

The Hunters



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Chapter 8: Swimming in a Suit and Tie

I spent the night at English's as I wasn't really relishing the long walk home to a dark apartment. And anyway, he had spare rooms and soft beds – something I didn't.

I woke up with a start. I was in a white bed, crisp white sheets... white walls. I was starting to see a trend here. I rolled off the bed and stood by the large bay window, morning sun flowing in. It felt good on my aching muscles, especially my face. I might be whole again, but it didn't do anything to chase away the ghost aches that were always left behind.

Through the window I could see the garden in the daylight. Its mixture of flowers spread to all colors, dark purple foxglove to the pale yellow of oxlip, it looked like he'd transplanted a plot of land straight from the UK. The lot backed onto a wall of solid green, the forest so deep and thick as to seem like a natural concrete, it hemmed me in just as much as its neighbors did in the city.

A scalatto knock on the door behind me and English strolled in without waiting. Guess it made sense – he owned the place after all. I spared a glance at him, a little bit deeper this time than I normally would. He was English again, not Michael. The swagger, the confidence and the composure, they were all back as though there had never been a chink in his armor.

"How's the face?" He reached out a hand, brushing the cheek that he'd managed to half eat last night.

"The advantages of regeneration," I said. I was happy to note my voice didn't slur at all. "But do me a favor, man, next time you're hungry – order take out. I'm not exactly an all you can eat buffet, eh?"

"Agreed." He smirked. "I guess I owe you one, or is it two? And just so you know, you taste horrible anyway."

"Good to know." My jacket was hung over a wardrobe, blood stained, but I could live with that.

"Normally I take brek at the café, but if you can stand toast and coffee, then I think I'll be taking today off. Anyway, did they give you your cut on the bounty yesterday? I figure I must have left enough to drag back."

I grumbled as I slipped on my jacket. "Wouldn't hand it over – they said it was your bounty, not mine."

"Figures, those pencil pushers back at the office have no clue what goes on out in the field. You

probably deserve the entire lot of it, mate." He huffed and turned around, walking out of the room, "You didn't try to beat the devil out of him."

We made our way downstairs and out to the small patio, I could smell the fragrance of lilacs and roses floating across from the garden in the surprisingly warm late summer air.

The food was simple, toast, cold cuts, and coffee that I declined. I never could understand how people could drink that bitter stuff. I could only gag it down with half a pot of sugar and another half pot of cream. By then I might as well not add the coffee anyway.

"What's your plan for the day?" I asked chomping toast, my voice muffled. My jaws were good at snapping and ripping, but I couldn't really grind them side to side for things like this.

"You mean our plans," he said.

"I thought you were taking the day off."

"We are. I'm not working today, and there's no way you're going hunting without me, pup. You earned your stripes last night, but by the looks of it, I'm going to have to keep you alive." He laid a finger aside his nose. "I'm sure it goes without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway. What happened last night stays between you and I."

I shrugged and let the morning sun beat down on me. It wasn't like I was planning to spread the news around anyway. "Without saying."

"Thanks, mate. Like I said, I've got to keep you around and alive now – you know too much for me to pawn you off. I can't kill you and eat the evidence, I already tried that. Anyway, I've got plans for you today."

"Oh?"

"No partner of mine is going to stay in that rat hole of yours. Keep yourself in that dive long and you'll wake up dead one morning. I've had to track down the killer of too many partners, I don't want to have to do it again."

"Works for me. What do you suggest?"

He leaned back, looking about ready to curl up and take a nap in the sun. "You remember how I mentioned most hunters don't last five runs?"

"Yeah."

"Well, one of our fellows just bought it a couple of days ago, after his sixth go around. He beat the odds, but not by much."

"And how does this involve me?" I asked, shifting in my seat, feeling vaguely uncomfortable talking about the odds of getting an unsealable hole ripped through me in the near future.

"He was doing well, right up until he got his neck snapped by our oversized side of beef. As I recall, his apartment should be up for grabs right about now."

"Gah." I gave a quick shutter. "Shouldn't we at least wait until the corpse is cold before we start fighting over his things?"

English just shrugged, "People die, mate. You'll get used to it."

I mulled over his words, I didn't exactly want to be getting accustomed to this type of thing.

"Unless we move fast we'll lose out," he continued. "It's in the perfect location anyway, near the café, and right on this edge of town. You can decide if you're freaked out when you see it, what do you say?"

Not much I really could say, I'd do just about anything to get out of my current apartment. I'd almost forgotten what a good bed felt like. "I'm game. One question though."

"What's it, mate?"

"How did he die?"

English fell silent for a moment in thought. "You know, that's not something we really talk

about much. You never knew him, but the two of you did meet. He was the fellow you managed to bounce off your chest when Marcus made his break for it. You needn't worry, the thwack didn't hurt him much - it was the hoof to the spine that did him in. From what I read he was all but dead by the time the medics hit the scene. Gone in minutes. Some of us aren't that lucky. I suppose that's a lesson for you, mate. Don't scream and leap - leave the theatrics until after the person is dead. Up until then it's fair game on who makes it out alive, a man running for his life won't wait for you to wax poetic before hacking you to pieces."

I winced. I hadn't even given the cat a second thought after seeing him go down.

