

The Hunters



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Chapter 5: Office Work, with a Twist of Carnage

I squinted up at the sun, it was at least two o'clock. I'd have to hoof it, but I could make it through the business district by four if I was lucky.

Unlike at night, by day the business district was filled with people hurrying from one side of the street to the other. Every third person seemed to be couriers or errand boys running messages. Almost everyone here wore a tie, some suit jackets, and even a human scampered by decked out in a full suit, no people shaving themselves here.

The buildings reflected the late afternoon yellow sun, glinting off the glass and chrome; this is what the world must have looked like a hundred years ago...

Storm Front had a building all to their own, it wasn't the largest one in the district, but to consider that a single business could fill a three floor building was amazing. They had to be among the largest companies in the whole city.

The front door wasn't lined up with people like some of the government buildings, but a steady stream of red jacketed employees were flowing in carefully choreographed randomness.

Walking in, the reception was large and spacious, arranged a little like how you might describe an upper class hotel lobby. Plants scattered here and there, benches, seats, and a small bubbling pool helped clear the scents of so many people. At the far end was a desk with the sign 'Client Service' hung over it, at least a dozen women were working it, talking to people and sending them off in all directions.

A little bit hesitant, I approached the nearest lady. She was a cat-girl of some description, with the kind of overly-bouncy personality that people in the service industry seem to cultivate.

"Hi! How are you today, what can I do for you?" She threw off a hundred watt smile that seemed determined to blind me.

"Hello," You know that it's at least a bit of an act, but you can't help but smiling a little in return. "I'm here to inquire about a position with Storm Front."

"Not a problem at all," If anything her smile got bigger, "We're always looking for new talent!" She pointed down a hallway that led back into the building, "Just follow that way back, head up to the second floor, then it's your first door on the left. Just before arrest processing."

I thanked her, and got a wink in return. OK, all admit it, while it may be an act, it did make me

feel better.

The place was right where she said it would be, though I had to sidestep a few people on the way. They had a massive guy in cuffs, and were dragged him along to the next door.

Recruiting was a decent sized room that ran along the back of the building. A high ceiling merged with a full deck of windows along the outer wall to let the sunlight stream in, all the other walls were covered in recruitment posters. The overall vibe made it seem like they were really looking for people. I was starting to wonder why folks were lining up for jobs if they were seemingly so eager to hire here?

I'd barely gotten in the door when I was flagged down by a leopard; he corralled me toward his desk, next to the windows, in a way that almost reminded me of a used car salesman. "Hello there, fella. You're looking for a job here at Storm Front, aren't you?"

I nodded as I sat down, "That would be me."

"Great, my name is Graham, and I'm a recruiter here. We just picked up an additional large government contract for bounties here in V-town, so we've ramped up on our recruiting, even more than usual."

"You guys seem to be putting a lot of effort into it."

"Um, well," He adjusted his tie, "we have a great medical policy for bounty hunters like you..."

"Hey, whoa, who said I was looking to be a bounty hunter?" So much for the good feeling.

"Well, most of the people we're hiring are hunters on account of the... um, high turnover rate."

If he kept adjusting his tie so much it was going to saw his neck clean off.

"By turnover, I'm assuming you're talking about death and disfigurement. Sorry, buddy, no luck for you. I'm looking for a support job, even a desk job if I can't get that."

He began thumbing through the papers on his desk, "We don't have nearly as many openings for non-hunting jobs..." Now he was opening drawers and rooting around. "Are you sure you're not interested in a position as a bounty hunter? I can get you a great salary, and an awesome commission."

By now he'd run out of desk to rummage around. "I'm strictly looking for a job that'll keep my claws clean."

He'd given up trying to find a paper, and put his hands down on the desk. It looked like it was killing him to not be able to find a job for a willing applicant. "Sorry, unless you've got some management experience, we don't have a single opening for any jobs that don't involve being on the hunting force. As a matter of fact, where did you hear about us looking for non-hunting jobs anyway?"

I pulled the business card from my jacket and laid it face down on his desk, "See, it says you're looking for 'support and office staff' right on it."

Almost without reading it he turned it right side up, "Wait a sec, you met English?"

"Who?"

