canada, the province of British Columbia, and the city of Vancouver." She gave me that look again.

"Four, what is our current form of government?"

I sat back and began ticking off points on my claws, "V-town is an independent city-state running the standard Olson modified republic system. Everyone coming of age, as defined by their species, is placed in a lottery pool for voting rights. Each year ten people are chosen at random to be added to the voting public, their votes then are used to determine our government."

"Democratic would have sufficed, Mr. Taggert."

"But it wouldn't have been right." I got that pause again, this time with a glare to go along with it.

"And, finally, five. Describe internal combustion."

I took a deep breath, "Internal combustion is the process in that air and fuel are combined to create an explosive-"

"Very good, Mr. Taggert. You may stop now. You obviously qualify for a level five intelligence, our highest rating." I shrugged my shoulders; I'd expected a more of a challenge. I wasn't that smart. "Unfortunately, Mr. Taggert, people like you are not in high demand at this moment." I felt my whiskers droop. "We will have to find you a position at a lower level."

"I have two jobs available that may be appropriate for you. My suggestion is that of a dock worker. We also have a position as a teacher if that should fail."

I cocked my head to one side. "My IQ came out high, so you're suggesting I avoid the teaching job in favor of dock work?"

"That is correct. Any other questions, Mr. Taggert?" She straightened the papers on her desk.

"Well, I -"

"Very good, here are your letters of introduction, they contain everything you need. Goodbye." With that she promptly looked down and I was no longer part of her world.

I walked out of the center with my tail down. It was nice to see they had such a high opinion of my intelligence, but there was no way I was going to be working the docks unloading ships.

I tossed first paper on the street; that would just be my office job all over again. I was here to prove I could find some place I wanted to be, not just another hole to eek out a paycheck until I've pulled my last breath.

The school wasn't far away, just a few blocks down. It was a large old brick building, definitely older than the Cataclysm, with the scars to prove it.

By the time I got there it was lunch, and it was no good trying to find someone to talk to while there was food to be had. It had been a long time since I'd been in a high-school cafeteria, the better part of a decade to be honest. Not that these places change much over the years I'm sure.

Advertisements covered the walls for brands I'd never heard of, 'Hyneman meats, a wild meat for a beast' and 'Savage water – pure water for a pure you'. Who bought this stuff? Has advertising really sunk that low that they're trying to sell their food on being 'cool'?

The fashions had changed as well. Back when I'd been here the 'dirty' look had been in. Mussed fur, maybe a pair of ripped jeans and as little makeup as possible had marked my passing, suited me just fine. I was never much of one for embellishment, so it was just how I managed to look rolling out of bed anyway – I guess that makes me retro. These days it seemed to have swung to the polar opposite, in one glance I could see young bitches with fur died with bright pink tips. Dressed in full human clothing, I almost wondered how they could walk.

A minotaur past me, I did a double take when I saw both his hooves were somehow shoved into a pair of conventional shoes, not matching of course. Now that I took a closer look, everyone seemed to be wearing shoes, not just the ones who needed them but everyone. No matter what it must to their balance, there wasn't a single pair of bare feet in the place but mine.

It went beyond that. Despite the complete absence of humans in the crowd, everyone seemed to have a clothing fetish; hardly a single bare chest was to be seen. Even more so to the pants, I couldn't find a single person going without. I could understand to some extent the modesty with humans, but with the rest of us - if you've ever tried running in a snowsuit in the dead of summer, after first putting on a full set of clothing then you might know. It was at least twenty degrees out.

So be it, if I wanted to have any chance of getting a job here I would need to at least try to accept the current fashions. I'm sure my own generation had been at least as mad, you never see yourself as the crazy one in an argument.

The lineup for food moved quickly, good thing, no one wanted a riot.

At the head, I took a look at the llama running the till. "Just give me whatever the special is," I said.

