

The Hunters



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Chapter 6: New Best Friend

Coming off from the adrenaline high, I almost fell asleep during the hiring process.

"Tommy? You still there, bud?"

My head snapped up as I opened my eyes, the leopard's face about an inch from mine. "Gah! Don't do that." I had a pounding headache, and being able to count the veins in his eyes wasn't doing me any favors.

"Sorry, sorry," He said, scampering back around his desk in the newly repaired HR department, workmen were still patching over the window and uprighting potted plants. "We're almost done, I promise." He shuffled some papers and began digging around on his desk again. He did that a lot.

"Can't I just sign on the dotted line and get this over with? Just show me where to scrawl and I'll do it in blood. Anything to get some sleep, and a wedge of chocolate the size of my head." He smiled when I said that.

"Last page, I swear." He'd said that about a dozen times now. "You don't know how lucky you are. Thanks to English you're starting out at almost five times the rate anyone else does." He looked at me enviously. "Keep moving like this and you'll have the world tugging your whiskers in short order."

I grinned and sat back, my head lolling over the back of the seat, giving me a good, if upside down view of the busted door. "Somehow I don't think I'll have to worry about that, my luck never holds out that way."

"Might as well take it while you've got it, bud." He held out another paper, "Sign here, and welcome to the family."

My hand was cramped, but I managed one last scratch at the bottom of the mile long paper, the squiggle looked only vaguely like my signature, but it did the job. He extended his hand, I took it, and was pleased to note my arm shook only slightly.

"Let's get you cleaned up, Tommy. I'm guessing you don't much want to be seeing English when he can smell you coming two floors away."

He was about right, between the blood and sweat the gods only knew what I had ground into my fur. I'm surprised that I hadn't made any enemies in the room.

We headed out the door and down, past the main floor to the basement. While it wasn't as nice down here as above ground, it was still better than anyplace I'd been. It ripped the legs off of my last

cubical. A few countless turns later we'd gotten to someplace or other, every hallway down here looked the same.

Graham tossed me a stack of towels and pointed towards a door conveniently labeled 'MEN's' in large black stencil. "When you don't smell like a walking garbage heap, don't forget to check in with English." He jutted a thumb back upstairs, "He's on the third floor. You can't miss his office. It's the only one without voodoo dolls stacked outside."

I wasn't sure what to expect from the shower room. To be honest, I've never been in a job where I'd needed one before. Sure there was high school, but only a moron showers at school – the classes were bad enough, I'll keep away from those showers thank you very much.

Whatever it was I was expecting to see, I wasn't disappointed, or surprised either for that matter. The place was deserted this hour, its dozen or so stalls empty and dry.

Other than the omnipresent mold that I think you'll find in every public shower, the place was clean and well enough lit.

The water was hot, and there was lots of it, right now that's all that mattered. I leaned into the stream and turned it up as high as it would go. For a few moments I just let it soak in, it may add ten pounds to my weight but it's worth it.

My mind wandered for a moment, I could almost see the minotaur's hands reaching as he fell, for just a split second I could swear I could see his eyes as he hit the ground and split into a million drops of blood flying in all directions. For as strong as he may have been, it hadn't helped him. No one could survive something like that, not him, not me. Regeneration needs a beating heart – and a pounding like that wouldn't have left me with one.

Some people got confused by the whole regeneration thing, it's not magic. Far as anyone has ever been able to tell my body just happens to be hyperactive when it comes to healing. I can only heal the same things as anyone else, I just do it faster.

I remember a doc warning me once about the whole regen issue, he'd put on a serious voice and predicted that my hyperactive body would one day create the very thing it couldn't 'heal'. The word cancer had been batted about the room. I shivered under the warm water. That was a thought I didn't need right now.

Suds dripped in my eyes from my matted down hair. I couldn't see a thing, but I heard the door squeak open over the sound of running water. I pushed my hair out of my face, the water sloshing to the floor below.

It was a bear, a big one. He strolled casually through the rows of showers, tossed a belt and some random clothing on the bench and walked into the stall beside me. The partitions came up to his chest, by comparison they were almost to my neck.

He looked down at me, dark brown fur blending into even darker green eyes.

"I don't know you. You must be English's new partner." His voice sounded like it came from the bottom of a well drowned in mud.

I tried to grin. "Tommy."

He didn't smile back, but did nod. "Brown." He kicked the water on with a swift foot to the pipes. "Word of advice, Tommy. English is an old friend of mine – good guy, not necessarily the best judge. Watch yourself. He doesn't stay in the lines. He may be untouchable, but you're not." He turned his back to me and began showering.

I decided it would be best to do the same. The water was the best thing I'd had in a long time, but present company was making me nervous. If Storm Front was footing the bill, I was going to use all the soap I wanted for once. I must have looked like a snowman, so covered in bubbles by the time I was done, even the ursine cracked a smile.

It took me a good forty five minutes to get the reek out of my fur, by that time Brown was long gone. I'd gotten the feeling he hadn't been here for the water.

The towels weren't new, but it was sheer luxury to be able to lay back on the bench with my tail and arms limply hanging, just staring up at the lights for a spell until I began to dry.

On my way out I even found a collection of red blazers stashed in a closet by the door. I took a moment to look in the mirror and preen. Okay, I'll admit it, I'm not much of one for fashion, and even less of one to care how I come across to others, but for a change I was starting to look respectable.

I barely filled out even a medium-small, but I figured I didn't do a bad job. Sure I was missing the muscles that everyone else seemed to be packing around, but I didn't cut a bad figure. With the way I'd been eating over the last few months I certainly didn't need to worry about pudge.

The red and yellow may not go all that well with my brown and cream fur, but I was able to at least avoid the angry fruit salad look.