He pointed at the name, "Jones. He's our top hunter, he doesn't just hand his cards out to anyone."

"What? He just gave me his card after I helped him out a bit-"

It was no good, by this time he had already waved down a message boy. "Hey you, go see if English is in the building. Ask him down here." The young rabbit was off like a shot, I guess that's why there are so many of them in that position.

"What's the big deal if I got it from this Jones guy? I just gave him a hand when he asked me to, and he tossed it to me."

The leopard was smiling again, I'm not sure how I could tell, but I could see the word 'commission' written all over his face. "English is one of the head men here. He's notoriously fickle, only gives his cards out to people he's willing to work with. I'm surprised you got one, he usually only

works with other felines."

I was just about to ask if this was getting me any closer to a support job when a commotion broke out that you could hear through the walls. If you'd had the presence of mind to watch, it would have been entertaining. One moment everyone in the office around us were talking, the next a scream and a thunk, then we were all trying to stare straight through a blank wall.

I guess that's how we were all taken by surprise, when rather than coming through the plaster we were all focused at, he came, quite normally, through the door instead.

The guy was massive, that was about I could really tell you at first. He was at least eight feet tall, and more than twice as wide as me. A minotaur of some description, and he was pissed.

He must have been yelling something, but to me it sounded more like random vowels and grunts. I did start to get the message however when he began breaking stuff.

He came through the room head down, horns looking more than a little dangerous. For a moment he looked up, appearing confused, but when he saw the windows he made a beeline for them. The only problem – we were in the way.

It didn't take much time for him to make it here, while the distance was at least a few meters he covered it in only two or three steps, his cracked hooves clicking on the polished tile floor.

For a bunch of people working in a bounty hunting office, the lot of them screaming like nursing pups. They were scattering everywhere, I was a little surprised no one had run face first into the minotaur they were trying to escape.

Graham however seemed to be the exact opposite. I was no hunter, but with his reaction I would almost be surprised if he was even a carnivore. He sat rooted to his chair, eyes wide, almost the size of saucers.

"Come on man, time to move. Time to move, now!" I vaulted over the desk and yanked him on the shoulder. He was seemingly oblivious to me, eyes locked unseeing, on the living mountain clomping towards us.

"Now or never man, let's go." The beast was almost upon us, his eyes never leaving the window, it didn't even seem to notice we were practically under foot – or that he would have to walk through the desk for that matter.

While I didn't really want to leave the leopard in the line of fire, I was more than a little preoccupied with being crushed under hoof myself. I gave one last wrench and dragged the cat from of his seat. He wasn't much more use standing; it was all I could do to shove him out to the side. He landed on his face, a split second before the bull swatted the desk to shrapnel.

The bad news was that although the kitty might be safe now, I had ended up laying on the floor amongst the splintered remains of his desk, staring at the scuffed and chipped hooves of the minotaur. For a moment I thought he was just going to continue walking, and I'd end up with a cracked skull, but for better or worse he stopped and looked down.

He reached down with one hand and lifted me by the scruff of my neck, not only did he rip my best vest to shreds. It also hurt – a lot.

Keep in mind, pups can be carried around by the scruff with no problems, but once you get larger (and add a hundred pounds) it doesn't work so well anymore. I could feel things pop and rip in my shoulders. This was going to hurt when I had to move again, but I had more immediate things to worry about right now.

He hauled me up to his face and sniffed me, seeming almost unconcerned with the people flitting in and out of the office. Each nostril was nearly big enough for me to fit a whole fist in; when he sniffed me, I could feel a rush of air. At least it was better than when he breathed out. Two words: breath mints. The dude could really benefit from a truck load of industrial strength breath savers.

I saw a flash in his large dark brown eyes. This guy may be no genius, but he knew he had a hostage.

He turned, and backed towards the large windows, holding me to his chest like an anemic fuzzy shield.

It was just in time for him too. As he turned a bull dog and fox skidded into the room. I think the cavalierly just arrived.

My first feeling was 'I'm saved!', but this was quickly followed by a 'Yeah, right.' These two were about the same size as me, and somehow I really doubted that they would be able to do anything more to this monster than kick him in the shins.

