

The Hunters



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Chapter 9: Another Day, Another Broken Bone

I came around staring into one of those tiled florescent ceiling lights that you see in some expensive public buildings. That's nice; I want to look at something else now. Problem was, I couldn't.

Seriously, I couldn't move a bloody muscle. Even blinking hurt.

"Gah." Always eloquent, I tried to twist the sandpaper that must be my lips to form something that at least sounded vaguely coherent.

A rustle off to one side and the droopy face of a bulldog leaned into view. He was wearing the blue uniform of a policeman.

"Gah?"

"Mr. Taggert, I see you're awake." A smile broke his lips; at least he didn't seem to want to drag me off to jail. "May I be the first to welcome you back to the land of the living."

"Geh." Yah, I'm a heck of a conversationalist.

"If you have a few moments, Mr. Taggert, I'd like to ask you some questions." He pulled a notepad from somewhere and licked the tip of a pen – never understood why people do that, all he got from it was a black smear down his tongue.

"Goh."

He looked at me again, grin widening. "How do you spell that? One 'o' or two?" He put the pad away. "Perhaps I'll just let you see your visitors now. We'll talk again soon, Mr. Taggert." He patted my hand, sending a jolt of pain up my arm and walked out of sight, i.e. not leaning over the bed. He could be two feet away for all I knew.

I heard a door open, it had good hinges, but in the thick air of the hospital you could hear it whoosh. A few words in the hallway that I couldn't make out, and a cane came clicking towards me.

"So our boy says he isn't a hunter?"

If I could have moved I would have thrown my face under the covers. I hadn't even told my parents I was bounty hunting now.

Two faces peered over at me from different sides of the bed, my mother looked concerned, my father like he was about to throw a party.

"Ugh."

My mom disappeared for a moment, coming back with a glass of water. I think I got most of it

on the bandages that covered me, but at least I sloshed enough around to sound like I wasn't choking on my tongue.

"Hi Mom, Dad. Fancy meeting you here." I tried to smile, but my lips didn't want to bend.

That got me a slap on the shoulder from my dad. I'm sure this was the day he'd been waiting to see for a long time. All I could do was flinch and groan in a less than manly way.

"So, when were you going to tell us you'd found your own brand of hunting, scamp?" The bed creaked as my father sat on the corner, I could only see the tips of his ears.

"I, well, I just started..."

"Just started? You've pulled off the biggest coup anyone can remember! Single handedly, our boy caught the murderer of hundreds, dragging him from the very sea." I couldn't see his face, but somehow I could hear his smile.

"Well, that isn't the whole story... you see, my partner English-"

"Is sitting out in the hallway, he's the one who sent for us. Told us the whole story," my mother's whisper of a voice filtered in.

"What? English is here?"

"Barely left the building, rode with you in the ambulance here with your new girlfriend – don't you remember?"

I tried to laugh, but a stab of pain in my hip made it come out as more of a gasp.

"Not in the slightest, last thing I recall was getting dragged from the water." I tried to sit up but couldn't even twitch my tail. "What happened to me? First time I've ever had to be in the hospital like this."

I saw a cloud pass my father's eyes, perhaps a flash back to all the time he'd had to spend in places like this after his final hunt.

"You got yourself pretty beat up, son."

I just laid back, the fight already drained from me. "Alright, what did I manage to do this time? It must have been something good to land me in a place like this with my regeneration running full force."

"Well, to start," He tapped a massive cast on my leg with his cane. "You came bloody close to losing this."

"How close is close?"

"As in they almost shipped it over here in a box – it's amazing your body can even pull it back together. From what I've heard, it's not unusual even for folks with regeneration to lose a limb when they do something so damn foolish as this."

He tapped the cast again, harder. A shot of pure blue pain spiked up from my toes. It's good to know it's still attached at least.

"What's everything else for?" I tried to point at the traction and gauze that covered me on all sides.

"What do you think, silly?" My mother from the side again, soft hands checking under dressings. "You can only heal so much at once. The leg is most important, so all your bumps and scrapes have to wait – and you've got a lot of them."