It took me awhile to find my way back up to the surface. The basement was a maze of corridors and bulletin boards, more like an upscale army base than anything else. I finally managed to pop up to the main floor, art and glass. It kind of reminded me of what the KDP office could have looked like if they'd bothered, definitely the public face of the company. Of course I managed to find myself in a section I'd never been before, another fifteen minutes lost as I searched for a staircase. The second floor was a bit easier, a few big offices, and a couple blocks of holding cells I decided to studiously avoid. Through the windows I could see the sun getting ready to set, a dash of wine red sky, finishing its fade to blood.

The third floor was the only one I'd yet to see, from what I could tell only a single way led up. It had its own security guard, another bear, he put old Ralph back at KDP to shame. He took one look at me and tipped his hat over a black ursine face.

"Evening, sir. You're expected."

While he stood aside, I had no doubt that he could have kept me out without breaking a sweat. From the corner of my eye I saw a conveniently placed reinforced door next to the guard station. I had the feeling it was undoubtedly sound proofed too, anyone unlucky enough to end up in it would likely be staying for a while.

I'd yet set foot on the steps before another figure came stalking down them. Huston's bulk took the whole staircase, and once he laid eyes on me I felt the insatiable need to find a shadow to cower in.

"You." He leveled an orange furred finger at me. "I'll kill you, fido. I'll kill you for this." He didn't speed up, simply continued down the stairs towards me as I backed away. "You stole my gig, I'll rip your arms off!" I'm guessing he just heard he wasn't English's partner anymore.

Just as he set foot on the floor the guard's hand clamped over the tiger's shoulder. The bear leaned close to whisper a few words into the cat's ear. Huston's eyes closed to slits as a growl rumbled through his chest.

For a second I almost thought the feline would turn on the guard, but after a moment he simply stalked off, shoving me roughly into the wall in the process.

I peeled myself off the wall after Huston had cleared the corner. "Thanks man."

The guard simply tipped his hat again. "Don't mention it, sir. All in a day's work." He ushered me up the stairs.

You know those rich neighborhoods, where you feel people are going to call for the cops when they just see you walking through? The third floor was something like that.

Indirect lighting from bulbs hidden somewhere in the ceiling lit the hallway, and not a single one was out. Thick green carpeting stretched from one wall to the other, plush enough that my feet left

little footprints in it as I walked. Objects de art lined the walls every few steps, each in its little alcove.

A young white bunny sat perched at a reception desk. While she had definitely been hired for her assets, I doubt they were her dictation skills.

"You must be Tommy." She had the eyes and voice that only came from years of practice. While she was professional in all ways, receptionist wasn't quite what those eyes spoke. "I'll call E for you."

She left me standing there for a few moments, from somewhere in the shadows, I could hear faint music in the middle distance.

"English will see you now." She was back; her smile seemed less polished, more real, as though she'd just heard a joke. I smiled back. People like her always looked better that way.

She pointed down the hallway. "You can't miss it." And she was right, there weren't a lot of offices on this floor, perhaps only a dozen, and of them only two had lights. The one she pointed at was open, yellow glow spilling out, rock music crashing close on its heels.

I stood on the threshold of the doorway, deciding it would be safer to keep any limbs I wanted out here. The office inside was every bit as plush as the hallway without, but decorated in colors of tan and brown leather, looking more like some old boys club then a corporate haunt.

On just about every horizontal surface papers thrived, coating the desk, floor, chairs, shelves, and atop it all was hunting gear. I'd never seen such a collection of knives, ropes, and cuffs before – and I grown up with a hunter.

In the middle of it all was the lion, kicking up a paper storm in time to some song I felt I should know, 'All night and every day'. If you've ever heard the phrase 'dance like no one's watching', well, he was managing that, and then some. I had the distinct feeling that if I got caught up in one of those high kicks or hand swipes I'd start to lose digits. Or become his new dance partner, I'm not sure which.

I leaned on the door jam for a few moments, waiting as the music came to an end and the needle slid into static. "Quite a show," was all I could say as he switched it off.

"Heh, you should see me if I find another Rush album, my last one cracked." He glanced my way, quickly looking me up and down. "I see you're settling in nicely. I didn't even know we made jackets that small."

I balled up an on hand paper, lobbing it at him. He sidestepped while walking to his desk, seemingly without noticing. "Grab a seat, mate; just toss the papers. People keep bringing them in here, why seems to be a mystery – I never read 'em."

He wasn't kidding, the stack on the chair must have been as thick as my arm, not quite ready to send them scattering I set them on their neighbors at my feet.

"I'm going to assume you accepted my offer shall I, mate?" His feet were up on the desk, behind him I could see a nice view of the street below.

"Pretty much, you made me an offer I couldn't really refuse." And I like to eat for that matter.

"Nice to hear. You know what you'll be doing then?" I shook my head, I was hoping it was going to be something at least a step above his personal slave. "More or less all I need from you is to avoid being a prat. I know you can hunt," He took my look of disbelief in stride, "even if you don't, any child of your father is bound to be better then he looks."

His feet came down off the desk as he continued. "More than that, I need someone who will help me do what this company is here for – hunt, just hunt. I've been here since the start, decades." He chuckled. "It doesn't seem that long now. I'm the only one left who neither quit, nor ended up on the menu. I don't run the place, that's the CEO's job, couldn't if I wanted to. Anyway, you think you can do that? Or should I be looking further down the food chain for a new partner? I hear we've a real ferocious squirrel working accounting."

"Works for me." I held out my hand, he just stared at it for a moment before reaching over the desk to shake. "But, one condition."

"Deal it..." He leveled his golden eyes at me, I felt a shiver. I might have backed down, but compared to my Dad he was an amateur when it came to intimidation.

"I'm not my father." I leveled back a gaze of my own, I'd learned at least that much from him. "I'm not the great hunter, I don't have twenty years experience running a pack. And above all," I edged my face closer. Impressively, he held his ground. "I don't kill. What happened out there today?"