"Put him down, come peacefully, and you won't be hurt." The bull dog sounded boastful, but you'll have to excuse me if I don't think a guy half a head shorter than me is going to do much in this situation. The minotaur was able to heft me around without much of a thought, I only came half-way up his chest.

I heard a voice in my ear, so low I thought I'd imagined it, "Don't struggle, pup. I just want out of here. If you play along, we'll both walk away without a scratch." The voice was deep, and while I wouldn't call it cultured, it was a long way from the grunts of a moment ago. I was going to try and respond, but it's a bit hard when someone is holding you by the back of the neck, cutting off most of your air flow.

"Don't act stupid, put the hostage down." The dog took a step forward; perhaps he was the bounty hunter who had brought the guy in to start with, though I have no idea how he could have brought in a guy twice his size. He acted like he knew what he was doing, but I doubted he was really ready for this.

The fox who had charged in with him seemed to have lost his steam, he hung back by the door looking skittish and hopping from one foot to another. I may have been reading him wrong, but I'd bet he'd be bolting for the hall on the first sign of trouble. Not that I blamed him, but not exactly the strong and brave reaction I would have expected from a professional bounty hunter.

I heard a groan beside me, Graham had woken up and was crawling away, good for him. For a moment, we all spared a quick glance his way while he dragged himself out of the line of fire; I guess that was all they were looking for.

Like a moron, he screamed when he jumped. I'm not really sure what he was, perhaps a panther or something of the like, but the scream was all the minotaur needed to react. He must have been hiding behind one of the nearby desks to the right of us. It was an impressive leap; he almost landed right on the bull's back.

I say almost, because the big guy was faster than he looked. A quick twist at the waist and he flung me around like a meaty mace. My chest connected with the cat in mid leap. I heard a crunch more than I felt it at first. I must have cracked at least two ribs.

A quick wash of pain proved me right, I think I mentioned that I'm a wimp when it comes to pain, well, it's true. If I hadn't had both feet off the ground I would have been looking for a nice dark corner to go and roll into now. Every breath felt like a stab of pain, if breathing had been hard a moment ago, it was near impossible now.

"Get back!" The minotaur had some volume when he wanted it, my ears were ringing. The cat had ended up in a black pile on the floor. I think I'd connected with his head, crimson was leaking out around him. For his trouble the bull gave him a swift kick that sent the dazed body in a shallow ark towards the wall. He landed in a crumpled heap, looking more like a disjointed shadow than a body.

A quick whispered "Sorry." in my ear and he was back up to full volume. "Next person who tries anything is dead. Do you hear me? You're dead." His mouth was so close to my ear that when he

spoke my vision blurred.

I could feel us moving, we were slowly making our way backward towards the windows, only a few oversized piles of paper and a half-dead potted plant stood in the way.

"Do you really want to be doing that, bucko?" You know those scenes in the theater when the hero arrives and everyone takes a half step back so you can see him? Well this was kind of like that. The lion I'd meet from this morning was standing in the doorway, smiling. Only problem was he was soaking wet with a bath towel slung over his shoulder.

I never knew a minotaur could growl, but this one did. I got the feeling they knew each other, the lion just kept grinning.

"I just brought you in once, didn't I? Don't make me get all sweaty again," the lion said. In one smooth motion, his smile expanded into a snarl. While the minotaur may be large, he had nothing on this lion when it came to growling, I could almost feel it radiating through the air.

My feet twitched as I tried to find purchase to get myself out of the line of fire. This was going from bad to much, much worse.

"Last chance, jack. Let the pup go, or I go through him." He held his hand up at a cocked angle, back and level to his head. He had claws that put mine to shame - you could almost see the sun glint off them.

In return the bull's hand came up to my head, roughly grasping my left ear. "One more step and I start pulling pieces off."

And the bloody lion took that single, deliberate step forward.

If I get out of this in one piece, I'll kill him.

Big and ugly didn't bother to say anything this time. Next thing I knew, I was flying through the air. I got a good view of the minotaur's tail as he turned and crashed through the windows. They exploded outwards in a shattering of glass, I was just glad I was out of the way of the shards; they came hailing down around us like razors of ice rain.

I wasn't thankful for long, by the time he was off the ledge I had a new problem to worry about – namely a lion who felt like he was built out of tawny bricks.