"Come on then, mate. Daylight's a-burning and we need to get into the city."

The walk back in was easier than the one out, now that I knew where I was going. English hadn't been wrong, the first tower we encountered was our target. It may not be one of the glass and steel fortresses that you could see back in the business district, or the clean ultra-modern apartments of the high rent area, but the simple, unassuming concrete tower was clean of most water marks and graffiti. The fact that it had no gaping holes or missing parts put it miles ahead of the place I was currently living.

The lobby had lights and people in it for a change. It didn't take long for us to find the superintendent.

"We're interested in the former MacDonald suite on the third floor," English said, taking the lead. I just kind of stood behind him and followed along. After the luck I'd had on my last place I was more than happy to take a back seat.

"Former? What do you mean? He's still up on his payments." The super was a human. Odd, but you did see them every so often.

"Former," English said firmly. "He's dead as of the day before yesterday."

"And who are you?" he asked, looking surprised.

The lion softened. "I was his boss at Storm Front."

It took the human several calls and almost an hour, but he finally let us in with a shrug. "Well, he's not getting any deader. I can offer you the apartment and everything in it. Doesn't look like he had any family, and that was the agreement if he didn't pay his last month's rent. Poor bugger."

After seeing English's place the apartment wasn't anything special, but it did feel more than a little disconcerting to step right into someone else's life after they had so recently left it.

Simple white walls and dark blue furniture filled the four room apartment. A main room, bed, bath off it, and a fully equipped kitchen.

Walking about, I got the feeling that I would have liked to meet the guy who had until so recently owned this place, his tastes were disconcertingly like mine.

English came up behind me. "So what do you figure, mate?"

I pushed open a window and got a jet of fresh air. The power hadn't fizzed even once while we'd been here. "I love it." I could see the fields and orchards surrounding the city.

The lion turned to the human. "Call it done, my friend. What's your price?"

He listed a number, and I could feel my tail fall so fast it almost thumped on the floor. Even with my new income there was no way I could meet that – the initial layout was more than I had in my entire wad!

"Sorry for wasting your time, there is no way-" English cut me off with a glare. Putting an arm over the human's shoulder they walked out into the hall, shutting the door in my face behind them.

"Huh?" I tried to open the door, but English must have been leaning on it, the heavy wood wouldn't budge.

I wandered about the place for a few minutes, then the two of them came in all smiles.

"Congratulations, Mr. Taggert, you have a new home," the human said, handing me a set of keys.

"Eh?"

"Looks like the price of this place just went down by half for the next year, imagine that." English was looking out the window, studiously avoiding me. "Hey, I can see my house from here!"

The human held a piece of paper under my nose to sign, and then he was gone. "What just happened?" I asked, joining him by the windows. He seemed intent on counting the shingles on his distant roof, it poked up just above the horizon.

"Karma just came back to bite you in the arse, mate," he said, laughing. "Now I just owe you one."

"Well, thanks."

"Like I said, mate, don't mention it. Really, don't." He turned and smiled. "Now why don't we get ourselves those pay outs."

And that was, well, that. We made our way back to Storm Front where English argued with the accountants again over the bounties. The odd part is it seemed almost scripted, change a few curses and it was practically the same bout as last time.

Down the steps outside the building, and the lion was divvying up the cash. "You sure you don't want more, mate? You did all the work."

"And how would that look, me robbing the pocket of the guy who brought me on board? I'm already making ten times what I did a week ago. Keep it – you've got an image to maintain."

"That I do, mate." He looked up at the sun. "Almost pub time. Care to join me at the café?"

I just shook my head, "I've got a new place now, remember? I might as well get myself moved in before someone decides that those books in the tower of slime look like a good cash in."

"I'll join you."

"Woah there, man. I know you're grateful that I kept you from tearing apart half the city, but I don't need a puppy following me around – I'm the canine here. And besides, aren't I the junior partner?"

I wasn't sure if I'd offended him, but it was a little much to have a shadow after just getting used to living by myself. He stood unmoving for a moment, staring into the middle distance and... thought.

"I guess you got it right, mate. It's just been a while since I've had anyone who's been interested in anything other than how much money they could make off of me, and how fast."

I patted his back as I rounded the corner and shoved him away. "You hit your precious café, I'll see you in a few hours and you can tell me all about your new found separation anxiety."

The old apartment block was as run down as I remembered it, not that I'd been away all that long. Up those gods awful stairs again, the lights flickered and died four times as I climbed. I counted.

After getting to my room I realized that there wasn't much to pack, the books, my journal, and perhaps a half dozen odds and ends. For a moment I regretted not bringing English along, I'd forgotten how many books we'd stole.

I left the door open, now that there truly was nothing of value in the little slice of purgatory. The rent would run out soon, and it was unlikely many people would wonder where I had gone.

It took some effort, but I managed to get down the stairs without breaking my neck. One floor after I past him, I remembered that I should tell Max I was out of here. He was probably the only guy in the whole building who would ever bother to ask after me.

Back up I went, grunting and sweating all the way. I meant to just shove a note under the door, but it opened in front of my face, causing both me and the oni to jump back and land flat on our tails. Well, my tail, his butt.

"Tommy!" He sounded genuinely happy to see me. "You're still in one piece."