The moment ended, he was the first one to break as he looked down. "I screwed up." It was simple, but he said it like it was some huge revelation. "I screwed up and someone died. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen in this line of work. If you want a world where you're never going to kill, where you're never going to have blood on your hands, you'd better go back to your desk job."

"I can't promise you that you're not going to kill, Tommy. Only you can do that. I've killed..." He paused for a moment, tapping off fingers "twenty-nine times. Almost six hundred busts, and with Marcus today, I'm up to twenty-nine." He laughed again, this time it was deep in his chest. "I used to say I didn't keep count, but we all do. You never forget when you pull a man's life out through his chest." He looked back up again, in my direction, but not at me, "I can deal with your demands, Tommy, but can you?"

"Yes, I can."

He threw his hands up in a mock show of exasperation. "There you have it then! Two young men trying to act like two old men, debating the deeper meanings of life when the night is still so young and pretty!" He vaulted the desk and was on his way to the door. "Come on, Tommy, my man, you just caught your first contract, we need to break you in – dinner's on me."

By the time we made it back out to the hall the bunny was gone, the place was all but empty for the night, only a single light crawled from under the other office door. When English turned off the hall light, all we could see by was the faint stars through the windows.

The streets, however, still had life. People much like us were still dribbling from the buildings, working their way eastward out of the district.

I tried to follow English, but he just pushed me ahead. "It's your night, let's see your places. The meal may be on me, but the location is yours." I didn't really have anyplace better to go, so I started heading back towards the restaurant district that I'd frequented for the last year, over by my apartment.

"Sure you wouldn't rather pick?" I asked. "For me, anything above cardboard is equal to champagne." He just laughed again and pushed me on.

The restaurant district was buzzing with light, sounds, and above all, smells, as it always did this time of night. A thousand hungry bodies nose to tail, and permeating it all the smell of at least as many cuisines.

It was an interesting show to watch English walk in a crowded place like this. On one hand you could see the easy cat that was ready with a smile on his lips, flowing like liquid around people as they walked down the narrow crooked street, guarded on both sides by the anorexic light from the ancient cast iron lampposts. On the other you could see the bounty hunter in him, watching every action, or at least trying to, and leaping from one shadow to the next.

From the corner of my eye I could see that people recognized him, for better or worse. Some just smiled, others pointed, yet others veered away, disappearing the moment he came in sight.

"Anything you're partial too?" I asked, looking over my shoulder to see him lurking in a shadow, half unseen.

"Whatever suits your fancy, mate – it's your show."

I left him there, hidden in plain sight; you could stand three feet from him and never twitch a whisker. I wandered for a moment before my feet took me back to the Cub-Caf stall. With the few extra dollars in my pocket now I'm sure I could go somewhere better, much better, but it just seemed to be my place.

The same pup was working, I smiled again – didn't get much of one in return. A double order of moose, and half a dozen mice, followed by a super-size cookie. I had no idea what English was into, so I just played it safe and grabbed an apple-gravy. This time I left a tip.

English was right where I'd left him, eyes alternating between watching me and the crowd. It was starting to get creepy.

A quick toss and he had his moose. I didn't bother to toss the mice, they had a habit of shifting in midair, and they almost always escaped when the containers popped open on the ground. Chasing down your food is a bad idea in the restaurant district, as the pounce reflex tended to get you more company than you really wanted.

He took the meat with a smile, but gave me an odd look about the mice while I wondered off looking for a free bench. As always, seating around here was at a premium, especially during dinner – and we were right in the middle of it now.

A little looking and I found a seat, it took some staring at a couple of tangu, but I got it. I was happy enough, with all this food my mouth was watering so much that I was making my own little puddle.

We didn't say much for a while, how can you with a mouth full of warm, dripping moose meat? When we got to the mice I got that look again.

"I thought you didn't kill?" English said.

"I'm a wolf, I eat." I tossed him a shrug. "I don't hunt though. I grew up with my father, so I didn't have to. I've always eaten meat, but I just can't wrap my head around tearing someone or something apart to get to it." I lifted the first mouse by the tail. "I know that animals aren't people, but some things are too close." I dropped the rodent and ended its suffering with a quick snap.

"I've only hunted once," I didn't know why I was telling him this, "years ago, when I was just coming out of being a pup. It was with my Dad, out in the forests to the east." I sat back, put my hands behind my head and looked up at what I could see of the stars, food forgotten. "It was a nice place I guess, if you like that kind of thing. Big trees, the pavement beneath our feet long cracked and covered with moss. It's strange, but the one thing I remember is the sun, it was cloudy. You could see the sun break through the billowing cotton here and there. Sometimes it even made it through the trees in pale yellow sheets that evaporated just before you could touch them." I spared a look his way to see if I'd managed to bore him. He was up on the bench, feet towards me, head propped up on the arm, eyes intent.

"It was supposed to be my big day you know, get the blood on my claws, become a man and all that." I coughed back a laugh. Yeah, it was a laugh. "I'd been looking forward to it for months; my father had likely been planning even longer. Everything was perfect, we wandered for a few hours, he showed me everywhere he'd been, where he hunted, where he'd lived his life. Then we found a doe, I'm sure it was no accident. For a man like him? He likely knew she was there before she did."

"It was lined up perfectly, we were behind her, the wind was in our faces, and the sun, it broke through, I could have reached out and scratched it with my claws. I did everything he taught me, it was as if I couldn't do anything but. Like clockwork, like I'd done it a million times before..."

"What happened?" English asked. He sat up a bit; I suppose it was nice to have an attentive audience.

"I stalked, I leaped, I felt my claws dig in and the blood well out. If you'd asked me then, I

would have told you it was the best moment of my life. I dug my teeth into the back of her neck. It tasted just the way it was supposed to. I could feel her pulse under me and smell her fear."