"Oof." At least I didn't hit him face first. My shoulder made contact with his chest. The blow had enough force to drive the wind from me. Somehow he managed to stay standing.

"Fancy meeting you again so soon, mate." He yanked me back on my feet before I even had the chance to collapse into a dignified heap. "You're with me."

He gave me a quick look over, I guess he wanted a body with at least some sibilance of consciousness before moving on. Grabbed by the wrist I was being dragged unceremoniously towards the broken windows, the last place I wanted to be.

"Whoa, find yourself another helper – I don't even work here yet!" I said, trying to pull free.

His fingers were like an iron band on my wrist. The more I struggled the closer I seemed to be to slitting myself open on his claws.

"I just hired you, welcome to the family. You'll get your complimentary jacket in the mail."

I had just the presence of mind to avoid slicing my feet open on any of the shards that lined the floor. The lion had his smile back, I would have asked him if he'd been in the cream, but he probably would have just laughed me off.

"Smell of the hunt, eh mate?" He stood on the lip of the windows, looking down the one story drop to the hard black asphalt below. Near the head of the alleyway I could see the minotaur's bulk picking up speed before he skidded around the corner, hooves almost sliding out from beneath him.

"Once more into the breach!" the cat cried.

And he pushed me.

I'll admit the fall wasn't too far, I've fallen furtherer on occasion, but it's never fun, especially when you're not expecting it. My ribs were still knitting from the thwacking I'd gotten just moments ago, so I did my best to avoid any additional damage.

A quick kick off the side of the building got me falling with at least a little horizontal motion. When I felt the hard ground scratch my pads of my feet, I let my legs crumple, and twisted my body to roll. I was trying to keep as much weight as I could off my damaged ribs, not that it did much good, it still felt like I was being force fed fire.

I must have tumbled at least a couple of feet, ended up on my back I could see the lion above. He seemed to be looking more intently at me then at the escaping quarry.

Unlike my flop to the ground, he leapt with a cat like elegance that was unsurprising. He even managed a quick flip in midair that I was quite sure was completely for my benefit.

I decided to get to my feet unassisted; he'd been yanking me around enough already. My gut was still on fire, but it was getting better. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

"You're the pup I met from this morning, right? I saw your regen then, mate. I'm assuming you didn't lose it in the last few hours."

I just grunted as a followed him down the alleyway, skirting puddles and jumping over boxes. I felt a wet pop in my chest as a rib snapped back in place. Finally.

We skidded out into the back street at the end of the alleyway. The bull was nowhere to be seen.

"Which way did he go?" English looked at me, his golden eyes intent, making me more than a little nervous.

"How should I... oh." I lowered my nose to the ground and took a whiff. I don't track much, so it took me a few moments. He'd made a break south towards the busy quarters section of the city. If he could make it to the streets full of people I'd never be able to track him.

I pointed with a thumb, the lion grinned. "Good job, you're better than Huston ever was." And we were off. While I was no tail dragger, the lion was fast. It was taking everything I had just to keep him in sight.

Down the back street, we broke onto a main thoroughfare, my tail dropped. There was no way we could track him amongst the mass of people. Then I heard a scream to my right and the words 'bull in a china shop' came to mind.

He moved through the mass like an over-sized container ship through the sea, leaving ripples and a void behind him everywhere he went. It was actually easier to try and overtake him here, while he had to push people out of the way and fight the slow moving masses, all we had to do was follow in his wake. As he was over twice my size it wasn't much of a problem.

English almost had hold of his tail when the bull started showing his new trick. Rather than pushing his way through people, he began tossing them over his shoulder. Before I knew it both of us were having close encounters with one or more bystanders. They may say that cats always land on their feet, but this one was as flat on his back as I was.

Once I managed to disentangle myself from someone who was green, scaly, and a dead-eye shot with a hand bag, we were back on the chase. The minotaur had managed his way to the fire escape of an old ten story apartment building. It had faded brick walls that had almost bleached to gray, and a crumbling facade that had more holes in it then the city's electrical grid.

With a leap, he was on the ladder. To be honest I was surprised it could hold him. He scrambled his way up, but not before he'd yanked up the ladder with the scream of sliding metal.