He was dressed in a housecoat the color of old dishwater, the only thing missing were a pair of worn pink bunny slippers – a set that I knew for a fact he had in the back of his closet.

"You bet," I said, pulling up a smile. He didn't really remind me of good times, but if anything was worth remembering from the last year, it was him.

He looked at my jacket. "You're a hunter now?"

I grinned sheepishly and scratched my head. "Yep, I'm moving up in the world, eh? But what are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

"Didn't you hear? Business is still dying; they've pulled everyone in the human tracking division back to part-time. There's just not enough people to track anymore."

"It's only been a week!"

"Yep, but the numbers just keep falling. But what about you? You look like you're making a run for it. Finally get yourself kicked out of the city, eh?"

Quickly, I tried to hide the books. "That's pretty much it. Like I said, I'm moving up in the world – I'm off to an apartment where you can't taste the air."

"Congrats, good luck to you." He looked me up and down. "You never know, I might just be coming to you in the near future looking for a job. I still think you're crazy being a bounty hunter, but maybe you can find me a comfy office job?"

"Bet on it." I handed him the card English had given me and turned to leave before he could get a better look at my bags. "Just ask for English, and I'll do my best."

"But isn't English the-"

"Yep." I let the stairway door close behind me with the screech of metal on metal.

The walk to the new building left me with arms that felt like they were going to fall off, but I made it. I even dared a ride up the elevator; I was willing to bet that if I took the stairs I'd have a heart attack.

Luck must have been on my side, the thing ran just the way it was supposed to – it even looked like it was maintained. Some no-name nauseating musak played as we worked our way up.

The elevator, however, was not what held my attention.

Maybe I'm just a little bit frisky after having a good night's sleep for once in my life, but she definitely caught my eye. I've done a fair bit of searching to find just where my tastes lay, and I think I just found the bullseye. To be honest, I'm a little surprised.

At first glance I almost thought she was human. Fair skin, and long brunette hair that cascaded down around her face to her shoulders, framing bright green eyes.

I don't normally notice things like eye color, but in this case I was willing to make an exception.

Her perfect face was crested by two little cat ears, perched atop her head just like mine. They twitched every so often, in the most come hither type way.

We rode up together. She looked out the windows the whole time, seem to not even notice me. It wasn't until I held the door open for her that she saw me, and smiled.

I could have melted right there, she smiled. And me, I smiled back.

And... I... didn't... say... a... thing.

She walked out the elevator and down the hall, all I could do was smile.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I couldn't take my eyes off her as she glided down the hallway, it was a good view. Surprisingly, she didn't have a tail. But hey, I could learn to like that.

She turned, and walked through the door directly opposite mine.

Some days, karma's a bugger.

Other days, I love my life!

Could have used my tail as a propeller as I walked down the hall. My arms were screaming bloody murder, but I was walking on air.

The books and knick knacks went wherever I dropped them in the apartment. I still didn't know where any of the things in this place were.

Through a little bit of random wandering I found myself in some kind of overly modern easy chair. Head back and legs up, tail through a slit that seemed a little too convenient to be for anything but the purpose.

Don't know what was up with me, this was a first. People don't just 'fall in love', more like fall in lust. I could go for that. Not the kind of thing to mention in polite company, but she made me one happy puppy.

I floated off, not sure how long I lay there, but when I opened my eyes I was staring straight into gold.

"Gah!" I managed to over balance the chair and go toppling to the floor in a heap at the lion's feet.

"What are you doing here? How did you even get in?" I asked, struggling back to my feet.

"I co-signed, mate." He jingled a key in front of my face. "Money brings its privileges."

"Knock, dude. Knock next time." I didn't want to think about what he might have walked in on if he'd been a few minutes earlier.

He just laughed and went to raid the fridge. Cool, I didn't even know I had a fridge.

"What are you even doing here?" I asked, rubbing my forehead, the premonitions of a headache coming on.

"It's five o'clock, mate. You've been off having happy dreams for some time now. Big news just came up, we've got ourselves a nice fat lead. Enough for me to come out of vacation, and you too."

"What is it? Another tepid thespian? Pissed off politician?"

He grinned, wide enough I could count the teeth. "Nope. This is one of those rare times when even the layman knows what the guy did."

"Oh?"

"Yep, you remember that sinking of the passenger ship, the Kayto, on its way in from Japan last year?"

I scratched behind an ear as I pulled myself off the floor. "Not really."

"You should, mate. Three hundred died. They always knew who did it – he wasn't shy. Some form of revolutionary, trying to keep out the foreigners. Morgan Wake." He threw a folder at me, I was pleased to note that I managed to catch it – I was getting better. "He's one right bugger."

"Do I even want to ask why he's got a fetish for sending ships to the bottom?"

"Don't look at me, mate. Sane people don't bother blowing up ships of refugees in the harbor, he does. Intel shows he's at the Diamond Dice casino tonight. As far as I can tell no one else knows he's out there. The government is playing it mum on this one, not a word, even to me. I'd heard he got brought in a few weeks ago, but it looks like they must have had the wrong man, he's definitely still live. With the fame this bugger is packing the payday will make us both rich. You up for this?"

"Why not? I always wanted an early grave."

