

The Hunters



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Chapter 7: The Lion, and the Lion

Up and around again, the sun greeted me the next morning whether I wanted it or not.

My eyes still ached from yesterday, I was almost seeing double, and the fact I could count the whiskers on my snout was a bad sign I was going cross eyed – I'd have to try and keep those books at arm's length.

Speaking of the books, I really didn't have anyplace to hide them – there was no way I could take them with me of course, and I didn't want to leave them here. I'd have some trouble explaining to my parents where I'd got the money to more than quintuple my collection. In the end, I just did my best to throw them under what rags I had for a mattress and be done for it.

I felt a little silly leaving them simply laying on the floor, but there was really nowhere to stash them. I locked the door behind me as I left, but a strong gust of wind would open it as sure as anything.

I found the café again, no problem. English was sprawled out on his chair, lording over the near empty tables. Above us the clouds were rolling, it hadn't started raining yet – but looked as it might at the drop of a coin.

"Have a good time with your prizes, mate?" He asked, pulling a leg of pork off the table and dug into it with a squish and rip.

I just rubbed my eyes and nodded. "I don't understand even half of what's there, that guy must have been some kind of genius."

"I would hope so," the lion chuckled, "he ran half of the government, until a decade ago."

"Wasn't that when the new mayor came in?"

"Yep, him and ol' Dallaire were close. Our current lord mayor, Jackson the cat, was no friend of his."

"Was?"

"Didn't you hear?" He ripped off another long shred of meat, hooking it on a barbed tongue.

"Right to a speedy trial and all that. He was found guilty last night, died before the dawn."

"Oh." I wasn't sure just how to describe how I felt, it was a little cold. I hadn't killed him of course; I'd only helped to bring in a just contract put out by the government. They did the trial, he must have been guilty and was dealt with accordingly. All nice, legal, and clean.

So why did I feel dirty?

"Anyway, mate, ready for today's run?" An elegant cup of tea followed the pork, he had his pinky out of course.

"Um, sure." I leaned back in my chair, for a moment I considered the spread on the table before me, but I didn't feel hungry.

"Great." He gave me a bit of an inquiring look. "Am I going to be chasing you around town again today? I don't want to be doing something one or more of us will regret."

My head snapped up, I hadn't realized that I was quite that transparent. "No, no. I'm just getting used to this whole dealing with people's lives thing."

He nodded. "Good." For a moment he softened, "Let me be the one who's used it. We both need you to keep a perspective on this. I'm the professional, you're not. Let's keep it that way."

His face hardened back into a grin, if such a thing is possible. "We've got another human this time."

"Another one?" I broke in, "What's the odds of getting two in a row? They make up what? Less than two percent of the population now?"

He just shrugged. "Who knows, never thought about it, but most of the contracts these days are for humans – I guess it just goes to show they're more trouble." He turned his head, looking away as he pulled out a piece of paper. "Anyway, here he is, Joyce James. A performer in the theater district."

"Never heard of him." I looked at the photo, pale, short black hair, and fur around his chin to match.

"Didn't say he was a good performer. Be careful though, from what it reports the guy is some kind of mimic. He may have a trick or two up his sleeve."

English yawned, displaying every tooth in his prodigious arsenal. "Let's go, mate. It sounds like he does a performance for the morning crowd. With a touch of rush we may just catch it."

The traffic slowly but steadily got thicker as we wove our way towards the theater district, it was busy no matter what the time of day.

The venue in question was an off-off main street, just to find it we had to wonder back down several alleys and byways. At last we tracked it to a second floor loft, above a provisions store of some sort.

The venue was tiny, better hope it was a one man show, hardly enough room graced the creaky stage to fit more than a soul at a time. It would likely splinter to the floor below if English so much as set a toe upon it.

The seating wasn't much better, we'd best hope that he didn't know there was a contract out for him, at most a dozen people would fit in here – and English's massive bulk stood out like a chipped claw.

The lights dimmed a few moments after we found our seats. Our mark came on stage, dressed in a neutral gray shirt and pants.

"Good morning, everyone." I looked around. Excluding English and myself there were maybe three other people. Way to hide in a crowd. "I am Joyce James, the man of a thousand species." He swiped a hand over his face and his dark eyes changed to a brilliant gold, almost like English's.