I wasn't used to having something like this. Every time I'd whacked myself as a pup it had been gone in seconds. Deep down I felt a sudden cold; this is what it must be like to live a life without the gift of regeneration. Smeg that. I didn't like it.

"I'll get better, right?" I couldn't help it, my voice curled up at the end like I was still some little pup running home to mommy.

"You'll be fine, dear." I felt her fingers on my cheek, just the barest of touches. "Do you want

us to stop by your apartment, pick up anything?"

Oh yeah, that too. "Actually, I've moved."

"Oh?" There was amusement in my father's voice. At least I wasn't getting a pounding for not telling them anything.

"I'm in Moreau hall now, third floor. Just moved in yesterday."

My father cocked an eye ridge, "Living with the ritz now?"

My laugh almost made it out this time. "Not quite, but getting there. English has a key. You can get it from him."

"Your partner has a key to your new flat?" He didn't suggest anything, but this was getting a little uncomfortable.

I groaned. "Long story. If you can find a way to extract it from him, then I'll get fewer surprises."

I felt the feather touch of my mother's fingers on my cheek again, and then they were off. From the corner of my eye I could just make out the shape of a sunflower sitting by the window. My mother just couldn't stand the idea of me here without one of her precious plants to watch over me.

Everything was quiet for a moment, just a moment. Long enough for me to let my eyes drift closed and feel the nips of sleep on the edges of my mind.

A wisp of air tickled my nose, slowly I forced my eyes open just a slit. In front of me, again, were golden irises staring straight at me.

I'm getting better, I didn't fall of the bed this time, but that likely had more to do with the fact I was all but tied down.

"English! Not again. Personal space, man."

Just to get even I tried to huff a breath up his nose, no dice, he was too fast.

He moved out of sight, I could hear the screech of him pulling one of those cheap metal chairs closer to the bed. I still couldn't turn my head, but he sat close enough I could see him without straining.

"You've done this before," I remarked, voice still hoarse.

"I've visited some partners in the ward before, mate. More in the ICU, and most in the morgue. I happy to see you managed to stay on the lighter side of the scale."

"What about you, ever been in here yourself?"

He didn't smile, but he didn't frown either, his face a mask of perfect neutral. "I've had my moments, but so far the gods have deemed for me not to need to stay down long. I plan to keep it that way, mate. Anyway," His voice lightened, "I've got some good news for you, partner. Payday came in. The government seemed a little pissy about paying up, but I quietly reminded them that I have a couple of contacts in the papers."

He tossed a wad of bills on my chest, so thick I flinched. "You're set for at least the next few months, mate. Good thing, as it looks like you might be down for just that long, eh?"

Figures, I get a big pay out and I have to spend it all recouping. By the time I'm back on my feet I'll probably be scrounging for cash again. That reminds me.

"Who's paying for my stay here, anyway? I haven't seen much, but I'm guessing this isn't any five room community hospital."

"You got that right, mate. You're in the best room of the V-town general, not a finer bed to be found in the city. As for the cost, don't you worry; one of the many papers you signed to get in the company slotted you in on our insurance. It's a bloody big chunk of the bounty every time you hunt, but when you get thrown around for a living you tend to invest in the best medical money can buy."

"Huh, imagine that, a company sparing a thought for its employees."

"Don't give the current administration more credit than it's due, Tommy." He leaned forward, "It's only set up because that's the way we did it back in the old days when everyone hunted. These days CEO and company would just as soon claw it back to the bottom line, but we won't let them."

He got up, chair scraping back on the floor. "Anyway, I should get running. Don't be feeling left out, mate. You may be out of commission, but I've decided this is a good time to take a vacation." He stretched like only a cat can. Bending backwards, he almost touched his toes. "It'll be my first one in almost, what, seven years?" With a wave he was gone; I could just see the tuff of his tail sliding out the door.

I had no idea how long I lay there, the windows were drawn, the lights were on, and I was hooked up to so many tubes that I doubted that I would need to eat, drink, or do much else for a long time.

I kind of drifted in and out of sleep. No real dreams or nightmares, just never sure of if I was looking at the real world or just an image of the featureless ceiling above.