"One trick, mate."

"What's that?"

"The Diamond Dice, it's a floating casino."

"First thing we're going to have to do, mate, is get you dressed up. While it's not a black tie and tails affair, we'll still going to need to squeeze you into a suit."

"Tails?"

"Old phrase, mate. Though I don't think we'd have a problem with that one, eh?"

I followed him out, careful to lock the door behind me. It was a bit of an odd feeling, I actually had something worth protecting now.

We made our way out west toward the coast, thankfully for us the business district was on the way. "You do know I've never worn a suit in my life? I hope you've got a plan for this, I've never so much as touched a tux as owned one."

"Not a problem, mate. Your good pal English has it all taken care of – we're going undercover, all spy like."

We were on one of those streets where even the sidewalks were clean and patched. The stores around us catered to the needs of the upper classes, small discrete signs listing their professions.

"Here we are, mate, the best tailors in the city."

A small sign hung over the door 'Arrow Tailors, fine men's wear no matter your species.'

The shop was small and, to be honest, not very well lit. An old fox, with a coat more gray than red, worked his way around to a counter, the click of his cane loud on the hardwood floor. "Michael, so good to see you again." He had a Scottish accent that put the fake British one English wore to shame. And his sounded real, too.

"Smith." The lion reached out, clasping the fox's hand, the vulpine seemed to almost disappear. "It's been too long."

"That it has, my son." He peered around the lion's bulk. "I see you've brought a new partner. The two of you have somewhere you need to be?"

English stepped out of the way to introduce us. "Tommy, this is Mr. Smith Arrow. Smith, this is Tommy Taggart, my new partner."

The fox pulled a thick set of glasses from a pocket in his dark brown overcoat, looking me up and down. "Tommy is it? Good to meet you. I've met a lot of Michael's partners, you're..." He paused for a moment, "Different."

"Oh?" I felt a bit naked standing in front of the fox. He began to walk around me, measuring me with his eyes.

"Yes, my son, you're... how shall I put this? Smaller."

"Wimpier? Punier?" English suggested, grinning.

"Yes, yes." The fox waved an arm absently and shuffled back behind the counter. "So many of your partners, Michael. I've seen what? Forty now? It's been a new one every few months."

"Hey now, Smith. It hasn't been that many!" The lion put up his hands as if under assault.

A measuring tape clinked onto the polished wood counter with a definite tone that brooked no argument. "Yes it has, Michael. I've known you since you washed up ashore ten years ago. You even tried to copy my accent before you decided on the darned silly one you have now."

"Hey!"

"You come in here every four months or so with a new partner in tow, keeping them around just to help you drag off your bounties after you've beaten them senseless. I'm always making them suits – likely both the first and last they'll ever own." He spat a long stream of red juice into a jar on the

counter, guess it was there for just the purpose. "All my fine work goes towards thugs who would never know a decent suit if it fell from the heavens and tried to knock some sense into them."

"Now that's just not fair-"

"And you," he growled, leveling a gray finger at the lion's chest. "Almost every time you walk in here, all you have hanging off you are the tatters of my latest work. So little left it's hardly even worth a box to carry it in!"

The fox stopped for a moment and leaned on the counter, gasping for air. English came around and helped him to a stool.

"Take a breath there, Smith. We don't want you dropping dead on us."

"I'm not done with you, Michael..."

"Sure you're not, just do me a favor this one more time and I'll take a rain check on the lecture, eh?" The fox just grumbled but looked satisfied. "Best friend Tommy here needs to look like a million pounds. We've got ourselves a date on the Diamond Dice, and I'd hate for him not to be the center of attention."

"High class affair, and they'll let malooks like you in? Their standards must be slipping."

The lion made a hurt expression, but laughed.

The fox came back around and measured me from ear to toe. When I asked why he needed the length of my muzzle, all I got was "In the event you desire a hat made."

It must have taken at least half an hour, but at last the fox made it back to his feet with a crack and pop that made me wince.

"Very good. I can have you a suit fit for a king," He gave me another look, "Or at least a scrawny prince, in two weeks."

"We need it tonight – or more to the point, now." English didn't even raise his eyes from the hole he was worrying in the counter with a claw.

The fox just sputtered. "You can't be serious! You expect a suit to pop out of midair!?"

"You've always done it before."

He sputtered some more, it took him a few moments to string more than two words together between coughs. "They were all neanderthals like you! I've gotten used to you bringing in morons in monkey suits. I've nothing to fit him!" He jabbed a thumb back towards me, not even looking. Nice to be included in the conversation.

"Oh, I don't know." English still hadn't bothered to look up, his voice was amused, a smile crept up his lips. "He's about your size."

"What!?" The fox almost collapsed on the counter. "Absolutely not!"

English finally looked up, smile in full bloom. "Come on, Smith. You know you want to sell them – then you can have the joy of making yourself a new ones. He'll pay triple."

"What?" Now it was my turn to get excited.

"Shush, mate. Don't interrupt the fine art of negotiation."

"With my money!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way." He grinned again and they both promptly ignored me. Remind me why I'm even here?

They bickered on for a few more minutes until the fox finally threw up his arms and hobbled off to the back room. "And don't forget the suit I left here last time," English called after him, mocking his Scottish drawl.