A quick tour behind what looked to be an old, stained, Japanese screen and he was out again, this time in the getup of a feline. The work was amazing, not only had he the eyes, but also a set of full prosthetic ears that moved and twitched as though alive. The costume was complete, eyes, teeth, claws, even the first good use I had ever seen of a fake tail.

Several more trips around the screen and we saw a lizard complete with forked tongue, a raccoon, a wolf that hit a little close to home, and finally but most impressive a lion, he seemed to be

almost the exact duplicate of English himself.

Somehow he'd managed to gain what must have been close to a hundred pounds, and walked with the same motion and regal air that the cat himself carried. When he smiled, I could almost believe that the man sitting next to me had snuck up on stage in an elaborate practical joke.

A quick glance to my side showed that no matter how much the image on stage may be smiling and cracking jokes, my partner wasn't. Not a single twitch betrayed what was behind English's eyes, but the slide-rule straight set of his lips conveyed more than a full growl would ever.

The show didn't last long, perhaps only fifteen or twenty minutes. He finished it in the full lion garb, bidding the audience farewell in a baritone that would have done a giant proud.

The lights came up and the others filed out of their seats, English and I didn't move. As it happened, we didn't need to – our mark came to us.

"I am in distinguished company today, my friends." He sauntered up, perching on the back of the seat a row in front of us, his tail laying over the head rest with an occasional twitch. "To what do I owe the honor of a visit from our fair town's most illustrious bounty hunter?"

English didn't reply. On the edge of my hearing I could just make out a rumbling coming from deep within him. I figured it was best to break in. "Are you Joyce James?"

He performed a theatrical bow and switched for a moment to his original voice, it seemed alien coming from that body. "The one and the only, it is always nice to meet a couple of fans." He smiled in a way that almost made me ill, watching a lion's face move in such unnatural ways was gut wrenching.

"The government has placed a contract on you, PS-931. You are under arrest."

"Oh." He said it completely neutral, as though he had half expected it from us. I couldn't tell what his reaction was. Whether it was the layers of makeup, or the actor's control, it was as though I was telling him the weather.

"I suppose I'll be coming with you then?" He eyed English, the real lion had still yet to move a whisker. I'm sure the actor was starting to wonder if he was stuffed.

"Take off the mask." That was the first thing I'd heard my partner say since we'd entered the theater. "Now." His voice was even and controlled, but it sent shivers down my spine more than then if he'd growled a death threat. "I will not be seen with that... abomination."

"Certainly. Right away."

Joyce turned slowly to walk back towards the stage. I got up to follow him, a step and a half behind.

He moved fluidly, but up close I could feel the difference. Where the real English moved without thought or effort, after a few moments you could just sense that the impostor had to think about every step, every twitch. At any distance it would be invisible, but so close one could just sense something wrong.

"A moment, good sir. Let me remove my makeup." He stepped around the screen and reached for a picnic basket sized box with a bear's head hanging out.

I moved to follow him, but in a sudden jerk he swung the box around by its handle, sending the paper and bamboo screen between us toppling in my face.

It wasn't heavy, but it did send me back a step as the contraption fell toward me. For a moment I pushed it back into place until I heard the sound of running feet. I growled. I wasn't going to let him get away from me. A quick swipe of my claws and the blinds were little more than tatters, whatever elaborate design that may have graced them before was so much litter now.

Behind me I could hear English roaring into action, literally – if I were any closer my ears would be ringing. We were both too late.

At the back of the small stage was a door, Joyce had scampered through it with his kit, locking it behind him. I was about to ask English for a knife again, but he just slammed his bulk against it with a crash that shook the very floor beneath us. It took two more hits for the wood to fracture, the door caved inwards with a shower of splinters.

Behind the gutted frame was a steep, dark stairway. I could still hear the splinters tumbling and echoing down the steps as English took them at a full run.

We barreled out of the dark steps into what looked like a used electronics store. Any kind of electronics are rare these days, but at least it explained how Joyce had gotten some of the more impressive bits of his act going.

A human shopkeeper and customer stood in the small room, both rooted to the spot by the screaming horror that was English. In a fluid motion he stepped up to each one in turn and took a huff of air that made their hair fly up. "No." Was all he said before he punched the front door with enough force to make it snap out and bounce back. I followed him out into the street.

If he was planning to track the actor by scent we weren't going to have much luck here. The press of people streaming by would eradicate any trail almost before it was laid.