"Then I made a mistake." I didn't bother to hide it. While it may not sound like much, my voice broke. I paused for a moment and let myself clear, I needed it. "I let go. Not much mind you," Gods, I hated how it sounded, like I was trying to defend myself. "Just enough to adjust my grip. In an instant, her head was around. Heh, I almost got sucker punched by her nose. That's when I saw her eyes."

"They looked just like my father's, just like yours, just like a hundred people I could name. The terror in them was so... well, real, almost like ours. They were brown. I froze for an instant, and that's all it took. One kick of her back and I was flying through the air, not for long though – I found a tree in short order."

"I felt a snap in my leg, and well, the pain was there – but it was offhand, in a corner of my mind. All I could see were those eyes. I remember my father freaking, he never could bend his mind around my regeneration. I held on to his hand for dear life. Odd the things you remember, I can draw the scars on his palm from memory, even today. I'd be lying if I didn't say I held on because of the pain, it felt like molten metal flowing through my veins as my leg shifted and popped, but that wasn't the whole reason. He was my father, I knew what he would do next. He'd have brought me the doe's head, and likely snap every one of her legs in the process."

"The edges of my vision faded red, but I could still see her disappearing through the trees, as fast as her frantic energy could carry her – the bounties of my failed attempt to manhood still oozing on her back."

"Wow." That was all the lion said. The word spoke volumes.

Wow was a good word; I could get to like wow.

"My dad never blamed me for the lost doe; he always said he failed his first hunt too. Never understood why I couldn't go for a second though. I guess it was because I never could say it myself." I wrapped my arms around my chest. It was a warm night, but I didn't feel it. "Her eyes looked so... well, human isn't the right word. So real, so much like any person walking down the street. I could hear her screaming, see her throwing up her arms and pleading for her life. I couldn't do it, I couldn't kill her; just as I couldn't kill a cub walking down the street." I forced out a laugh, it sounded hollow, even to me. "I guess you were looking for a big bad wolf as a partner, and you got me. I may be a hunter by blood, but not by heart. I can't do it."

English twisted and sat up, his eyes staring out into the crowd. "Mate, I'd be lying if I said you were what I was expecting." He shook his mane, as though throwing off a bad memory. "We're about as different as the earth and air," He lifted one lip in a smile and flicked his eyes in a sideways glance, "but I think we can make this work."

"Oh yeah? What's your story?" I asked, leaning forward and trying to work out the kink that had appeared in my neck.

"Uh un, I don't kiss and tell on the first date. You'll have to earn that."

"What!?"

"Just kidding, mate. Let's just say that we've both come from less than ideal backgrounds, I'm as damaged goods as you are." His eyes were hard. I've never seen a lion cry, and I doubted this would be the first time, but he was either close to that, or killing something. "I hold close consul. Close as in one, me. What do you say we call it a night?"

"Works for me, but what's with all the buddy-buddy stuff? You don't exactly seem like the touchy feely kinda guy who likes to talk about feelings."

"Let's just say that when I'm trusting someone not to get me killed, I like to know why they've

decided to join up. I made that mistake with Huston. I don't plan on repeating it."

I took a look around as we stood up, all the food was gone. Figures. "Where's my cookie?"

He tried to put up an innocent face for a moment, before failing and dissolving into a grin.

"Here, take it. I've learned long ago, mate, never stand between a dog and his chocolate."

"That's a wolf, you poof-tailed tomcat." I swiped my prize from his out stretched hand, hugging it close to my chest in a show of mock affection.

"Where do you bunk, anyways?" he asked.

I cocked a thumb towards the hulking behemoth just visible in the night sky. "My hunk of junk is the joy just a couple of blocks over."

"Mate," He shook his head sadly, "we've got to get you into some style. How do you expect to impress your lady friends with a pad like that? I doubt you even have electricity."

"Barely." I waved as we parted ways in the street.

The climb up to my apartment seemed lighter today than it had in quite some time. The stairwell was dark as pitch, and the landings as rancid as ever, but things might just turn out for a change. I'm not sure why, but getting all that off my chest felt good. Sure my family knew the story, but I'd never really told it to anyone before. All English had done was listen, no coddling, no accusations. It felt good.

My door was open, as I'd left it. I dropped my cookie on the table to keep. I was hyped enough was it was, if I ate that I wouldn't get any sleep until the sunrise.

I could just see the moon from my window, rising full and silver over the crumbling towers of V-town. I was never much of a howler, but I felt like it now.

The window didn't open, it'd been stuck for years, but it didn't matter. I threw my head back, closed my eyes and let loose. Off note as always, but to me it was perfect.

Around me I could hear people shouting and hitting the walls, I didn't care. It took almost a minute, but someone joined me, just as ragged as I was. A few moments later another joined, and another.

Far off, I could almost imagine that I could hear my father singing along too.

My body must have forgotten that I managed to get a job, by the time I woke the sun was already well into the sky.

A quick stretch and scratch was all I had time for, I'd have to catch some breakfast on the way to the office. I'm late enough as it is – to think about that, English had never bothered to tell me what time I should be starting a day anyway.

I slipped on my Storm Front blazer and noticed a paper sticking out of the pocket – hadn't seen that last night. The handwriting was a near illegible scrawl, but I could just make it out.

Meet me at the café Bristol when you get up. No rush, I'll be there all morning.

-English

Worked well for me.

I'd never heard of the place, but the address was on the back of the paper. It was in a ritzy part of town I'd never been. The kind of place where they have trees lining the streets, and sweepers running up and down with brooms to catch all the fallen leaves that are just beginning to change.

The late morning traffic was light, I made good time. It may just be my imagination, but I'd

swear that the police were giving me a double glance. I caught one in the corner of my eye and he touched the brim of his hat with a smile. I knew Storm Front worked closely with the law, but this was a bit too close.

The streets got progressively cleaner as I walked. From decrepit high rises to run down houses, simple office buildings, and then finally, wide boulevards.