She looked me up and down, then grunted and took my money. The smells coming out of the back of the place weren't confidence inspiring, but I was just going to have to hope for the best.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. I got a large cup of some black liquid that bubbled and fizzed, and, well, I call it meat, but it wasn't, not really. It was a tube shape that I don't think came from any animal. It was fitted inside a bread bun, covered with some secretions of one form or another. The last thing I was just as happy to ignore, a hot serving of some plant, a sickly yellow set of strips that dripped clear fluid.

I found a seat in the corner where I could watch the room with my back to the wall. Call me paranoid, I am, but the old training my Dad gave me about hunting always kicks in when I'm in an enclosed space with a crowd.

Maybe I'm just getting old, but it was kind of scary how alone I felt in a crowd of, well, let's say it – kids. Just a few years ago I would have been among them. But now, watching them around me, they seemed alien.

Perhaps it was because when I'd been through everyone wanted to look like themselves –

individuality had been in. Now everyone wanted to look human, but I was wondering if any of them even knew what a human looked like. I watched a feline of some stripe walk by, she must have been a tiger, but her orange and black fur was dyed an off-white pink. The clothing she wore made her look more like she'd just fraught her way out of a drama class' wardrobe.

On the other side of the room was a wolf, like myself. It took a moment to even tell he was a canine – he'd shaved his chest and back to show off pale white skin. I'd never seen anyone shave unless they were going into the hospitable, and that was one of the only times you'd see someone wearing a shirt. He was hiking up a pair of football jockeys, and had somehow managed to shove a baseball cap down over his ears.

The final effect was to make him look as though he was a human who had woken up in a wolf's body and hadn't noticed, rather than merely a howler with bad fashion sense.

I picked up the tube of meat that I'd bought and sniffed it. No clue what it was, and that was odd. Growing up I'd eaten almost every type of animal that could be caught around these parts, from mouse to muskrat.

I took a bite as I watched the wolf show off the latest football moves to his friends. I gagged the moment the meat touched my tongue, almost heaving the rancid stuff all over my tray. If I'd wanted to keep a low profile I'd just failed. Some of the teens turned towards me to see what the noise was, it didn't take them long to decide I was of no importance and return to their conversations.

Gods, this meat was putrid. I sniffed it again, the only way I could have missed something this bad was with all the other scents in the room. Whatever this tube was, it barely had any meat in it. Being mixed with some kind of spice or other didn't help – the whole thing tasted like it had come out the wrong end of a factory.

The drink wasn't much better, but I was prepared enough not to spray it all over my neighbors. I'm not sure what they put in it, but it burnt my mouth like acid and made my teeth ache. Much of this stuff and I'd have blunted fangs.

I pushed the tray away and pulled out my little wrapped foil package. If this is what the students ate every day, I was starting to wonder how many would be alive to see graduation.

The chocolate was as good as ever, its sweet taste washing down my rancid meal.

I turned my attention back to the people around me, a clique of female rabbits tittered to my left. They were of all colors, but they seemed to dyeing their hair a dark yellow, at least it was better than pink. They spoke in a rapid fire solatio speech that was peppered liberally with high pitched squeals and shouts.

On the right was a group of birds and avians of varying sorts. I winced when I saw them; some of their number had plucked their own feathers. No matter what I said about the wolf, he looked good in comparison. The flightless fowl looked positively anorexic, as though there was nothing of them left. I'd never realized just how little there was to those people. One of them turned their head, giving me a good look at a piercing. Now piercings are nothing new, I've seen more than few ravishing bitches modeling with a piercing or two in their ears. This was different. Somehow they had managed to bore right through the bone of their beaks.

I can't imagine what they must have gone through - the only way to get a hole like that is with an electric drill. In any event it seemed to be popular; at least three of them had it. They spoke much the same way the rabbits did, not a click or tweet of their native sounds. They stuck to almost straight english as though any other sounds were foreign to them.

Now that I lent an ear to it, it was the way they all spoke. You could barely tell a difference between the speech of a daemon to that of a rat. There was no differentiation in their chatter, no snatches of Japanese, no clicks or pops as they jumped to a howl or chirp.

The buzzer behind me rang, and slowly the press of people around me filled out to one class or another. I got one last look at them as they mobilized and moved out, hardly a snatch or fur or feathers, everything was synthetics and fabric.