The lion stood unsure in the middle of the street for a moment. I took a quick jump and scrambled clumsily up a nearby rain gutter. I didn't manage to get more than a few feet up, but I could see well enough to spot the double swimming upstream against the current of people, not far away.

I pointed and shouted. I'm not sure if he really heard me, but English began moving towards the target. I had to shove people out of the way to catch up. I just don't get the same respect as a towering blood thirsty lion.

Joyce dodged up an alley. We might have almost had lost him if not for the gawking onlookers. I guess it's not every day you get to see a famous bounty hunter chase himself through one of the more theatrical parts of the city. I was sure that at least some of them thought it was nothing more than an elaborate street production.

We raced down the twists and turns of the alleys, seemingly at random. And random it must have been, because before long we found ourselves in a dead end. The actor had a sturdy stone wall to his back, no way up, over, or out.

To be honest, English was starting to scare me now. His tail twitched almost hard enough to whip, and the growls had morphed somewhere along the way into incomprehensible screams of rage. They oscillated from deep enough to shake the ground to high enough to feel like a drill to the brain.

The fake had turned his face to us, putting his hands up, makeup box lying on the ground. "I give up, I surrender." English just took another step forward, his claws missing the actor by the width of a whisker "...please..."

"Hey, English, wait!" I tried to put a hand on his shoulder but almost lost it as he turned on me in a heartbeat. The only thing I could see in his eyes was bloodshot fury. I backpedaled as quickly as I could. There was no one in those eyes. Whatever was running him now was in complete control.

A flurry of tawny and bronze, the two of them were on the ground as the actor's screams joined the real lion's. The actor's, however, were screams of a different nature.

"English!" I knew I was going to regret this, but I jumped into the fray. A flurry of identical limbs few about me, all coated in crimson.

I had no way of countering the lion, he was stronger than me by more of a margin then I could imagine. And right now, he was using it in the unnatural way that only a madman can call upon.

It took a moment, but I found the impostor among the two, his face was in tatters but the makeup still clung about him, a testament to its application. I hooked my claws in and pulled, I could hear a rip, and the tearing of hair, both real and fake. The actor's true face was revealed, bruised and

swollen. It may not look much like what it had moments ago, but it was definitely not leonine.

"Look! English, look!" I pointed at the hairless face as best I could to get his attention, it's hard to make a massive head like English's do anything it doesn't want to, and harder yet to do it without losing a finger or more to its teeth. "It's Joyce, the contract." I had to pause for breath, I may not be doing much good, but I was trying to keep the man alive under this onslaught.

For just a moment the two men's eyes connected, I could see a flicker of something in English's rabid stare. His face was still bloodshot, and mouth flecked with foam, but his assault slowed, then came to a halting stop.

"What was that?" I asked.

I looked at the lion, he didn't say a word, didn't even move. Joyce was held up by the fake fur on his chest, head lolling back as though there wasn't a bone left in his body. For the span of a heartbeat English stood motionless, features frozen in mid scream.

Then he was off, not a word, not a sound. He dropped the actor on the ground without a thought. Joyce collapsed in a pile. I saw a swish of a tail, then not even a shadow of the lion remained.

"English?"

The alley was empty save Joyce and I.

"Well, Mr. James, you're under arrest." I hauled the near lifeless body off the ground and snapped some cuffs in place on him, didn't really know why – it's just what we'd always done before.

It took me ages to drag him back to Storm Front HQ; the funny part is I didn't get a single weird look. This of course is the one time I really needed a recovery team, and I didn't get one.

I did get to see the processing room for a change, up on the second floor next to HR, it was almost entirely made from stainless steel. A large desk stood at the head of the room, and a couple dozen holding cells along the three remaining walls.

An elk ran the place, with a rack of antlers so big I wondered how he got up in the morning - or got through any decent sized doorway for that matter.

"You got a process for me?" He didn't even bother to look up.

"Yah, PS-931. Joyce James." I must have gone up a notch in his world, now I deserved a glance.

"That's E's contract. I don't know how new you are around here, but you don't poach his work, rookie."

"Hey now, I'm his partner."

He gave me one of those 'Yeah, right' looks.

"Then where is he? He's anal about getting his paycheck. If the recovery team doesn't bring the man in then he does. Personally."

"Search me. Last I saw of him was on the street, then he ran off, gods know where."

"Sure." He took the half dead actor from me and tossed him in a cell. "It's E's contract. Nobody sees a scrap until he and Tin sign off."

I just get so much respect around here.