The jump was too high, even for a cat. That didn't stop English from trying though, after a few attempts straight up he began digging his claws into the soft, time-worn brick. He almost made it half

way up before it peeled under his fingers like moldy bread, crumbling from the wall.

He hit the ground, wheeling backwards into me, where for a change I was the one holding him up.

"There's more than one way to gut a bull, come on." He was off again with a growl rolling under his breath.

We had to track around at least two corners before we found an unlocked door hidden amongst the boxes and stray garbage. Kicking the worn wood rewarded us with a dark hallway, unbeseiged by even a single brave sunbeam.

"Afraid of the dark, mate?" He glanced at me over his shoulder with a wink.

"I've gotten my ribs broke, then thrown out a second story window in the last five minutes. What's the dark going to do to me?" I replied.

He laughed and began into the shadows without a pause.

It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dark, I just started by following the dim tawny colored shadow that weaved and bobbed in front of me. My nose wrinkled, as bad as my place was, this was worse. I was surprised it was still standing.

The smell of rot was pervasive, leaching through the chunks of plaster that were missing from the walls and ceiling. While I couldn't make out any color in the gloom, I was sure whatever it had been was long since faded and stained to a wet mosaic of off gray and pea soup green.

It took some looking, and a few startled beggars who clutched rags to their chests, but we found a stairway. I almost wished we hadn't.

The fire escape on the outside had been rusted and brittle, but the interior stairway was at least a third outright missing. What water damage and moss had begun, it almost looked like a hyperactive weightlifter with a love of sledgehammers had finished.

"You first, mate." The lion extended his hand towards the death trap and bowed in mock sincerity.

"Me? Are you crazy! You're the bounty hunter here. Let's see you do something for a change."

"If I break a leg I'm out of work for six months, you're out for a day. You do the math, mate. Besides, you were joining up for some excitement, right?"

I just growled and muttered under my breath. I'd better get paid for this.

I had to leap the first two steps; they were nothing but a mass of splintered lumber, good for little more than burning. The third step complained loudly at my weight, but held. That's when I realized that we were missing a handrail.

The handrail is one of those things that you never notice until you don't have it, and I was itching for one now. I did my best to lean on the wall as I took another step. So far so good.

"Faster, mate, he's ten floors up, and we haven't got all day." The cat was suddenly behind me, giving me a shove forward. I almost lost my balance and had to take the next few steps at a run to get it back. With the lion behind me, we sprinted up as quickly as we could, having to leap most of the steps.

It wasn't until the sixth floor that I hit a bad step. To say I was surprised would be an understatement, you could have detonated a bomb next door and I wouldn't have noticed. All I could see right then was just how much further six stories fall is then the one I'd already taken.

I was pitching forward, pivoting on one leg as the rotten board crumpled beneath the other. My tail must have looked like a convenient handle, as that's just what he yanked to pull me back. For a moment I'd almost wished he'd let me fall. Being held by the scruff is bad – this felt like he was going to tear my spine out.

"Careful, mate. I don't want to have to scrape my new partner off the floor."

Partner? Since when? I fought down the lump in my chest as I tried to keep my heart from beating its way out through my newly healed ribs.

We were off again, but this time I was keeping one eye to make sure my grinning friend was never more than a step behind me. Not that I wanted any more emergency chiropractic work from his tender meat-hooks, but it beat a long fall and a short stop.

The door to the roof had that halo of light that you see around window blinds on a bright day. I stood back and let English kick it open. He didn't even bother. A quick run, and it fell before him as though it had never been.

The late afternoon sun streamed in, blinding after even just a few moments in the cloying darkness of the decrepit building.

The roof was all but barren, little to see but tarred gravel with green shoots snaking up here and there. A short brick wall edged around the building, not more than perhaps three feet high.

It was on this wall that the minotaur sat, still looking down towards the street, as though still waiting for us to work our way up the fire escape. He turned quickly when the door transformed into a splintered mess.

English was growling again, his fur on edge, it almost doubled his size. "No escape this time, Marcus. I've brought you in once today, and now you're going back."