I wished I could move, do anything but lay in the clotting silence. I thought about my journal – well, if I ever started it back up again, I'd have something to put in it this time, eh?

For a moment I thought I was finally dreaming, I opened my eyes as she drifted towards me. I could only see her from the chest up; she wore a green shirt that set off her eyes. OK, I normally don't understand how people can talk about things like 'set off her eyes'. Maybe my eyesight just isn't good enough to see that most of the time, but right now I drank her in like a man who's had nothing to stare at but a white ceiling for the gods knew how long.

"Hi, Tommy."

She perched on the chair, just barely in sight. I couldn't see it, but I'm sure she had her hands folded in her lap. Every so often her ears twitched rhythmically in the most alluring way.

"Rebeca. How did you find me?" My voice was hoarse again, sounding like it came from the wrong end of a ten mile gravel road, I didn't care.

She giggled a bit, I liked that, wanted her to do it again.

"Tommy, the city's talking about the capture you did." She turned her head slightly, "Most people think your partner did it, he must be famous or something. His face is all over the papers. But don't worry, I saw it, you were amazing."

"Thanks," was the only thing I could think to say?

She lowered her head slightly, not making eye contact. "You saved our lives, you know. They found the bomb down next to the engines. I'd be dead, we'd all be dead, if it wasn't for you."

"Hey now, you were there too! I never would have thought twice about the tracks if it weren't for you."

Her face brightened. "Rebeca the bounty hunter? I think not, too much attention. I'll just stick to serving champagne, thank you very much. Other than the occasional bomb toting whack bag, it's safer." At long last she laid a hand on my cheek – I almost melted into it. "And when it does happen, I'll have you, won't I?"

"Heh, sure. You're my damsel in distress, are you?"

She stiffened, as though I'd insulted her dignity by calling her a rat. "I'm nobody's weeping flower I'll have you know."

"Sorry, sorry." Smooth move, Casanova.

"No, it's my fault." Her fingers returned to brush my cheek, her features seeming to have to strain back into a smile. "I'm just not used to having to rely on someone, even though I need to now and then."

"I can live with that." Anything to keep her here. "Shall we call our act of heroism a team effort then?"

She laughed, echoing me, "I can live with that." She looked down at her watch, "I need to get going, Tommy. I'll see you again, okay?"

"Promise?" Gods, what am I, a pup?

Her face lit up again as she walked away. "Promise."

I watched her leave before falling back into that in and out of not quite asleep. Sometime later a doctor came by; I didn't really pay her much heed. She said something about me being lucky, and how my artery had been sliced. It was amazing I was alive, so much as going to get my leg back.

I nodded absently, grunted at the right places, stuck my tongue out and all that, eventually she went away.

Over the next few days they slowly removed my restraints. My leg was still in a cast, and by the sound of it I wouldn't be dancing the mambo for a while.

I can't describe the joy it was at last to be able to sit up. I'd always taken for granted something so simple, but to feel the blood finally draining from my head was a pleasure I wouldn't soon forget.

At long last my parents showed up to get me out of here, English and Rebeca were still nowhere to be seen.

It felt a little odd to be pushed down the street in a wheelchair by my mother, half my size, and my father who had to lean heavily on his cane the whole way.

It looked like they must have grabbed the key from English; mine was long lost somewhere on the seabed, about a mile out, amongst tattered pieces of my short lived suit.

The apartment looked just as I'd left it. The two of them scuttered about, asking me questions about this and that – all I could tell them was that I hadn't the faintest. I'd only spent what, about four hours here before my protracted stay at the hospital?

Before long they left, and I was left alone with my own white walls and silence. It took me a while to drag myself to the chair I had slept in, to be honest I'd barely even set foot in the bedroom yet!

My cast clicked and dragged, leaving a fine white trail on the floor, until, with little ceremony I flopped down onto the seat. Beside me the bag of books lay where I'd thrown them absently.

I pulled out one at random, it wasn't pre-Cataclysm like the others I had browsed, it was a government journal about the human population over the last decade or so. How the old man had gotten it I had no idea.