But speaking of English, where was he anyway? I sniffed around the office, no one had seen him.

I took my time cleaning up as I waited for him. The walk back had taken forever. By now it was almost five and he still hadn't shown.

I worked my way back up to the second floor, all squeaky clean now, and popped my head into HR – I didn't have anywhere better to start. My man was still there.

"Graham!" I sauntered in and threw my arm over his shoulder like we were old friends, no easy feat when he was seated at a desk. "Just the guy I'm looking for! I need a small favor of you, old buddy."

Surprisingly, the leopard looked happy to see me; I must have made his quota or something. "Tommy! I haven't seen you since you got started, how's everything going?"

"Great, Graham, just great. But I need your help."

"Anything, bud. Just name it."

I sat down at the desk across from him, trying to look casual. "I need English's home address."

"No can do, Tommy." A frown crossed his face. "E's a private guy. He's not the kind of fella who hands his address around – doesn't like the idea of being found in his sleep, or something like that."

"Come on Graham, I'm his partner," I said as I pulled out a random envelope I'd grabbed on the way up and waved it in the air under his nose. "I've got his pay from our last catch." Now I was lying through my teeth, but he didn't know that.

"Bud, I'm sorry," He shook his head, "I just can't."

I put my hands down on his desk and pushed forward, not enough to look threatening, but just enough to get my point across. "Graham, come on, who saved you from a rampaging body builder reject before I even started? Without me, you wouldn't even be here today."

He sighed and fell back into his chair. "Fine. I owe you that much." He waved a finger at me. "But don't you forget, this isn't as simple as it looks. That man is rabid when it comes to his privacy."

No kidding, it looks like he's rabid about other things, too.

It took the cat a few minutes, but he came through. He returned with an address on a slip of paper. No surprise, it was in a high-rent district. But oddly it wasn't in the city core, but rather on the outskirts where the city ebbed into the orchards that surround it.

There really was nothing to do but walk there. Like so many other things, I might just regret this - but I had to know what was going on. It wasn't often you saw someone go feral like that – and it's always a big deal when it happens. He made a stink about wanting to know what he was getting into with me? Same thing here. I wanted to make sure that next time that happened I wasn't on the wrong end of a kamikaze run.

It took well over an hour to make my way out; I guess he puts a higher priority on privacy than the commute. I watched the buildings fall away behind me as I slowly worked my way out of the core, beyond the suburbs, and into the land where the spaces between the houses grows slowly larger.

The lots were still rather small by the standards of the old days, a requirement when one must walk to work on your own two feet. Trees planted between the houses created a sound proof barrier; they kept all but the most persistent yowls from leaking from one lot to the next.

With the paper, English's home wasn't hard to find, though no name graced its address plate. From the road all one could see was an expanse of trees. Unlike some houses around he'd kept the natural vegetation, not clearing it for a lawn.

A couple of twists and turns, and the home came into view. Large, and plain white, it was a three floor in a Victorian style. It grew from the ground in a way that made it look as though it had been there forever, despite the fact it couldn't have been more than a few years old by its construction.

A few hesitant steps and I was on the covered front porch. Its smooth wood suggested the weathering of several winters, but few feet.

I knocked on the front door; there was no provision for a bell. No response.

"English?" I yelled as I knocked again. Nothing.

I took a few steps back, surveying the face of the house by the rays of the setting sun that threw it into contrast from behind. A light was on in the second floor.

"English! I know you're in there! Can you hear me? It's Tommy." Great, he was ignoring me.

I had to know what was going on, this was too big to ignore. And anyway, there was no way I was going to walk all the way home until I had some kind of answer.

A quick check, the front door was locked. Figures. I rounded the house the check the back. I was a little surprised to see what looked like a full British garden. Transplanted lilies and all, it could have been shipped straight from the shire countryside.

The back door was locked as well of course, beside it sat a chair and table – the same style as that of the café.

I growled in the back of my throat. I was no lion, I didn't have the mass to knock down a door – and anyway, I didn't want to try and explain the busted lumber in his house afterwards.

"English!" One last try in vain. I was getting in to that house one way or another.

I did a quick circle of the building, an eye to anyway of getting in. The only thing I could see was a window slightly ajar on the second floor, above an offshoot roof. Have I mentioned I'm no good at climbing?

I walked back to the rear porch, leaping on the railing I almost lost my balance and left a nice face imprint in the soft black garden soil. A quick shimmy up a support and I'd managed to get up onto the porch roof.