The minotaur just held up his hands as he stood up. "Not again, please, not again." He took a half-step away from the wall, "I'm guilty. I'm guilty, Okay? I did what they said, I'm a thief." His hands went fell to his sides. He almost seemed to shrink, bluster fading before us, though still massive. "I stole food, Okay? What else am I supposed to do? I can barely pass the IQ test for citizenship – no one wants to hire someone like me."

English was inching closer as he spoke, Marcus didn't seem to notice, I doubt it was what he was seeing right now. "I've got a family, what else am I supposed to do? I can't let them go hungry," His hooves shifted in the tar covered gravel with the sound of scraping stone. "I can't work, I can't learn, but I can't fail as a father."

The lion was a little over two lengths from him "Not my problem, Marcus. You earned yourself a bounty, and it's my job to bring you in. Mayhaps you can't work, but I can. And I will. You're coming in with me one way or another, chap. It's your call. We can all walk away from this, you might get lucky and serve hard time in the mines, see your kids again in a few years, or I drag you off in pieces."

English took another step forward, the minotaur took one back. It was hard to believe this was the same beast who had tossed me around like a rag doll, the fire gone from him now. His eyes wheeled widely, seemingly not being able to lock on to either of us, but rather turning upwards to the empty sky above.

Another step from the lion and the minotaur was up against the wall, hands grasping for purchase behind him. I was never sure what happened first, if it was English's dive or the minotaur's topple over the edge. Hooves were never designed for purchase on gravel. They did little more than skid out from under him as he pivoted over the wall, his massive bulk doing him no service here. I watched his hands slip away as he disappeared from sight.

English was there in a second, looking over the edge. I met him, just in time to see a living person explode into a pool of crimson red on the cracked sidewalk below. I wished I'd been a heart-beat slower.

"Send it all to the gods!" The lion spat, his British accent slipping, "I brought him in once, and the incompetents at the office couldn't even hold him. I'll slice them, those plant eaters, I'll feed them their own-" His head snapped around as he realized that I still stood beside him. Like a mask, his

smiling face slid in to cover the barred fangs that had been on display but the blink of an eye ago. The accent had returned again like the transformation of a street brawler to an upper class aristocrat.

"Drat, mate. Well, we're not getting the live bounty on this one – care to split the dead?"

I just stood there for a moment, stunned. I'd seen people die before, but not like this, not after they'd surrendered. You see the cops and bounty hunters track people down all the time, but there's something different about a running death, fighting, not with your hands up warding off a blow that never came.

"Mate? You still in there?" He stepped forward, a look of concern crossing his face. One finger came out to tap me in the middle of the forehead, thankfully with the claw retracted.

I swatted his hand away. "Does that happen often?"

"What?" He sat on the edge, inches from where the minotaur had been, tail dangling out into the void.

"That." I pointed towards the edge, "Killing them." I had to suppress a shiver. All of a sudden, despite the sun streaming down, I felt cold, as though we were back in the bowels of the crumbling building.

English slouched on the ledge, "Well..." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, "Let's put it this way, mate. You saw my little outburst there? I'd be greatly obliged if you never repeated it to anyone. I don't lose my query often, and my face even less. It doesn't behoove a hunter like me to lose his temper, with any luck it's something you shan't see again. But, I guess if I want a new partner, I've already shown you the worst I can be. I'm hoping with a touch of the gods' luck, next time you'll be able to see something a bit cheekier."

I walked over and leaned on the wall next to him, a quick peek over the edge dissuaded me from perching on it like he did. "You keep saying partner – I don't even work at Storm Front."

He waved away my question like another would a gnat. "Not to worry, mate. I'm a founder, and their top earner, I've been pounding the halls longer than anyone, bar perhaps the janitor. As long as I keep bringing in the big money they'll jump when I tell them to. Hiring you won't even be the flick of a whisker."

"Why me? If you're so good, you could have the pick of anyone you want."

He laughed, "Because they all work there. Everyone wants to partner with the top men. Everyone wants the money, everyone wants the prestige, no one wants to actually do any work."

"What about the tiger?"

"Houston? He's a prat." He slid out his claws and began admiring them in the sun. "A talented prat, but a prat none the less. Did you know he took the rest of the week off, just for getting thrown to the ground? He likes losing even less than I do. The human who laid him out wouldn't have made it to processing in one piece if I hadn't followed him back."