The café was a small single floor building, surrounded by a black wrought iron fence enclosing an expansive patio. A small flag pole hung both old British and French flags; they barely rippled in the still warm morning air.

It wasn't hard to find English, he was seated just off to the side, a spread fit for a king before him; it included everything from a dainty cup of tea to what looked like half a skewered pig. He had a waitress sitting across his lap. The young fox had her hand over her mouth, giggling in a way that made me think more of a school girl than a fully grown lady.

"Tommy! Over here!" he called, waving theatrically, as if there were any way I could miss him.

I waved back as I picked my way around the mostly empty seats. He whispered something in the vixen's ear and she headed off back to the café, his eyes watched her go.

"Late breakfast?" I asked as I slid into a seat across from him.

"Hm?" His eyes still followed her as she left. "Nah, I'm just here for the ambiance."

"Sure. The architecture is great around here, eh?"

"Exactly," he said as she slid about the corner and he twisted around to return his attention to me. "Always best to get started on the right foot, mate - got to make your plans for the day."

"Anyway," he continued, "you did a great job yesterday, but I'm hoping you're ready for your first real assignment."

"As ready as I'll ever be." I shrugged.

"About the best attitude you can have. Ours is a job you can enjoy, but it's best never to look forward to."

From under a pile of dishes and crumbs he pulled a stack of papers and spread them across the table. "This, mate, is who the government wants tracked down." It was a human, dark skin, middle age, not exactly athletic.

"What did he do?"

English put his hand over the guy's picture, "That's a question you never ask. The government wants him, and they're willing to pay us for the effort – that's all we know, and that's all we need to know."

"Doesn't knowing what he's done make it easier to find him? What if he killed someone? Shouldn't we be more careful?"

He put a claw to his narrow chin and tapped it a few times. "Heh, you could be right, mate. But it doesn't matter anyway. They don't tell you, and they wouldn't answer if you asked. You want to know how to treat him? Treat him as dangerous. He's done something wrong, and the government is willing to pay a high penny to get him back. And this is the government; they wouldn't pay if he hadn't done something worth the effort."

I nodded, made sense. If the government was willing to pay money to get him then it must be worth it – those were the same folks who couldn't seem to find the cash for anything else.

"Okay, I'm in. What do we do now?"

"Well, first thing," He sat back. "Is we relax. I never hunt on a full stomach." He stretched out and looked as if he were about to fall asleep.

"Hey, don't leave me here! I don't know about you, but I just woke up."

He twitched a lip. "You know how to ruin a perfectly good sunbeam – do you know that?"

"Yeah, it's a talent."

The lip twitched again. "Fine, you win, mate. We'll go and get him now, and I'll nap this afternoon." He dragged himself up from the seat.

He didn't bother leaving any money on the table, just waved to the waitress, she waved back.

I was surprised that we didn't head back north, I'd gotten it in my mind that most of the hunting would be in the low rent district, instead we kept heading south – deep into snob hill.

"Are most of our contracts in the richer areas?"

"You'd be surprised, mate. Anywhere there's people, you can find a contract. I've dragged as many folks screaming from the city hall plaza as I have from any slum. Our current target is just up here. With a touch of luck, he'll be home right now. As far as I know he hasn't anywhere else to be."

Rounding the next bend, we ran parallel to a large gray concrete wall at least ten feet high.

"Here we are, mate. From what I can tell, he doesn't like visitors – especially our kind. The gate is a hundred meters or so that way, but I think we'll make our entrance here."

He stood next to the wall, and gave me a wink. One kick of his powerful legs and he was airborne. By the time he reached parallel to the top of the fence he was bent forward at a ninety degree angle. One leg slipped over the top while he landed on his stomach, hugging the beveled head of the stone.

"Your turn, mate." He whispered before slipping over the edge and out of sight.

"Great, now what?" There was no question, I wasn't strong enough to leap the fence like he had. And with no telling what might be on the other side I didn't exactly want to fall head first into someone's open arms.

I sighed and dusted my claws on my legs. I never liked using my nails to climb, they were dull enough as it was before I started grinding them against stones.

The concrete of the wall looked impressive, but it was cheap and new. It gave away freely under by black claws; the greater problem was getting enough purchase to hold my weight.

I dug my feet in and pulled with my hands, soon enough I'd gotten one arm over the top. No sooner had I began hunting for a hand hold on the blind side of the fence then my arm was grasped. A single tug and I had to hold back a yelp as I slid over the top, falling in an undignified heap on the grassy ground.

"Glad to see you could make it." The lion was crouched down, hidden in the shadow of the fence, his voice little more than a whisper.

"Keep low, follow my lead, and try not to get killed, okay?" His eyes scanned the small orchard that separated us from the house; it was all business now that we were within the lot.

I nodded, following him as he began moving slowly on three legs between the apple trees and grape vines.

Deep shadows made it easy to keep hidden as we moved. No matter how warm it may have been on the street it was cool here – didn't help the fact that I was sweating, my toes were soaked.

Not a single voice broke the stillness, but English moved like sentries were posted every few feet, guess it came with the job. The house slowly slid into view, a large three story mansion. A deck backed onto the orchard, door conveniently laying open.

English made the sprint from the trees to the door in little more than ten strides before plastering himself against the wall. A quick pause and he disappeared into the darkness within.

All I could really manage was a scamper; I did my best to mirror what I'd seen, but just felt silly.

We found ourselves in a library, no, really, a library. More books than I'd ever seen in my life. English was striding from door to door, resting an ear upon them and peeking through the cracks. I just

stood awestruck. I had, at best perhaps a couple dozen books, and mine had been the largest collection I'd ever seen.

Here, there must have been upwards three hundred tomes total. I did a quick calculation in my head, and the cost of what lay before me had to be at least equal to that of almost any building in the city.

"Tommy, over here." The lion was plastered up against one of the doors leading out, I ignored him.

"Now!" he hissed. I ripped myself away from the beautiful shelves and slinked towards him. A quick flick and the door opened silently. A moment later the lion was gone.