The window was along the side of the building, so I had to crawl my way along the roof on all fours. It was steep enough I was afraid that I'd go sliding off if I stood up.

The porch roof bent around the side of the house, but didn't quite connect to the offshoot with the window – a five foot gulf sat between them.

I gritted my teeth. "English, if I break my neck on this, I'm going to come back and rip your tail off." There was no way to make up much speed on the slanted roof, but I did my best.

My best was a rather pathetic leap that left me scrambling, I was short by about a foot and a half. My arms and chest were on the roof, but my legs dangled in midair as I slowly slid backwards. My claws slid as I left long marks in the shingles, I was in a race to pull myself up before I fell clean off.

A quick glance below me, and I worked faster – it may only be a few feet to the ground, but it looked a lot further. I really didn't want to be limping back to the city as my legs healed.

My arms were screaming fire as I pulled; I vowed that when I got back I'd have to start doing push-ups. It was a close race, but I made it. I lay panting on the rough shingles, feeling them cool under me as the sun set. My arms felt like water as I rolled over and tried to force the window the rest of the way open. It was one of those types that slides upwards. It didn't want to slide now, and with my strength I could hardly even swat a gnat.

The window unstuck with a pop, and I fell in an undignified pile to the room within.

I had no clue where I was really, other than inside. I'd found myself in some kind of storage room, filled with neatly stacked boxes and pouches, filled with things I couldn't even begin to name.

I waited a few moments for my panting to slow and my arms to regain some form of strength. They still shuttered a little, but I could live with that.

I walked out into the hallway, the clean, smooth, unvarnished wood clicking under my claws and spotless white walls surrounding me.

It didn't take long for me to find him, the light spilled out under the closed door of the only room in the place with life.

I knocked on the door. "English?" No response. "It's Tommy, can I come in?" Okay, it was a

little pointless asking now, but I didn't know what else to say.

I took a deep breath and turned the handle. It slid smoothly, clicking in my hand.

The light came from a single desk lamp in the corner of room, the rest was shrouded in darkness. It took a moment, but in the deepest shadows of an opposite corner I saw the glint of golden eyes.

"English?" A shiver passed through me. Suddenly this didn't feel like such a good idea. The lion hadn't moved. "Are you awake?"

Slowly, I crept forward. The shadows around him darkened, cast by my own body. He hadn't moved, hadn't anything but blinked. I fell back to my haunches a few feet from him; he stared through me as though I wasn't even there.

"Man? Are you okay?" I didn't know what to do. If I hadn't seen him blink I would have just as soon thought him dead. I reached out a hand, it brushed his shoulder.

Closer now, I could see him better. He was on his knees as if praying, hands on his kneecaps, uncrossed.

"I saw my father." It was less than a whisper. I would have told you I hadn't heard a thing if the silence of the house hadn't closed up behind him. "He's here. I saw him."

"Your father?" I reached out again, putting a hand over his. My hands may have been trembling, but his were still, almost lifeless.

"I killed him. I swear. But he was there, right in front of me..."

"English, what is it?" He just looked right through me again. It took me a moment, but I rustled through my jacket and pulled out the business card he'd given me days ago. I had to reread it to remember his real name. "Michael?"

His head snapped up, eyes trying to focus, not quite making it.

"Michael, that wasn't your father. It was Joyce James, our contract."

"Contract?" Well, at least he knew I was here... kind of.

"He was just an actor, dressed up to look like you."

"Me? No." The lion shuddered, claws reflexively extending to leave welling trails on his legs. "No, no, I killed him. I killed my father."

This was not going well.

"Come on, Michael." I pulled gently on his hands, and to my surprise he flowed to his feet in one easy motion, as though on autopilot.

A quick moment and he was sitting on a chair, his face half illuminated by the light, the other side left in almost complete darkness, only a glinting eye visible.

"It's just you and me, Michael. I'm sure your father is fine." I watched his pupils contract in on themselves in a single heartbeat.

I suddenly knew I didn't want to be in this room anymore.

He screamed a high pitched claws on slate screech that fell quickly to a growl that I could feel in my teeth.

My feeling of dread grew, no small part due to the fact he wasn't sitting any more. In a flash too quick for me to see he was upon me. Chest pressed up against mine, my back to the floor, both hands were pinned above my head in one of his massive paws.