The whole first page went on about the fact this was a privileged book, and how owning, transporting, or especially reading it was a crime resulting in a long list of nasty punishments that I didn't really feel like getting into.

Bah, I already felt like a bit of a bugger. I'd stolen the thing, how much worse could reading it be?

It was mostly tables of figures upon figures. If I hadn't spent so much time at KDP I would have been asleep in moments, but for me it felt almost refreshing, as though just another day back at the office was a good thing.

Well, to think about it, back there I only got threatened with bodily harm – at this job I'd gone so far as to get my leg ripped off.

It took almost three hundred pages to say just two simple things. One, the human population was shrinking. Well, that I already knew, anyone could smell it in the wind. What I hadn't realized was just how quickly. In the last three years the numbers had fallen by just over half. Now, there weren't

that many humans to start with, but this was huge. And we're not talking about people merely having non-human kids, then fading away after their golden years. People were just disappearing into the night almost at random, especially the younger ones in their twenties or so.

I had to reread the numbers a few times to make sure I got it right – humans weren't just dying off, if I didn't know better I would say they were being killed off. But that just wasn't possible, with that many people dying the city would be in an uproar, the police would institute marshal law before they'd let that many citizens disappear.

Then again, I'd worked with human records every day, and I'd hardly even noticed the numbers falling so fast. How would anyone else?

The second bit was even odder, almost ninety percent of the humans who had gone missing were female, women. I tried to think of the last time I'd seen a female human walking the streets. To be honest, I couldn't. There were those like my mother who looked almost human, but I couldn't think of a single fully human woman I'd seen in a long time...

I couldn't keep my mind from wondering, thinking about human like women got me daydreaming back to Rebeca. Without those cat ears, she could almost pass for a human. Pull a ball cap on her and you would never know the difference. I'd have to ask her what she was, perhaps a Japanese cat daemon of some sort?

I pictured her, tried to breathe her scent, a perfect musk. She must be at least part human, I could remember it, an undertone beneath the feline. I had to shake my head to try and concentrate on the dry numbers.

So where were these people going? I'd have to ask English if he knew anything about it.

I didn't manage to do much over the next few days but eat, sleep, read, and scrawl the occasional line in my journal. Even the simple act of dragging myself across the flat tired me to a pant.

I did eat a lot though; good thing the last owner had left the place fully stocked. My body was still trying to pry itself back from the jaws of death, and they weren't going to let go easily. You could tell the last guy here had been a cat, the apartment was OCD clean, everything was in its spot.

I'd managed to eat everything in the place, edible or not. You know you're hungry when you're eat that unidentifiable thing in the back of the fridge with the cling wrap on it. You know you're real hungry when you eat that same thing out of somebody else's fridge. Didn't taste bad really, as long as you could bolt it down without smelling it first.

There was nothing to do for it, I'd have to get my carcase out of here before I started gnawing on the leather and woodwork.

It was only what, fifteen feet to the door? Well, it felt like I was trying to climb a mountain with an overly snuggly polar bear wrapped around my leg. I closed the door behind me with a sigh, I'd hardly gone anywhere yet, but at least I'd made it through the door.

The battle to the elevator wasn't much better, but it got a hair easier with every step. By the time I pressed the call button I could almost manage a dignified crawl.

Behind me I heard a door snap shut.

She stood there, still starrng into the closed door, scratching her ears. It took her a moment to look up and see me with a start. She waved, and I waved back, looking like an idiot.

Perfect timing, she walked up just as the elevator arrived; I held the door for her.

"Tommy, I'm so sorry I didn't come back to see you. After the attack, things have been crazy at the Dice. They've been interviewing us all to see if anyone was working with him. They've even shut the whole ship down until this blows over."

"Working with him? That's stupid, you'd be just as dead when the bomb went off." I pressed the button for the ground floor and we began to descend. "Anyone left on the ship would have been dead from the bomb. Anyway, why not just ask him?"

She screwed her face up a bit. "Good idea, except he's already dead."

Huh? "How'd that happen? I didn't whack him that hard."