He held out his arm, I hadn't even noticed the bandage that covered it from wrist to elbow, colored to match his tawny fur. "He can hunt, but he does it for all the wrong reasons. Not to be good, and not to makes things any better, but for the money, for the blood. His highest goal is to get a record for body count." He twitched his lips in a grimace. "He'll likely make it too. He doesn't like the contracts to bring 'em in alive. If he can't rip some flesh off, then he's not much for it."

"Heh, so I guess he's not so much for the whole 'do upon your fellow man' type stuff?" I said.

"Yep. He'd probably quit the job if he couldn't rip people to shreds. Anyway, what did you say your name was again, pup?"

I slid down the wall to sit on the gravel. It was rough and pointy on my backside, but my adrenaline high was wearing off and I felt like I'd been sent through the wringer. "Tommy, Tommy Taggart."

English twisted around, putting his feet back on the ground to look at me. "Wait a tick, I know that name."

I could feel my cheeks burning under my fur; you would think I'd be used to this by now. "Probably, my father is Griss Taggert, and my uncle is Gowan."

He was suddenly squatting in front of me, eyes intent. "You had better not be playing with me, mate." He took my muzzle in one hand and turned my head left and right, this was getting annoying. "Your family is a legend in our circles." He let me go, "You look enough like him - it might just be true."

I gave him a shove, he backpedaled, keeping his balance. "Back off, cat. I'm Griss' son. If you want proof, I'll take him your tongue for an autograph." I tried to sound threatening but he just laughed.

"I might just take you up on that, Tommy." He nodded slightly. "Just not on a piece of my anatomy. Speaking of anatomy, we'd best be getting back to the office. We need to get a recovery team dispatched before there's not enough of that big lummox left to claim bounty on."

We walked to the other side of the building and leaped to the fire escape. The descent was more leisurely than the climb up had been. If the rusting metal could support the bull's weight then we would be no problem.

Rounding the corner we got out first up close look at the body. At this range I pretty much wanted to puke in the gutter. The corpse had been split open like a water balloon, guts and viscera were spread a good fifteen feet in all directions.

English took a quick look before continuing. "Come on, mate, don't get too involved. Despite what they might tell you, you don't want to spend the time to get desensitized to this."

I hurried on.

It may have been nearing five o'clock, but the Storm Front building was as busy as it had been earlier, if not more so. It seemed that people need folks tracked down no matter what the hour. As we walked I deposited what remained of my good vest in the trash, trying to brush what filth I could from my fur.

We got to the front desk, with the same girl who I'd talked to before; she batted her eyelashes at English. "What can I get for you, E?"

He turned to me, "Who was the guy you were talking to?"

"Um..." I had to think for a minute. "Graham, Graham something..."

"Joan, get Graham from HR down here, now. I've got a job for him." He lounged across the desk like he owned it.

"You've got it, E." She was off, didn't even bother to send a messenger.

"Nice little girl, Joan," He said, sparing me a glance after she had rounded the corner. "Met her?"

"Briefly." I shrugged.

He laughed again. "I have, very nice girl."

It was only a few moments before the two of them were back down. Graham had a bandage on one side of his head, but otherwise didn't look any worse for wear.

"Tommy, you're still alive!" He ran up and shook my hand. "I didn't know what happened to you once you jumped out of the window. You saved my life!" He kept pumping my hand like letting go would bring the bull back.

"Don't mention it, Graham." I tried to pull my hand back, but he didn't want to let go. "Really, I would have done it for anyone."

The leopard smiled faltered, "Yeah, I guess so, but thanks anyway."

"Listen, Graham," English broke in, put a hand on the smaller cat's shoulder, "I've got a job for you."

"Anything, English."

"Tommy's my new partner. Make it happen."

"But, what about Huston?" The leopard's eyes widened.

"Transfer him. Brown needs a partner. They're both heavy weights, put them together. Gods know, maybe Brown can even knock some sense into him. Do what you need to do, just get Tommy here hired and put with me." He turned to go before pausing and flicking his tail. "And get him a golden contract, no partner of mine is going to be begging for table scraps. He can hunt, and I want him to be paid for it."

He made for the stairwell with one last parting shot, "Tommy, see me in my office when he's done with you." Then he was gone.