I waited until things had finished clearing out and settling down before setting out to try and find the main office. It was easier said than done, while there were arrows on the walls in bright red letters, it took me a good fifteen minutes and at least two circuits of the place to track it down.

As I walked in I was hit by a heavy wave of *déjà vu*. While I'd never been here before, all school offices look more or less the same.

Another deer behind the desk, she just as well could have been a clone of the one at the job center.

"Shouldn't you be in class?" She didn't even look up from her stack of papers.

I had to laugh at that one. She must not get that often, she looked up. "I'm sorry, sir." She straightened her glasses. "Are you here to pick up your son, or your daughter?"

Now it was I who was taken aback, I wasn't that old. "Not quite," I laid my letter of introduction down on the desk between the piles that were already there. "I'm here for a job."

She adjusted her glasses again, peering at me for a second. "One moment, sir." Glanced at the paper she got up, disappearing into the bowels of the office.

I leaned on the desk, and looked around as I waited, snatches of conversation and music floated the air as the old bulbs above my head buzzed.

The office walls were covered with posters; I walked up to get a better look at one. It depicted a group of children, canines and felines mostly. Under it was the label 'Stick together, think together. Only the group gets it done.'

The receptionist returned to her desk, giving me an offhand shrug that made me feel like I was fifteen again. "The principal will see you now."

His office was spacious, for a broom closet. The principal was a balding orangutan, decked up a full suit that looked more like something you might see in a photograph from the nineteen thirties. He sat behind a large wooden desk that had just barely been wedged between the walls.

I gagged for a moment when I walked in. The office was stuffy to start with, and combined with his own personal odor I was just about ready to turn tail right now. He smelled of something between the sulfur of rotten eggs, and that sickly sweet smell of honey gone bad in the summer noon-day sun.

"Mr. Tommy Taggert, I presume?" His voice was a dry rasp. It was the only dry thing on him; I could almost see the stench radiating from his suit in waves.

"That would be me," I put out my hand, "Mr. ...?"

He just looked at me for a moment, his eyes falling to my outstretched hand. A curl of his lip displayed a flash of small yellowed teeth. He didn't move, leaving me looking like an idiot trying to brush the air.

"My name is principal Macintosh," he said. I sat down, it didn't seem worth waiting for an invitation. "I understand you are inquiring about employment." His eyes lurched over me again; it felt a little bit like being looked over by one of those police officers that think they're hot stuff on their first day on the beat.

"That's correct, I'm interested in a teaching position at your school. I have a firm background in history, and enjoy working with people." I put out my best smile and tried to look integrating, he just scowled back.

"You're under dressed, don't you believe?"

"Pardon?" I took a quick look down; I was still wearing my good blue vest. I was reasonably

brushed up, and thought I was looking at least fairly dapper. Admittedly I had some dust on me from my altercation on the way to the job center, and a little blood on my feet – but that was my own anyway.

He scowled again, almost looked like it was the only expression in his whole repertoire. "Your clothing. You lack sufficient amounts of it." He reached across the desk and pulled my vest between his thumb and forefinger. "This." He yanked, hauling me forward, "Is not proper attire at such a place of learning as my school."

I was wearing more than most people on the street. "I wasn't aware that you had clothing rules here, I'm simply wearing what I felt was appropriate. I'm certainly willing to adapt. What do you recommend?" I fought to keep my words even, he didn't seem to like me much, and the feeling was mutual.

"You are aware that you are in a school? Then I presume that you have seen some of our students. The current fashion is to be dyed where appropriate, and fully clothed at all times."

"Are you telling me the dress code for staff at this school is dictated by the fashions of the students?"

He looked me straight in the eye, "Yes. Do you have a problem with that?" As though it were the most logical thing in the world.

I had to fight hard not to sputter. "No, of course not. I simply wasn't aware of the current trends. It's been some time since I've been back to school."

He huraped at me and made a shooping with his hands. "That can be addressed in proper time. The more important consideration is your area of expertise."