"I don't know, Tommy. He was alive on the ship, but by the time they got him to the hospital, right behind you, he was dead and gone." She came across the elevator and leaned next to me, a hand came out to rub my bicep, under the fur. I winced, it still hurt just about everywhere. "I guess you're stronger than you look."

That made me laugh. "Now I know you're thinking of the wrong guy. I'm about as strong as your average office jockey. Bench pressing paper is all the exercise I've gotten."

Her face fell for a moment. "You did save us after all."

"Yeah, that I did. Just don't start painting me as some super hero that I'm not. If you want a mighty hunter, I've got a couple of them on speed-dial, and only one of them's married."

"What?"

I waved a hand, "Never mind. Shall I collect on that visit you promised me?"

"I've got to be out to the Dice's office soon, but that sounds good to me."

"I'm new around here, remember? Anyplace you suggest?" I jabbed a thumb towards my leg, "That's close by?"

She laughed. "I'm sure I can think of a couple. If not, I could always carry you."

I crossed my arms.

"I'd like to see you try. I may be a wimp, but I'm not that much of a lightweight." And it was true too; I must have outweighed her by a good thirty pounds.

"Okay." The elevator doors dinged open as she came up beside me. She grabbed my arms, pulling me over her back in an old fashioned fireman's carry.

"Hey! Wait, I was kidding!" She just started tromping forward towards the doors. Stronger then she looked, this one.

"Believe I'm no shrinking violet now?" Her voice was strained but not tired, dripping self-satisfaction.

"Yes, yes! Just put me down before you break my other leg."

She tossed me onto a plush sofa in the lobby. Collapsing down beside me on the cushions, she wiped her forehead. "Always told my Dad I could pick up a man. Just never expected to have to carry him around too."

"Ha, ha, we've got a funny one here." I struggled to my feet, the sofa was low, I could hardly move. I fell back with a growl. "You want to help a poor little wolf get himself back on his feet?"

I did my best puppy dog eyes, easy for me. Big and brown – they almost always worked. She just laughed as she got up, turning to walk away.

"Hey! You're not going to leave me here!" I called.

"Give me one good reason why not."

"I'll buy lunch?"

She thought about it for a moment, "Never let it be said I can't be bribed." She extended a hand, I pulled myself slowly to my feet.

I threw an arm over her shoulder as we made our way out the double doors into the sunlight, staggering like a pair of drunken sailors. Now that I was up, I didn't need to put quite so much weight on her – she didn't know that. I took the liberty, getting as close as I could.

"Where are we off to anyway?" I asked. It felt good to have the sun on my face after so long

stuck indoors.

"A little sandwich shop. Don't worry, it's just around the corner."

"Sandwich?" I said, screwing up my face.

She laughed again. "I forgot, you're probably not so much for those things, I'll handle it. Just give me all your money and I'll make everything better."

"First you throw me around, then you take all my cash. Is this a date or a mugging?"

"Which do you want it to be?"

I lowered myself into a green, hard metal seat on a patio in front of the restaurant. The feeling of bones grinding together wracked through my hip as I went down with a grunt. "Right now I could go either way as long as it's got food at the end. Lots of it."

She just laughed and walked into the building. I leaned back on the hard chair, cracking my spine on the back of the seat; it felt good to hear each and every vertebrae pop.

This place hadn't been far, but I hadn't had a hike like this since my dunking.

The patio was nice, not too many people about right now. It was only the middle of the morning, after the breakfast crowd and before the lunch rush. Everything here was that dark green painted metal that you see park benches made out of. The place faced south, and we'd managed a table in the sun, I could just as well curl up and fall asleep here. The sun warmed my fur, soaking in, slowly leaching the cold feeling of death from my bones.

I must have fallen asleep, the next thing I knew Rebeca was back with two plates balanced in her hands. I reached for them, stretching my back in the process.

"I don't know what you like, Tommy, so I had to guess."

I took the plate she pushed towards me. It must be one of those novelty human food places, this hardly looked like anything I would order. The plate itself wasn't all that big, and the food on it was more like what they were serving back at the high school.

I held the plate up to my nose and sniffed, Rebeca giggled.

"What?" I looked at her.