His teeth snapped, I felt fire light up half of my face as his huge canines ripped off my cheek. It was back behind and above my jaw – where a human's ear would be.

"This is it. I'm dead." It was all I could think, for some reason I was completely calm. There was no way I could defend myself against this beast, he'd spent his life fighting. It was time to make my peace.

And that was it. He was gone.

I opened my eyes, face still burning. He was back up on the chair as if nothing had happened. Now his head was in his hands, both covered in blood. Heh, my blood.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. You should go." He didn't look up. He was still whispering, stronger now, but I still had to strain to hear it.

I pushed myself up into a sitting position, a hand clamped over my face, blood already soaking halfway down my neck. "Not until you tell me what in the name of all the gods, living and dead, is going on." It hurt to move my mouth, but I was pissed enough to not be going anywhere.

The lion sighed, a slow shuttering breath. "I guess I owe you as much."

"Straight you do." I softened a little bit, or rather tried to – it's hard when you're holding half you cheek on. "I'm going to tape my face back together, do you need a minute?"

"Yeah." He paused for a moment then pointed out the door. "Round the corner, through the bedroom. You'll find supplies under the sink."

I stumbled out the door, following his directions. Limping half blind through the bedroom I could see a large king sized bed. Figures. It was covered in white sheets, I tried not to bleed all over them on my way past.

The lights in the bathroom burned my eyes as I dug around under the sink. He had more stuff in here than a well equipped ward. I heard a click on the floor behind me and turned. He must have wiped the blood away, other the smile missing from his face he looked as though it was just another day at the office.

"Sit down," he said. It took me a moment, but it finally clicked – his accent was gone. I hadn't heard the twang of British slang since I'd entered the house. He pointed towards the closed lid of the toilet. "I doubt you're any good at this. I'll patch you up."

I took a seat. He moved about with a medical efficiency as though he'd done this a thousand times before. Perhaps he had.

My cheek was already clotted and beginning to heal back, but the feel of cool gauze was comforting. I tried to get a reading from his eyes as he worked, but he avoided me with the determination of a monk. His face was so neutral that he might as well be asleep.

He finished and packed the kit away. I followed him out, but not back to that little sitting room where we'd been. Rather, he led the way downstairs to a spacious, spotless kitchen. Clicking on the overhead lights he turned and filled up what looked to be an antique tea pot.

"I need something calming, and I'm guessing you do too."

He managed to busy himself, back to me, until the pot whistled, making us both jump. Through the windows looking out onto the garden I could see the faint red afterglow of the sun.

He popped some packages into the pot and the faint smell of raspberry and lemon crept to fill the room. "Here." An ancient bone white tea cup was gently slid in front of me, its twin sat before English.

A moment of misery managed to slip through his mask before he began unbidden.

"You've probably managed to guess by now, I'm not really British." A smile twitched his lips as he tried to reassert his twang, but failed. What was left was the flat rolling tone of some language I couldn't place.

"I'm not from London, despite what my bio may have to say on the matter. I was born in Kenya, outside Nakuru to be exact." He spat the name like a curse.

"I don't know how much you know of Kenya, but like much of Africa, it became all but deserted after the fall. I grew up in a home that was half a step above a thatched grass hut, out on the edge of the Serengeti. My mother was British, but I most assuredly am not. She was a human, sent out on a

neo-colonial expedition on behalf of the British crown. From what I'd been told, they were dispatched to report on how the old dependences were doing. Her and a couple dozen others were sent to Kenya, she decided to stay."

His eyelids had fallen closed, behind them his eyes twitched as he spoke.

"My father was Kenyan. A lion... like me." He raised the tea cup to his mouth, hand steady as a rock, but his lip trembled. "He was a local warlord. Ruled a featureless patch of mud half the size of the city. His name was Singa. I don't know why my mother stayed. She must have seen... something in that petty dictator."

He paused for a moment when he said the name. He didn't curse it, and he didn't spit it. The name came out flat, like a stone to lay on the table between us.

"I was their only child, born soon after they met. Not married, of course, he had every woman in the village. My mother just happened to be the exotic one, and he liked exotic things."

"I grew up there, the blue African sky above me, and the red earth below. Nothing harder than a bone to be found, and nothing more permanent than the rainy season. My father ruled it all; the horizons and beyond. My father was the world, and his word was law. There was nothing he could not bring to the ground, nothing he could not kill."

His eyes opened and he speared me with a gaze.

"He was my entire life, a living god."