I smiled, this time I had it hooked on my claw, "I'm a history major. I studied at Mendelian collage here in V-town, and graduated near the top of my class."

He waved his hand again, "What else do you have?"

"Pardon?" I scrunched my face up and lost him on that, I was history major – it's what I did. Didn't they need history teachers?

"What else do you know? What else can you do?" He was getting impatient now, fingers tapping on the heavy dark wood of the desk.

"I'm a student of history, aren't you in need of history teachers?"

He laughed that kind of boastful 'Ha, ha' you give someone when you know the joke is on them. "We don't run the history classes anymore, haven't for years. No one wanted them. Why would be hire a teacher for a class no one wants to take?"

"But, isn't history a prerequisite?"

He looked at me for a moment, as if he didn't know what the word meant. "You are surprisingly outdated, Mr. Taggert. That's not the way things are run anymore, they haven't been like that for years."

"How do people graduate these days?" I was getting a bad feeling; perhaps the doe at the job center had known what she'd been talking about.

"It's all hours based," He began talking to me in the voice one would normally reserve for a brain-dead twelve year old who had gotten whacked on the head one too many times. "As long as the student-partner attends a minimum number of hours in classes, they will graduate with all their peers."

"So what kind of teachers are you looking for?" I was grasping at straws, but I really didn't want to be working in an office again.

The ape smiled, now he was back in his element "My school specializes in all the most popular classes." He began to tick them off on his fingers, becoming more animated with each one. "Our most popular courses currently are of course in hunting, you may be able to assist us in the canine stream..."

I gave him a look that kept him moving on.

"We also offer classes in socializing,"

"You have classes in socializing?"

"Of course, how else would our students learn how to properly socialize out in the real world? We offer extensive classes in species specific socialization techniques, we're the most renowned in the city."

I was getting ready to just put my hands over my head and slink away, this was going nowhere. "What else do you have?"

"We have an excellent class in the culinary arts-"

I knew it wasn't going to help my chances much, but I couldn't help breaking up laughing. All that got me was a stern look from the head master.

"And what do you find so amusing, Mr. Taggert?"

I did my best to sit up and put on a straight face, "So what you're telling me is that your top tier classes teach people to do the following: kill, eat, and screw?"

His mask of institutional indifference fell for a moment; you could almost hear it clank on the floor of the silent office. A look of abject horror and disgust crossed his face, but for only a moment. Seconds later he had his mask readjusted as though I hadn't said a thing.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Taggert, but I don't believe we will be employing you."

I got up and turned to leave the office, my shoulders still racking from my own silent laughter. Just as I was leaving I turned to see the man sitting behind the desk, he looked years older now.

"How did it get this way?" I asked.

He looked up, eyes flat in the dull light of the office. I could see he had been teaching for longer than this particular program had been in effect. "What else do we have to teach?"

I was glad I didn't get offered a job here.

The halls were empty when I made my way back out into them, I was glad for that. I wanted to get back out onto the streets where there were people with an insanity I understood and could deal with, not the new breed of crazy they were growing here.

The streets were as crowded and clogged, as they always were, people around here were normal. The mixture of races you see every day. Out here, a fox looked like a fox, she didn't shave her head, nor clip her ears. A bird looked like a bird, no holes in their beak for an over-sized safety-pin.

I decided to check in my pocket in the vague hope that I might still have some chocolate left; I needed something to calm my nerves. While I needed that laugh, the whole interview had left me drained. I didn't notice it at the time, but my heart rate was up, and I was starting to breathe hard, like I'd just run a mile through the streets.

I rooted around in my pocket but didn't come up with much. The only real thing I found was the business card from that lion this morning. I flipped it over in my fingers, getting ready to toss it.

It was a simple white card, with a small yellow lightning bolt on a red square in the corner. The back read 'Storm Front is always looking for new recruits, hunters, support, and office staff. We are an equal opportunity employer. Find us at 1024 Dover road, business district.'

I held onto the card and tucked it back into my jacket. I didn't relish the job of a paper pusher again, but maybe they could find a place for an introverted wolf like me.