"Do you always do that? Sniff your food I mean."

"Sure, why not? I like to know what I'm eating." I sniffed it again. Okay, I give up. "What is it anyway?"

"Roast beef sandwich, what did you expect?" She picked up the mess on her own plate, some semi-solid pale white puss squished from it, falling to the table.

"Beef? Doesn't smell like any beef I've had." I shrugged my shoulders, "Maybe I'm just spoiled."

To be honest I was surprised she could even buy the stuff. Most ranching had fallen to an end after the Cataclysm. A few places were still around where you could get flesh from a real cow, but why bother when you could simply hunt and get better meat for less?

"Spoiled? What, are you rich?" she asked.

I cocked an eye at her, "Rich, me? Hardly. My father was a hunter. We always had fresh meat, just off the hoof." I picked a finger at the bread covering the beef, tossing it aside. "Nothing like this. This stuff is all cut up and mutilated, you can hardly tell where it came from. I mean come on, they even drained all the blood – how are you supposed to eat it without the juice?"

Her face turned a shade of green. "I know some places sell it like that – but you're kidding me. You don't even cook it first?"

"Why, would you?" I picked up a slice on my claw and tossed it in the air, snapping at it. She pulled back as my jaws clicked shut. "Totally changes the taste, I couldn't even tell you what part of

the animal this came from." I held up another slice. "Come on, I dare you, tell me what part of the cow this is?"

She just waved one hand, gulping hard to get her own food down. "Okay, Okay, I'll give it to you. I'm no expert in meat. We always just bought it at the market and cooked it when I was growing up."

"To each their own I guess." I picked up the rest of the meager beef, tossing it into my mouth with a single smooth motion. "I still think you're weird though."

She seemed happy that I was done talking about the food. I poked around on the plate for a bit, all that remained was the bread and some plants. I nibbled on the greenery as we watched people pass on the street. Some of the green stuff can be palatable enough, these weren't among them.

My stomach gave a rumble, Rebeca looked up. "Still hungry?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Trying to rebuild the better part of a leg does take a lot of energy, eh? Anyway, it's not like there was a whole lot of real food in that thing – most of it was just window dressing and garnish. Why don't I get us some dessert?"

"I can get it for you."

"No, I'll do it. I'll have to get used to this gods forsaken cast anyway."

That, and I didn't want her to come back with something completely inedible. With my luck she'd bring out something cute, pink, and made entirely of sawdust.

I puttered around the restaurant for a while, definitely a novelty place. Really wasn't much to eat, but they did have a small 'carnivore' menu tucked away at the bottom of the large board that hung above the till.

A triple order of cow bones. Not much meat on them, but at least they were cheap, edible, and sucking the marrow from them made for something to do over conversation. I had no clue what she might want for dessert, so I picked up a couple of milk puddings. I didn't really care for them myself but, no matter how messed up her appetite, I hoped the milk would score me a point or two with the cat in her.

I made my way back to the table out front. It's amusing how quickly people are willing to get out of your way when you've got a cast on your leg. Makes you wonder why they're not so polite the rest of the time. I'm sure the fact I was almost collapsing in their laps had nothing to do with why they moved out of the way so quick.

She looked up as I got back. "What, did they pay you to take out the garbage?" She pointed at my bones.

I eased back down with a loud pop from my hip. "No, really, they're good." I held one with some meat left on it out to her, "Try it. This is what beef is supposed to taste like."

She just held up a hand, pushing it away. "That's alright. Like I said, I don't really do raw meat."

"Your loss." I dug into the bones with a vengeance. A little pressure in the right place after you've stripped the meat, and they splinter right open for you to get to the marrow – you just have to know where to bite.

I must have worked my way through half a dozen or more before I looked up. The splinters were arrayed in front of me, strewn across the plate in a messy pile. The look on her face was... let's just say she was less than impressed.

I'm not sure why, but I suddenly felt, well, embarrassed? I'd done this a hundred times in public, and at more kitchen tables than I could count, but now I was self-conscious for no real reason I could put my finger on. Putting down my bone, I quickly draped a napkin over the rest. I was going to get back to them, I'd see to that – just not right now.