"If it weren't for my mother I wouldn't have known anything stretched beyond those empty skies. I wouldn't have known that my father's great kingdom was no more than a mere speck on a map. She taught me everything she knew, everything I know, my father decreed it so. He wanted a viable successor, and I was to be him."

"I don't know if it is nothing more than my foolish childhood memories, but I can remember days under the golden Kenyan sun when he was just... my father. Days we would hunt mice in the long grass, days we would just lay there staring into the spotless sky."

He shook his head, a violent snap.

"But I was young, I was stupid. That was not my father. My father was an animal. My father saw himself as king absolute, completely. Any disobedience... any failure, was met with punishment most severe."

"I would swear that at one time I could remember him using nothing more than harsh words... but it grew. Beatings, slashings, and finally death... for something as minor as spilling the water jugs. I was exempt from it, of course. But I watched those around me slowly sink into the red earth of the Serengeti. The vultures began circling the village, they never left."

"I must have been... what, nineteen? Prime of my life, and happy to do my father's bidding. He was king after all, and in my world king was synonymous with god."

"I never knew what it was she did... I was but outside the hut, they had just finished laying together. I heard my mother scream. It was short and crystal, like fine china dashed against the stones. Not at all like a beast's."

"I was within the hut in a heartbeat... but I was too slow. His back was gray, but his face was still golden. He turned towards me; his hand was still wrist deep in her, my mother. Blood spread from her chest, dribbling down his arm, the scarlet had already kissed his lips."

"My god was blood drenched, my father stood before me smiling. All he said was 'My rule.'"

"He hadn't hunted in years. His flesh was weak, his bones were brittle. My mother's blood wasn't dry before he joined her on the dirt floor."

He paused, looking out the windows. The sun was gone; all you could see was your own reflection off the glass.

"I buried her. Alone, by myself, I dug her grave. I left his body for the beasts. He would get no burial from me."

"There were others left alive in our... my village. I didn't see them. They may have been hiding from their new king, or perhaps standing right before me. I didn't see them. It was a small matter to take what coins we had in the coffers, there were few enough of them."

"I left with only that small bag of coins and a single box of mother's. I didn't want anything my father had made. Nothing lay behind me but mud, bones, and blood. I left, walking away from the setting sun as it fell behind me."

He coughed, cleared his throat and flexed his hands. "It took me weeks to walk to Muqdisho. And months to walk to Nohar, in the Indian province of Rajasthan. I needed to eat along the way, so I did the only thing I knew how to do – I killed. For money."

"It took me only two nights to venture further than I had ever been in my life. If it hadn't been for my mother's education I wouldn't have lasted further than Lake Elementaita." He looked at me again, eyes focusing, but not on me. Whatever he saw was from a space years ago.

"And that's my story. I've walked the journey of a million steps. From prince to pauper, murderer to lawman."

"Tell me, Tommy, how many lions do you see in V-town?"

I was taken aback for a moment, and had to think. "Well, none – except for you."

"Exactly... mate." His accent was trying to reassert itself again, it still wasn't quite there. "And that's the way I like it. Understand?"

"I think so." I reached out and put a hand over his massive paw, still curled around the tea cup. "You've heard my story too. I guess we're not exactly kindred spirits, eh?"

He tried to laugh. It didn't quite make it out. "I guess you're right."

"Why did you come here? Why not London?" I asked. "That's where you say you're from, why not there?"

His eyes hardened again. "V-town is about as far as you can get from the Isles. I know I have family there, my mother told me once." He held out his other hand, "Look at me." He flexed his claws under the tawny coat. "I don't belong there, I don't even belong here. I'm the son of a beast."

"English, Michael, whatever you want to call yourself, I don't kill because I made that choice. My father's legacy will haunt me until the day I die, but I am the one who decides what I'll do. Today, tomorrow. You walked away from your father, I'm grateful I haven't had to. You're already one of the most respected people in the city, and you do a service that we're all grateful for. You'll always have your mane, but the only blood I see on it right now is mine - and I can forgive you for that."

My cheek itched. I reached up and ripped off the bandage. It had just about grown back, fur and all.

Reaching down, I drank some of my tea for the first time. It had gone cold and bitter. I made a face.

"Not to your tastes, mate?"

"English, you can be a little too British at times. This stuff is disgusting."

He laughed, this time it sounded real. "Don't chip the cup, mate, or I'll have to rip your tail off."