"Do I even want to ask how much I've paid?" I took a place next to him, leaning on the counter.

"Think of it as an investment, mate."

I groaned. "I hate it when people say that."

The fox was back with a single gigantic suit bag. "Here is your suit, Michael. It's wasted on a thug like you." He turned to me, "Come along, my son, let's get you in the back – we've got a deadline, and we need to find something that matches you. In case you haven't noticed, you're not red."

I followed him into the back room. English's voice chased us away, "Neither are you, Smith. Haven't been for the last decade!" The fox ignored him.

I'm sure what he did was highly technical, but all I saw were pins, scissors and cloth. The number of suits he put me through was more than I could count. Everything from the most gods awful emerald green sports coat to something that looked more like what a corporate sellout grim reaper would wear.

We ended up on a suit of bark brown, a few shades darker than my own fur. The stuff was practically shiny, I asked him about that but just got a smile. The cut was simple, surprisingly so. Fewer lines in this thing than you might see in your average triangle.

The final effect in the mirror was that of a bank manager with too much money on his hands.

Walking out to the front, Smith leaned on me, breathing hard, but a smile on his face. "I've done the impossible, Michael. Your friend here is as good as any suit can make him."

The monster in the room hardly looked like English at all – he'd changed into his suit while he was waiting. It was almost a tuxedo, so tightly tailored that it was surprising he could even move at all in it.

"So how do I look, mate?"

"Like you're either going to try a hostile takeover, or start calling yourself Bond."

"Who?"

"Never mind – read some classical literature someday."

"Now, about your payments." The fox was slowly making his way towards a rusty iron till.

"Put it on my tab, Smith." The lion said. He started pushing me towards the door.

The fox's head jerked up. "No. That's what you said last time."

With a shove I was out the door, English on my heels.

He poked his head back in, "Still on for lunch, Wednesday?" All I heard was the clank of a pair of scissors hitting the door, and cursing peppered with coughs.

"Nice old fella, just have to know how to handle him."

We walked down the street, getting a few more looks than I was used to, mostly from the women.

"Question for you, Tommy," he said, casually flicking some dust from his lapel, "Do you swim?"

"Well, not really. I guess I can as well as anybody else." I shrugged.

"That's good, I don't swim – I sink." He said it easily, as though oblivious to the fact we were about to share a boat with a mad bomber.

"Is this a cat thing?"

"Nope, it's a muscle thing. Muscles don't float, mate. You don't see many body builders on the swim team." He flexed a bit, didn't impress me – after I'd already seen him lift me off the floor without a thought, a flex didn't mean much.

"Wonderful. Do me a favor, English?"

"What's that, mate?"

"Don't drown."

Ahead of us the street dipped, and started gliding down towards the ocean in gentle crests. The sun was just starting to set; we were treated to a fiery red globe slowly extinguishing its self in the

crystal blue water.

The walk to the pier wasn't long – the Diamond Dice would never find its self far from the smell of money. As we neared the ship, the number of people in suits and dresses steadily increased until I was glad English had insisted on us getting changed. To wear anything that didn't ooze money would make one stand out here like a blood stain on a linen napkin.

To the ship's credit, there was no line up to get in. The pier just seemed to end, and the vessel began. English flashed a couple of tickets at the crewman, and we were waved in without so much as a 'Welcome aboard.'

The ship itself was huge, white, ultra modern, and I wouldn't have been surprised if the gold on the fixtures was real.

"How did our friend manage to get himself onto the ship?" I asked. "Looks like the cover charge is more than most people make in a month."

The cat just shrugged and grabbed some champagne from a passing waiter dressed in impeccable all-white. "About as good a question as how he planted a bomb on a ship that came all the way from Japan without docking, and not get caught in the blast himself."

We wandered the decks of the ship, no slot machines here – everything had a dealer or other staff watching over the game, making sure the customers were happy and playing.

Our IDs got us into the galley, through the engine room, and even onto the bridge. Every step was watched by the crew, they'd let us through but they didn't trust us.

I was a little disappointed with the bridge, it was as clean and orderly as anywhere else on the ship, but it felt so... low tech. I'd figured if I were to see a computer anywhere on the ship, it would be here. Nothing. Valves and levers to be sure, but that was the extent of the pickings.

The captain was a water daemon of some sort, blue skin, and eyes that seemed to be made of ice. He was a short fellow, only came up to my chest, English's waist. "Are you quite done? This is the only tour we're doing, we're not a cruise ship." He held his temper, but I kept getting the mental image that English was going to poke the guy just to see if he would pop.

"Just about, skipper." The lion got down on his knees to talk to the captain, and was still taller than him by a head. I had to hold myself from laughing, just my luck he'd throw me from the ship. "I understand you can't be enjoying this, but you'll be happy if something should go down."

The captain just turned and walked away. "My vessel has sufficient security without you mongrels on it. Should your unfounded claims be true, we will most assuredly be able to handle it ourselves."

"So what do we do now, English? Everything checks out, and the crew won't be letting anyone where they shouldn't be."

He pulled a coin from a pocket, flipping it in the air. "Walk the floor, and have some fun, mate. The bugger will be here, but it won't do us any good to stand around with our tails tied to the floor boards."