Something to get the conversation back on track... "So, they've taken the Diamond Dice out of commission for a while?"

Her eyes lingered on the tent containing my bones for a moment, before looking up; she locked them on my face, brightening.

"Yep, they're so concerned that someone breached security that management shut the whole thing down for now. The ship's tied up in dock, nobody's going anywhere."

"I'll bet those rich types were pushing out bricks the whole way back."

She snorted out a laugh; I liked the way her nose crinkled up when she did it. Memo to self, must tell more jokes.

"Something like that. You know they had to be paranoid when they even brought their own doc on board, just in case any of them dropped dead from a heart attack when they won the jackpot." She paused for a moment, "Guess it worked out for the best though, their paranoia kept you alive, didn't it?"

"Yep, my lucky day." I pushed a pudding towards her. I noticed a chip of bone had fallen into it. Without thinking I picked it out on a claw and flipped it into my mouth where I cracked it with a snap.

Oh yeah, that was bright.

If she noticed, I didn't see it on her face.

"So, are you heading back there next?" Had to get her talking again.

She picked up a spoon and slowly began working at the pudding. "More or less. No one gets on the ship, but we spend our time in security reviews and such. They want to make sure nothing like this will ever happen again."

"That's annoying." I said. "Well, with any luck, you'll be back and tantalizing rich men in that skimpy little dress of yours soon." I raised the bowl to my lips and took a lap. With my teeth, spoons don't work so well. A long narrow mouth makes for a lot of spillage.

"Hey now, it's a job. We all can't live the exciting life like you."

I put the empty bowl down. "You want to trade? I'll let you run around and trade blows with homicidal maniacs." I touched a finger to my chin with a smile. "Though, I don't think I'd fit so well in your little bunny suit, now would I?"

She laughed again, nose crinkling, nearly dropping her spoon. "You know, I'd almost like to see that."

I just held out my hands, leaning back. "No deal. I'm not into that kind of kinky stuff, babe. Anyway, I chaff."

"And how would you know that?" She leaned forward across the table, voice low.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I crossed my arms and defiantly raised my muzzle. "A guy has to keep his shapely figure somehow, doesn't he?"

I held it for just shy of a heartbeat before I burst out laughing. I tried to stop, but couldn't until a shot of pain up my leg put the brakes on.

She walked around the table, laying a hand on my cast. "I've got to get going, Tommy. It was nice seeing you again." Her smile made me melt. "I'll see you soon, won't I?"

A stupid grin spread across my face. "You know where I'll be, I'm not moving much for a while."

"Will you be alright getting back alone?"

"I'll make it. If I can survive getting drowned in the sea, I can survive walking a whole block home."

One more smile, and she was gone.

I finished up my bones, went back in for just one last order, took two of everything edible. Good thing they do doggie bags, I needed to carry it home.

It was a bit of a sight to watch me make it back to the apartment. A cast on one leg, a big brown bag under my arm, and the other hand against the wall to hold me up.

I almost made it too.

Just a couple dozen yards from the front door I past an alley.

"Hey, rover, what you got in the bag?" The voice was high and raspy, with a touch of lisp that tried to add a 's' where there shouldn't be one.

I turned, in the shadows I could just make out a reptile of some sort. More than anything he looked like a freaking oversized iguana, about five feet tall, green, with long soft spikes growing from his head like a Mohawk.

He took a step towards me, small yellow eyes narrowing. "I said, what you got, rover? I'd hate for you to trip on your little bag."

"Just my dinner here, friend. I'm not looking for any trouble." I said.

What was this kid's problem? He couldn't be more than fifteen. And I even all but missing a limb, I still outweighed him by a good twenty pounds.

"No you're not, are you, doggie boy?" He took another step, now almost within arm's reach.

"You just give me that bag and what ever's in your pockets. We all walk away nice and happy."

He hissed out a laugh, or at least I assumed it was a laugh. Neither of us were smiling. I took a quick look around, no one in the alley, and the street was momentarily bare – he'd picked his time well.

I put the bag down behind me, never taking my eyes from him. "Listen, I've got enough aches and pains already, my dinner isn't worth fighting over."