The only light in the library had been the open patio door, now the gloom was complete. We were in a small back staircase; the lion slowly crawled up it on all fours.

"Careful, spread your weight, we don't want them to creak." He was just an arm's reach from me, but I could barely hear his whisper.

I followed him up, his tail tickling my nose. At the top we fanned out, checking one empty room after another. It didn't take long to make it to the last door, and the only one that was locked.

"Stand back." He braced himself for a charge against the door, I put up my hand.

"Give me a moment..." I knelt in front of the latch and peered at it.

"What are you doing, mate?"

"I've read books on this – do you have a blade?"

"I have my claws."

"Yes, but do you have a blade?" I held out my hand.

He rooted around in the belt at his hip for a moment before passing me an old pocket knife.

I quietly snapped the blade in place. Holding my breath, I wedged it between the door and frame. It took a few moments and a little scraping, but I managed to gently pry the latch back, pushing against the spring until it could swing freely.

"The door is unlocked, shove it and it'll open." I handed him back the knife.

"Neat trick." He crouched down, and slowly pushed the door open. Quite a change from the crash he would have had.

It was good news, too. The query was right there, on a balcony overlooking the front yard. Good thing we hadn't come that way.

It was definitely the guy from the picture, but he looked older. Not gray hair mind you, just how he held himself, leaning on the simple iron railing.

English calmly walked up to him casual as you could care to imagine, silent on the immaculate carpet. It wasn't until he was a mere stride from the man that he spoke.

"You are under arrest. The government has put out a warrant for you, Mr. Kacatch. You're coming with me."

I've got to hand it to the human, if it were me I'd be three feet in the air and likely over the railing by English's second word. He calmly turned to look at the lion.

"I know you. Didn't I hire you once, years ago?" He leaned against the railing, hands in the pockets of a large black overcoat.

"Possibly, I've worked for a lot of people. Now, you're coming with me." English's face hardly moved. If he recognized the man, it didn't show.

"You're Michael Jones, aren't you? I've seen you in the papers."

"English. You will call me English." His lip twitched again, he wasn't smiling this time.

The man just sighed. "I guess I should be privileged, they send the best to collect me. What did they say I did? No wait, let me guess, taxes. That's what it always is, taxes."

"I don't know, I didn't ask, and I don't care for you to tell me." The lion cocked a finger towards me. "Cuff him." He tossed me a pair of handcuffs, likely the same set from yesterday.

The man turned, seeing me for the first time. "You brought a protégé did you? Don't remember him from last time – but that was what? A decade ago?"

I walked up behind him, he obligingly held his arms behind his back, not bothering to fight at all, the cuffs snapped into place.

He didn't say a word as we walked down the stairs and out the door, the front door this time. About a block away another Storm Front team took him from us, no clue how long they'd been waiting. And that was it.

English leaned against a wall, eyes closed, staring into the morning sun. I walked up to stand next to him. "I think I'll take that sun bath now, mate."

"Is that all there is to it?" I asked.

He laughed, humor back the moment he handed the man over to the recovery team. "Not normally, mate. I guess you must be my good luck charm. A lucky wolf, I wonder if your mother was a rabbit?"

I snorted. "Not so much."

"Anyway," he yawned and pushed away from the wall. "Let's get you paid. Knowing our accounting department, they'd just as soon squirrel you out of half of what I promised."

"Where do we get our money from anyway, the government or the company?" I followed him down the street.

"The government pays Storm Front when we bring the guy in to the city jail for processing. Normally, you'd have to wait until they pay the company before you'd get your cut, I don't play that game. Once the catch hits the office, he gets ID'd and I get my payout."

He skirted a hand cart moving down the street. It was loaded with furniture, pushed by some oversized pony who's feet clopped on the worn cobblestones and blacktop.

"Anyway, once the recovery team checks him in, we hit accounting and they cut us in for our take – mine is twenty-five percent off the top from the gov."

My ears perked up. "Twenty-five percent? That's a big share. I'm surprised you get that much."

He looked over at me, "You get twenty of what's left after that. The money is big, but don't act so surprised. You grew up with a hunter, you know how the game is – you get in, make your pile and hope you get out in one piece. I told you, I'm the only one left of the original SF crew. Started with good friends, killers all. They're gone to a man, dead or retired. I'm still here, what does that tell you? The average life span of a recruit is five contracts. That is, of course, assuming they get past the first."

I expected he thought he'd hit me pretty hard with that line, but to be honest, it didn't really faze me. I should have realized it a long time ago. He was right about my father though, we'd always accepted that every time he left to hunt he might just not come back.

I guess it was something you got used to – it didn't really feel any different from working an office job. Every time you left, you kissed your family goodbye and did what you could. If you worked an office job, you might stab yourself with a letter opener. If you chased bounties, someone else might stab you with that same blunted knife when you came to carry them away.

"I guess I'll just have to try and beat the odds then." It wasn't really a joke, but he laughed anyway.

"That you will, mate," A smile touched his lips. "I've got a feeling that you will."

It didn't take long to make it back to the office, people streamed in and out as they always seemed to. English ignored them, tracing a straight path through the circus that opened up before him.

Up to the second floor and through a small maze until we ended up in a stuffy interior office filled from one gray wall to another with pasty cubicles.

He leaned over the first one, startling the rat working within. "Tin in?" The rat just jerked his thumb, not saying a word.

The lion weaved his way through the mess of endless walls. After a few minutes he began cutting through the cubicles themselves, startling their occupants. I followed as best I could, muttering apologies. A few more minutes and he growled. This was almost getting entertaining. He began leaping the walls in a straight line towards his destination, I vaulted along behind him.

"Tin is the only one who can do the payouts. And with the way this place keeps changing you'd almost think it was a reverse Minotaur's labyrinth, trying to keep people away."