The gambling floor was packed, crawling with money. It had that quiet buzz that you only hear in the upscale casinos. None of the screams or clatters of the low roller places, just the clink of glasses and the occasional muted cheer.

English had wandered off and found a seat at one of the high roller tables, between two vixens of course.

I didn't follow him, gambling just isn't my speed. I had only just recently clawed my way out of poverty – I didn't want to be jumping back in head first.

Three quick circuits of the ship, and my feet were getting tired. I was almost bored enough to wish that something would happen.

Oh well, I was on my fourth glass of water by now and needed to get it out of my system. I was avoiding alcohol like the plague, but the humid night on the ocean was pulling the moisture right from my lips.

I'd said that the design of this ship was great? Right, but with one exception, anyone who puts urinals on a sea going vessel should be shot. Considering how few people can seem to hit a target on dry land, how many do you figure can shoot straight while the ship beneath them rocks back and forth? Yeah, me too.

In any event, there were no psychos with bombs in the men's room – or at least no more than you might expect on an average night.

Coming out, I was face first into a crowd of people. Pushing through, I ran into her, the cat from the elevator. Literally, she was carrying one of those trays of champagne with about forty glasses on it. Smooth guy I was, I sent it skidding from her hand. It took everything I had to drop to the floor and slide forward to catch the tray before it smashed against the ground, it would have sent the glasses into pretty crystal shards.

"Why thank you, Mr. ... haven't we met?" Her voice was simple, eloquent, and just that perfect soprano pitch that makes you want to drape her over a piano to sing. Everything a female wolf's wasn't.

I pulled myself off the ground, almost tilting the platter. I had a nice skid mark down the front of my new suit, Smith would likely try to skin me with a dull pair of scissors next time I saw him.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." I tried to do a little bow, but the glasses clinked and I had to hurry to straighten up again. "I believe we saw each other earlier today, I just moved into the third floor of Moreau hall."

"Oh!" A smile lit her face, it was like a pinball machine going off. "You're the wolf I saw in the hallway." A frown crossed her face. "Your one of the dignities on the guest list? We're doing a special invitation only function tonight."

I shook my head with a small smile, like I had the kind of money to get on any list. "Not quite, I'm a bounty hunter. We've had a report of a fugitive on board tonight. I'm here to track him down."

"A bounty hunter?" She looked me up and down, "By the looks of it, you must be good at what you do." Her smile was back in full force, I could sun myself and fall asleep in front of that smile.

"Well, I'm..." I shifted the weight of the tray, "My partner and I are the top rated in the city." Mayday, mayday, libido out of control, and I'm starting to lie through my teeth.

"Really?" She took her tray, I had no clue how she managed to carry it, my arm was already aching. "Would you care are to meet me at the bow in fifteen minutes? I could give you a tour of the ship."

My tail wanted to start sweeping the floor; it took everything I had to hold it in check so I didn't start looking like a perv. "Private tour?" Gods, I'm so transparent.

She just laughed, "Private tour." I got that smile again and almost pole-axed backwards, "By the way, my name's Rebecca."

This time I did manage to bow, I reached out and took her spare hand in a light kiss. The one trick I'd learned from my dating days. "Tommy."

It worked, she giggled as she walked off, a glance over her shoulder.

I felt like I was walking on air, I didn't know where I was going – and to be frank I didn't care. Last time I'd tried that trick, I'd gotten a drink tossed in my face rather than saving a tray of them. Red wine is a bugger to wash from brown fur, I should know.

It must have been fifteen minutes, but it felt like I'd just got there. The cool breeze was magnified by the ship plowing forward, out to sea now and making a circuit of the harbor. I've never really been one for the water, but there is something to be said for leaning nose first into a strong wind.

I didn't even know she was there until I felt her leaning on the railing beside me, I could feel the warmth of her body against the cold wind.

I looked over, the black, almost bunny suit, was gone, covered over by a long dark blue coat that almost made it past her knees. It didn't show as much, but I liked it anyway.

"You come here often?" OK, sue me, my pickup lines are about as good as week old rat meat.

She laughed. Too late, I realized I just cracked a joke. "Not really, only every break or so." She turned and extended a hand along the railing towards me. "So tell me, Mr. Bounty Hunter, who are you tracking tonight?"

I had to rack my brain to recall what English had told me. "You remember that bombing a year ago on the passenger ship from Japan?" She nodded. "Rumor is, the same person is going to be here tonight, doing the same job."

She shivered and took a half step towards me. "Really? They didn't tell us a thing."

I chuckled. I wanted to wrap an arm around her and pull her closer in the cold wind, but I wasn't quite that brave. "Not to worry, we didn't even get the tipoff until an hour ago. I'm sure everything will be fine."

She thought for a moment, smile bursting out again. "I saw another guy who looked like he could bench press a horse, must be your friend." Now a worried look. "He was a cat of some type, that couldn't be the bomber - could it?"

"Nah, my partner's a lion, I'm sure it's just him. In any event, the bounty's so high, I'd bet we're not the only ones on the ship. If I were the bomber, there would be no way I'd be caught dead here tonight. I'm sure we're safe."

She was the one who took that final step closer, leaning into my chest. Between her coat and my suit I couldn't feel a thing, but it still felt good.