"You're not the one making decisions here." His voice went up an octave. Not a good sign, the adrenalin was kicking in. "You hand over what you've got, or I club you with your own cast."

He put a single finger in the center of my chest and pushed, as though he expected me to fall over backwards.

That was it. You don't get between a hungry wolf and his food.

My right arm came up under his wrist, my left hit down in the crook of his elbow. A quick push and his arm snapped up, dragging his shoulder down in the motion. I kept my right arm going, in a smooth circle I brought it back down over his head. A quick blow and he fell to the dirty trash strewn sidewalk, stunned.

I should have hobbled away right there, but I didn't. I followed him down, landing on his chest, we were face to face.

I waited half a heartbeat for his eyes to focus on me, snarling, my teeth dripping onto his agape mouth.

I wanted to say something witty, like... 'What now, tough guy', anything, but it didn't come. I just snarled again.

Fear alighted in the little thug's eyes. For all I knew, this could be his first roll. I sunk my fangs into his shoulder; his high raspy voice echoed down the alleyway, it was almost feminine.

It didn't take long, but I practically dismantled him. A chunk from the shoulder, a rend to the gut, and an ankle that would never bend again. I pushed away from him, blood oozing from his limp body. Still alive, but unmoving.

I got to my feet as quickly as I could, it didn't take nearly as long as I thought it might, my leg didn't shoot up even once. I grabbed my bag off the sidewalk and made a break for it, half the cardboard boxes spilled from a rip in the paper before I noticed it. I kept walking.

The street was still clear. I hobbled the remaining distance to the doors, taking refuge only once

I got to the elevator. I was still soaked through with the kid's blood, panting I could taste it with each breath.

It didn't take me long to get back to my apartment, it past in a blur. I only just managed to get the door closed behind me before collapsing to the floor, remaining cartons rolling out around me like presents circling a Christmas tree.

What did I just do? I'd almost killed the kid, and I didn't even think about it.

Gods, is this what I was becoming? I'm a bounty hunter for a week, and now I almost kill someone in an alleyway over a bag of food? And not even good food at that.

I laid on the soft carpet for a few moments before dragging myself to my feet, staggering towards the bathroom. I spared a fugitive glance through the windows on the way, down the street I could see a pair of cops running towards the alley. Someone had found him, good. The kid had a chance to keep breathing.

The lights in the bathroom were the type with a dozen or so bulbs that circle a mirror. I looked through them at myself.

My cream chest was coated in blood, still bright red and sticky. Most of the red was on my face, my mouth – I could still taste it rolling heavy on my tongue.

I spat, the blood stained my lips, it wouldn't go away. I threw my head under the tap, but I couldn't get it from my mouth. It reeked, a stench that wouldn't wash away.

In the shower, I let the hot water rush over me, turning the floor into a smear of red and black. Holding up one hand I could still see a string of green flesh wedged beneath a claw. If I looked closely I could count the scales.

I scrubbed with all the soap I could find; the clotting blood slowly came free, the red water fading to clear. I couldn't smell the blood anymore – but I could still taste it.

How was this happening to me? My father had hunted for decades, and I'd almost never seen him act like this. Was I losing my mind? Falling apart?

The walls swam before me. I shut off the water. Still soaked I stumbled out and fell across my chair.

I could see his yellow eyes, wide, staring into mine. The moment he locked with me I could see his terror, see the moment he realized that he'd lost control, and I'd taken over.

The mauling its self was a blur. I know I did it, I remembered it in a way, but then again I didn't. It was like a dream – the more I tried to grab a hold of it, the more I tried to pull it to the surface, the quicker it fell to wisps like smoke between my fingers.

That was it, wasn't it? I was becoming a killer. I spat once more, whatever they may say about being a hunter, I wanted none of it. I don't care what the rules are for hunters, I can't go my life killing others for any slight, any half perceived threat.

My head pounded in rhythm to my heart, I couldn't see straight, couldn't hear a thing past the blood rushing in my ears.

From the back of my mind the black jaws of sleep came racing towards me. I let them consume me whole.