A few more leaps and startled gasps later we'd found out destination that looked just the same as the last fifty cubes.

English stepped off the desk, an elderly gray squirrel with a comb over sat with crossed arms while we walked all over his paper work.

"So, the mighty hunter has returned." His voice was nasal, sounding as if he were about to tell me to get off his lawn. "Here for another hand out, I assume?"

"Hardly, Tin. Just here for the percentage that was agreed upon."

"You're not that important, you know. You may make ten times that of anyone else, but that doesn't make you one of the gods. I'm going to see to it that you get paid what your worth – the same as everyone else."

"Good luck with that, pencil boy. Now pay up, before I drag you up to the third floor to have a heart to heart with the CEO. You can explain to him why I've decided to start moonlighting with another company."

The squirrel just grumbled and began working out numbers on the paper before him.

"Warrant BI-1294?"

"Yep. And don't forget Tommy here."

"I don't pay normal hunters," he said, reluctantly counting bills from a drawer in his desk.

"He's my partner, and you'll pay him. Twenty percent the remaining. Either that, or I'll start counting out the bills for you."

Tin choked, "Twenty percent!? Are you nuts? Almost no one else makes that kind of money, especially not a first time mangler off the street."

English leaned on the desk, it creaked under his weight. "Our boy Tommy does. Like I said, start counting or I'll do it for you."

"Don't try to muscle your way through this, meat head. You can do what you will with your own pay – but you're not going to get your way with your little love child here." He shot me a look like I'd killed his wife. I shrugged and jumped off his desk.

"Do you really want me to drag VanDerhoom into this?" English leaned further onto the desk, it groaned as he came nose to nose with the squirrel.

"Don't you bring the CEO into this. He has nothing to do with it."

"That's because you know he'll back me up. Tommy works for me – not the company, and not you. Storm Front may have its name on the papers, but he's mine. Now, are you going to give him the cash he deserves, or am I going to send a runner upstairs?"

"You wouldn't dare..."

English straightened and cleared his throat. Standing upright he could see over the short, stained, cubicle walls no problem.

"You! Over there!"

With a point and wave, a young rabbit stood at the entrance to the cube.

"Go the third floor, find VanDerhoom, and get him down here right now. Tell him English sent you, a failure with the payouts."

Tin lunged forward as the rabbit turned to leave. "Wait." He tried to sound calm and confident, but it came out as more of a quiet shriek. "Fine, you win."

"Never mind, kid. Thanks anyway." The lion smiled and gently pushed the rabbit away.

"Fifteen percent, was it?" The squirrel opened his cash drawer again.

English just growled.

"Twenty it is." The squirrel didn't move fast, but he doled out the bills one at a time on the desk.

When he was done he pushed the pile towards me before turning to the lion. "Anything else, your majesty?" His tone was low, I'm guessing this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

"Tommy, count the money. Then we're good to go."

It took a few moments to click in. I had more cash in my hands for the morning's work than I'd made in my entire last year. I had to count twice to make sure I'd got it right – this was enough to pay rent, and feed me for at least eight months.

"Uh, ya. It's all here, English."

"Good." He smiled and tipped an invisible hat to the accountant. "Pleasure doing business with you, as always, Tin."

He didn't bother trying to find his way out of the maze, just began jumping walls on the way to the nearest door. I followed him.

"Is that the way it always is?"

"Nah," he said, patting me on the back. "You're the new guy. They want to try and keep you in line. Once you let them know they can't push you around, then you won't have any issues. Let's get out of here before Tin decides that he made a mistake on your taxes and comes looking for more money."

The sun was still shining as we walked out the front doors. I found a comfortable stone as we sat about halfway down the wide, roman like steps that fronted the building. English found a column and leaned on it, face to the sun, eyes closed.

"What's going to happen to all his stuff?" I asked, worrying a small pebble out from between my toes.

"Eh?"

"The guy we just brought in. What's going to happen to all his stuff?"

"Who knows. If he's innocent, then nothing changes. Unlikely though, the gov doesn't often make a mistake like that. More likely it'll all be possessed and sold off. If the guy's going to jail, or the renders, then he won't have much use for it anymore, will he?"

"Guess so."

"What's up?" he asked.

"Uh, just the books there..."

"Never seen so many in one place, didn't even know they'd made that many. Must have been a kook to have them all, eh?"

I did my best to work out a laugh, it came out as more of a grunt. "I've got a bit of a thing for books myself."

"You collect them?"

"Something like that, nothing compared to him though."

"Heh, cool." He waved to a couple of girls walking past, they giggled, blushed, and waved

back. "I'm going to take that nap I keep promising myself. Wake me if the world comes to an end, eh mate?"

His eyes closed, but his ears twitched, almost rhythmically, swiveling towards anyone who ventured near.

I couldn't get that room out of my mind – I could still smell it, the old musty scent of books and paper, packed so tight that I couldn't even count the volumes. I could almost see the light playing through the open door into the shadowed shelves.

"English?" I asked. The lion just grunted and half-heartedly swatted at me. "I'll be back."

I dropped my coat next to him, no reason to advertise I was stalking around the neighborhood as a bounty hunter.

It didn't take me long to get back to the mansion, I traced the steps we'd followed not so long ago. I did a quick circuit of the property, trying to look inconspicuous. From what I could tell, not a single soul was about. The recovery team must just take the guy and leave everything be.

It would be just my luck if Storm Front or the government were to show up now; it would be hard to explain what I was doing back at the property.

Thankfully I was able to make it over the wall again, I didn't have the balls to try and walk through the front door. My arms screamed as I pulled myself up, this time without the help of English.

The orchard was still dark and shady. I paused for at least a minute, waiting for someone to raise an alarm, anything. All I heard was the rustle of the wind and the far off sound of someone hammering a nail a few lots over.

A quick dash and I was inside, I skidded to a halt and tried to come to grips with what I saw. It was at least as huge as I remembered, floor to ceiling, the whole room was packed with books upon books, none of them I recognized.