"A bit scrawny for a big name hunter, aren't you?" She said it pinching one of my arms.

"Hey now. I may not have muscles, but that's what my partner's for - I've got the brains."

"A smart wolf? Will wonders never cease." A quick laugh and she was closer. "Someday I'll have to meet this partner of yours. Not today."

"Works for me." We stood leaning into the wind for a moment, not saying anything, just watching the dark shapes floating through the night.

"You still want that tour?"

"Hmm?" My brain had to click in again, this felt too good, I'd just slipped into autopilot.

"The tour I promised you. I can't really make it that private, but I can at least take you for a walk about the ship before my shift starts back up."

"That would be nice." I had to do my rounds anyway. I took her hand, it was warm to the touch. She didn't have fur to keep her warm in the wind; I tried to imagine what it must be like but drew a blank.

Slowly, we wound our way through the ship and down to the bottom casino deck. We were so close to the water you could almost reach out and touch it - guess this vessel wasn't for rough sailing.

"That's odd."

"What is it?" I asked.

She pointed to some wet tracks on the deck. They led from the railing to a staff door.

"Someone came in from the edge of the ship. It's normal during the day when we're at dock, or

even just idling, but not when we're at power on the open sea."

"Where does that door go?"

"Down to the engine room."

Oh bugger.

"Rebeca, you stay here. I need to go and check this out."

"Tommy, isn't that dangerous?" Well duh.

I walked to the door, and looked down the stairwell within, all the lights were out of course, wonderful. I was about to step inside when I smelt blood and my courage broke. I might want to look like a knight in shining armor, but on the other hand, I kind of liked to keep breathing as well.

I turned around and took her hand, "Rebeca, this is important – go back to the main floor and find a big lion in a tux named English. Get him down here right away, okay?"

"Got it." She was off and running – in high heels no less. Got to hand it to her, she knows when to get moving.

I wanted to wait for English, but the scent of blood kept hounding me. For all I knew someone was dying in there, and I'd be skinned before I let this go down with me standing only feet away.

The stairs were the type you see on ships all over the world, sharp metal grating that cuts your feet, and the rungs were practically vertical they were so steep.

It took my eyes a few moments to adjust as I stepped in, the light in here was almost nil, what little filtered through came from a few random gages and status lights.

I was in a claustrophobic hallway, machinery bulged in from both sides and above like tumors. The pulsing of the engines was so loud as to almost be unbearable – no need to worry about being overheard.

I was in some part of the ship that we hadn't taken a tour of, but we couldn't be too far from the main engine room. I worked my way slowly forward; to be honest, I was about as concerned with whacking myself senseless on a random pipe as I was finding the bomber.

I rounded a corner, and suddenly my priorities reversed. In front of me I could see two figurers outlined in the red dimness of the gages. One was slumped forward, sprawled out over a small desk. The other was hunched over something on the floor, it didn't have a big blinking sign saying 'This is a bomb', but I was going to go with my gut on this one and say it was.

"I don't think you belong here." Yeah, I had to work on my heroic dialog, I could just barely make myself heard over the thumping of the engines.

The guy stopped and turned around, glaring at me from small, close set eyes. In the light, I could just make out his face. An otter, still dripping wet. Well, that explained how he got on board without security pounding him into hamburger.

That was about all I saw. Well, that and his fist flying towards me.

The punch itself didn't do much damage, it was the fact that he sent me stumbling backwards, headlong into a pipe, that made me see stars.

I must have been out for only seconds, my vision swam back from spinning black pinwheels that made me just want to curl up and sleep for a week.

Behind me I could hear him clamoring up the stairs, not exactly a discrete fellow this guy.

I felt behind my head, my fingers came away wet – just great. I spat some more blood from my mouth, levering myself to my feet. A little unsteady, I followed after him. I may have that warm nauseous feeling, but I was pissed off enough to keep moving – I didn't feel like getting known as the guy who let him get away.

By the time I hit the top of the stairs I was back to normal, pissed, but normal. I burst into the

cold night air, the stars and sea opening up around me. English barged in from the side, almost sending me flying for my trouble. He looked like a well-tailored tank, ready to rip someone limb from limb.

"Where is he, mate?" The lion's voice was tightly controlled, cool and calm; I could almost see him counting the bills.

"I don't know-" I scanned the decks around me, no way he could have gotten past English, and the other direction was clear.

About twenty feet away, something glinted in the dark water. "There!" I pointed, we both squinted. You could just make him out between the waves.

English pounded the railing with a clank, almost denting it. His composure was slipping. "We'll never catch him now." He turned to walk off.

"Wait." I set a hand on his shoulder. "How's your throwing arm?"

"You kidding me?" The ghost of an ugly smile grazed over his lips. I'm going to regret this... again.

"Thirty feet, think you can manage it?"

He hefted me like a pup. The seams on my suit popped.

"Let's find out, shall we, mate?"

He wound up, took a few steps back, and with a roar I was airborne. It wasn't exactly a first-class flight. The otter turned to look at the noise and saw me. In a perfect world he should have been the one screaming, but in this case it was me as I flailed through the air.

I landed a few feet short and to the left, guess English didn't have much experience as a bouncer.

Worked well enough for me though, as I hit the water my suit puffed out with trapped air and I was near soaked in an instant. My fur kept a warm patch right next to my skin, but it wasn't much good in the cold Pacific.

I reached out an hand in the darkness; it had only been seconds, but I was chilled and shivering. By sheer good luck I found the otter's leg as I sank, and clung on for dear life. If I wasn't the hunter here I would just have well begged him to drag me to shore.

The stinking water-rat would have none of it, he kicked and scrambled at me while we sank; I could see the dark ribbon of the surface slowly pull away from us.

He reached down. There was no flash, but I could feel through the dark water that he had a knife – big Rambo style one too. Just great.

He swiped and I pulled around behind him, pushing off from his shoulders to try and get some fresh air before the hot coals that were my lungs burned their way through my chest – regeneration doesn't do much if you take a watery grave.

My head broke surface, I sucked in cool air that was the sweetest thing I'd tasted in a long time. It took me a few moments, but I realized that our positions were reversed – the otter was pulling at my legs now.

He had one arm wrapped around just under my calf, and he was not a happy little swimmer. I pushed with my other leg and tried to pry him off, but his grip was too tight. His head got in the way so I gave it a quick kick. I felt my foot connect, but it wasn't the hard bone of the skull – I'd managed to get one of my claws into his eye.

Oops. If he was pissed before, he was out for blood now. The water beneath me practically churned white with his thrashings.

Another second and I was under, face to face with his ruined eye, and a deranged smile that did not promise good things in my future.

Keeping your head underwater is one thing, if you just lay still you can do it for maybe a minute

before you have to surface. Fighting, not so much. It couldn't have been more than ten or twenty seconds and I was ready to take in a big lung full of sea water.

So far I'd managed to keep the little bugger and his knife safely away from me, but when I broke for the surface all I could do was give him one last kick and hope I had time to gas up. Bad choice.

I managed to get one lung full of air before I felt it in my left leg, just below the hip.

Ow ow ow ow ow, oh flipping – the bugger had stabbed me!

And the knife was still within me – he gave it a twist. I almost jumped clear out of the waves.

I gave him a good bop over the head in return, but he was a slippery sod to get a hold of down there. He gave the knife another wrench, my leg felt like it was on fire, as though it would just as well drop off. And then, nothing. Nothing at all, my leg had gone dead weight – this can't be good.

The water around us was dark with blood, from all I knew we were calling up the sharks from Mexico. My leg was gone, so I didn't have anything left to lose, if I didn't end this now I could be out more than just one leg.

I ducked my head under the waves and followed him down. It was hard to see him, a black blob in the dark water – but I did. This time I wasn't playing. I didn't care about his eye, I didn't care about the knife. My hands found his neck, I squeezed.

Otter boy might be able to go without air for a long time, but I doubt his brain was much good without blood. The knife flailed as he opened more wounds on my arms and back, but he didn't have the leverage to do much more than get me even madder, if that were possible.

It took a few seconds, but not as long as I feared, he went slack in my hands.

Well that was nice, now I've got a passed out otter in one arm, a dead leg, and I'm ten feet under water. Can I get a do over?

It took everything I had left. To be honest, it wasn't all that much, but it felt like it. We broke surface and I hauled that little water rat up so he could get some air. Good thing he wasn't dead yet, after all this I wanted my full bounty.

I waved to the ship. I heard screaming, maybe cheering, I couldn't tell. Someone tossed a life preserver with a rope attached to it. They had good aim. It whacked me right between the ears.

At this point I was about ready to sink to the bottom of the ocean, but if I've worked this hard I wasn't going to let a little thing like a concussion stop me. I repeated every curse I knew as they dragged me back towards the ship.

A couple of folks in fancy suits jumped down into the water to help lift up the otter.

I was seeing double, so they more or less handled me like a sack of kibble.

Laying out on the deck, dripping, I got the first chance to see my leg. Ah gods – someone has a hard-on for giving me a hard time. It was obvious why I couldn't feel it, the bugger had almost cut it clean off at the joint. It hung on by the barest scraps of flesh, I was pumping blood everywhere. With the amount of fluids I was losing you could make mixed drinks – really bad mixed drinks.

I saw the face of English. He, like the rest of the world, had faded into black and white.

"Hold on, mate. The doc is on his way – we've got the best care money can buy."

I just laughed, a little too hysterically. Regeneration was all well and good – but this was a bit much.

Something nagged at the back of my mind... what was it? Had I forgotten to let the sun out this morning? Oh yeah, the ship turning into a fireball.

"Buddy... pal." I hooked a finger weakly towards the door the engine room. "Thing go boom in there."

"What?" English was looking more concerned, if that were even possible.

"Bomb."

"Oh." And he was off, the sound of his feet scampering down the metal staircase faded away as I fell backwards into a black spider web.

I surfaced a few moments later, or at least I thought it was a few moments. I was still on deck, and I was still surrounded by people in expensive suits who did nothing more than gawk and sip their drinks.

Some guy's face hovered over mine, looked like an angel, probably the doc. He pushed something over my muzzle. It smelt sweet, I coughed.

My hand twitched, someone was holding it. I couldn't turn my head, but I had images of brown hair and green eyes.