Like English said, I'd never seen so many in one place. Unlike him however, I knew that once upon a time there had been more books in the world than could ever be contained in a single room – likely even single building.

I pulled a tome at random from the nearest shelf; it was dark red and didn't have a trace of water stain or mildew.

'Sigmund Freud' was on its cover, never heard of him. The next book was 'Complex Governmental Systems in Times of Turmoil', the name attached I couldn't even try to pronounce.

I skimmed the shelves, looking for a single title I could recognize, but nothing. Everything was talking about society, physiology, or governments.

I could read a few different languages, and these looked like english, but when I opened them to a random page I could only make out perhaps one word in three – were they in code? Some of the books I had read had talked about great secrets being recorded in code. The same books talked about dragons and magic long before the Cataclysm, so I'd assumed that they were flights of fancy, but perhaps they were true in some way.

I must have spent hours with my nose in the shelves. By the time I forced myself to stand up the sun had shifted. It no longer flowed through the open door, leaving the room in a half-darkness that made the letters twist and wriggle before my eyes.

My head ached, and I pounded under the ears. Even just browsing the covers, I hadn't read this much in years, if ever. So many tombs, things to discover I couldn't even imagine, I could barely pull myself away. I knew that there was always a chance that someone could show up, but it had been worth it.

I walked out the door, blinking in the relative sunlight, a single book tucked under my arm, hidden as much as possible.

"Having fun with other people's property?"

"Gah!" I must have looked a sight, jumping almost six feet into the air yet still somehow managing to trip, I landed halfway back through the doorway.

English hadn't bothered to stand up, he lay spread out across a chair on the patio. He looked like he'd been there for hours – complete with a jug of iced tea.

"What a surprise to find you here, mate."

I picked myself up off the floor, trying to look at least somewhat respectable. He tossed my coat at me – getting me flat in the face.

"You followed me?" I asked, clawing my jacket down, trying to look indigent.

"You're about as transparent as drinking water, mate – you might want at least wait an hour or so before you come back to loot the place."

"I wasn't looting!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not." He just shrugged, "What you do is your business, just watch yourself. I put in all this effort to get myself a new partner – don't make be drag you into processing by your tail. That's one payout I'm not eager to cash."

I looked at my feet, tail almost touching the ground. "Got it."

"So, did you make it worth it?" He hardly blinked, changing topics.

"What?"

"You came all the way back here to look at your precious books – did you make it worth it?"

"Yah, I grabbed this one." I held up my prize, feeling less than enthusiastic.

"Mate," He got up and put his arm over my shoulder, "if you're going to break the law, you'd better make it worthwhile. The gov doesn't like you touching their stuff, they're territorial that way. They'll throw the courts at you no matter what you take, so you had might as well make it worth it." From behind the seat he produced two large burlap bags. "Let's get you learned."

It took me at least another hour to fill the bags, it wasn't that I had trouble finding things to take, but rather I kept running out of space.

"We're not coming back; you'd better get it right on the first try." English warned.

We made our exit not over the wall, but back through the front door. "You're not much of a thief, mate. Skulk around and everyone knows what you're up to, walk out bold as day and folks think your just doing your job."

No one was in sight as we left, but as we rounded the corner two dogs in full police uniform were walking our way. "Afternoon, officers." English just waved and tipped his invisible hat, the dogs gave us curt and curious nods.

For the gods, I was happy to have my fur. The blood drained from my face as we walked past, but they didn't give us a second glance.

"See there, mate – we're just doing our jobs. And right now, our job is to get you and our little parcels out of here."

It took us some time to get back to my apartment, and to be honest I felt a little bit self-conscious asking him to help be lug the books up the stairs. He didn't say a word while we walked through the lobby, he just peered around at the fallen fixtures, wiping his feet every few steps.

"This is where you're living, mate?" We'd made it up the long climb, I kicked open the unlocked door.

"Home, sweet rat hole."

"A hole it is, mate. We've got to be getting you a better place than this."

I tried to work up an argument, but nothing came – I was only here because I couldn't afford anything better.

"Let me see what I can do for you, mate. You're not going to be affording anything in the high rent district, but we can barney well get you something a might bit better than this."

"Really, you don't have to-"

He cut me off with a wave. "Like I keep saying, I've spent so much effort in getting myself a new partner, I don't want to be losing you any time soon. I must have seen at least three scums with a warrant out on them in the last block. By the time you start making a reputation for yourself they're going to start wondering if they can make life easier by coming for you before you come for them."

I knew my neighborhood was a dive, but I didn't think it was that bad.

"You enjoy your reading here, mate. I'll see you tomorrow back at the café. We'll have more work lined up, and then we'll see what we can do for you."

After he left I locked my door for the first time since I'd moved here. The little piss-ant lock wouldn't keep anyone but a girl-scout out, but at least it made me feel better. A little bit.

I spread the books out on the floor, after wiping away what I could of the dirt and grime. Whoever that guy was we'd taken in, he must have been the most well-read person in the city.

I reviewed the tiles again, physiology, genetics, government. Everything was nonfiction, and it all seemed to be based around society. With the human's interest in genetics, was he trying to understand the Cataclysm? As far as I knew, it had been decided long ago that it didn't make any sense from the point of view of science as it was known then. From what they could tell the genetic codes that people came away with were totally valid – followed all the laws that had already been understood, just completely new.

It would be like spending your life here in V-town, then deciding to move to Tokyo. Sure everything would be different there, but all the same basic rules of nature would still apply.

Almost all of the books were pre-Cataclysm, so hardly a single reference to anything about people like me. I leafed through them at random. Lots of words I didn't understand, formulas and complex illustrations. Eventually I ended up setting them aside and stacking them into as neat a pile as I could, the sun was setting and my power was out again. I wouldn't get far trying to read by moonlight.