

The Hunters



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Chapter 10: Take This Job and...

My ears twitched just a fraction of a second before the knock came at the door.

It didn't help me much though. Long moments dragged by as I chased away the shadows from my head, even longer to steady myself enough to make the laborious trip to the hallway.

By the time I'd thrown the door open with a growl, the messenger was long gone. An envelope was slipped under, laying on the carpet. Some courier service I'm sure, they got paid on how many deliveries they made per hour, so they never hung around.

The envelope was labeled from Storm Front, no real surprise, they'd sent me some forms to fill out every couple of days. Like any company, they can't believe you're doing your job unless you produced your own weight in paper every few weeks.

It took me a moment to work my claw under the flap on the envelope; these carriers always use heavy stock that doesn't rip so easily. Good for getting a message across the city, bad for finally getting it open at the end.

Well, it wasn't another one of the endless forms, but rather a short hand written letter in cursive orange script. I skipped to the signature at the end; it took me a few squints and a couple of ninety degree turns, but at last I was able to read 'M. Jones'. Nice, English, just how many names do you need?

The letter was short and simple, guess he didn't feel like talking for a change. He needed me today. At nine, over at a pub about six blocks away. And no, he couldn't get anyone else to do this.

Wonderful. My leg is still in multiple pieces and he wants me back on the job. I looked down at the cast, then over at the clock. It was seven in the evening now. Six blocks... with my speed I'd best get going if I wanted to make it.

A small touch of luck, the pub was the other way from the alley where I'd left the kid bleeding, and right now I really didn't want to be dealing with that.

The walk was all I expected it to be, long, tedious, and boring. I think I was radiating enough 'come near me and I'll rip your nads off' ambiance to keep anymore small time crooks from getting within twenty feet of me.

'Plato's Rest' wasn't exactly a dive, but on the other hand it was hardly as high class as the name suggested. The place wanted to look like it was up and coming in the world, but it didn't quite have the

money to pull it off.

The single room was wide and shallow. Almost all the booths were up against the front window, a bar running the length of the back, not much between the two but a line of stools. The place had wood paneling once, but that was a long time ago. Now it had the occasional wood panel, the rest was bare plaster staring out into the gathering dusk.

I dumped myself into the nearest empty booth, all but laying sprawled out across the cheap, well darned leather of the seat. I lay with my eyes closed, head back, panting for a few moments.

It didn't take long for a waitress to show up. She was in one of those classic French getups, black, frilly, and should have been replaced a couple of years ago. Now it had holes in places where there shouldn't be, and more annoyingly, patches in places where it might be just as nice to have holes.

"What can I get for you, love?"

"Just a water to start with, I'm waiting for somebody."

"Would that somebody be a big lion named English, love?"

I narrowed my eyes, what had he gotten me into this time? "Yep, that would be him."

"He was here an hour ago, left a note."

Wonderful. "I'll take that note, please. And one of whatever tonight's special is."

If nothing else, the service was quick. A few moments later I had another envelope in my hands, and what smelled like a mixture of brandy and paint thinner sitting in front of me in an oversized glass. They don't skimp on the portions here.

I popped the new letter open while checking the time. It was only eight-thirty, he must have left this just after the first letter arrived.

The same orange ink and impossible to read handwriting.

"Tommy, sorry I can't be here to meet you. Something is picking up and I don't have the time to cover all the angles. A human is going to walk in at about eight forty-five. Male, panther skinned, slight for a pink. Don't know who he'll talk to, don't know about what. When he leaves I need you to tail him. I know this isn't exactly going to be the best job for you right now, but I don't have anyone else who I can give this to." Followed by the same illegible scrawl at the bottom.

Had that cat lost his mind? I could barely get myself down here, now he wants me to tail someone? I didn't even know the first thing about stalking, well at least in the city anyway.

Too late, the door bumped open and in walked my mark. He was early. Couldn't be anyone else, he was the only human in the place, and he fit the description to a tee.

I just sat and tried to watch him without staring. He walked right in like he owned the place and sat down next to a bull in an expensive leather trench coat.

I took a sip of my drink, peering over the rim at them before grimacing. How did people drink this stuff? Didn't they know that alcohol was nothing more than yeast piss? Whatever, it gave me something to do while I waited.

It didn't take long, anyhow. Their conversation started civil, but it didn't stay that way. Within a few minutes it moved to raised voices and pointing, then outright shouting. The human banged his fist on the table like it was supposed to intimidate the bull somehow – it didn't.

The human turned, walking out in a huff. Well, that's my cue. I slipped a couple of bills on the table for my unfinished drink and dragged myself after him.

Okay, this wasn't fun. Within moments he was out pacing me, I doubled my stager. Unsurprisingly, the sound of my cast on the sidewalk had him looking over his shoulder.

He turned and darted into an alleyway. I'm sure he thought he was in shadow, but I could see him plain as day. First law of tailing someone, don't let them see you. Second law, don't talk to them.

I was never all that good at following rules anyway.

"Yo, man, you got a hand for a cripple?" I spread on my thickest downtown accent.

He looked at me, eyes narrow, hunched against the wall, ready to bolt. "You don't look like no cripple to me, fur job. Move it along."

Wonderful. Stealth failed me, and subterfuge hasn't gone much better. Right now I just wanted to drag myself back home and get away from the quickly oncoming night.

I turned my back and started off. Over my shoulder I muttered, "Don't come looking for help from me when someone breaks your pansy hairless leg in half."

I guess I shouldn't have said that. The next thing I knew I was face down on the street, the human kneeling over my back, raining down punches. Thankfully, the guy was about as scary as he looked, which was to say a two foot chiwawa could have hurt me worse. He must have noticed that he wasn't doing much more than bouncing off my fur, a quick shift on his part, and I felt a foot stomp down on my cast.

I'd like to describe what that felt like – but then I'd likely be censored out in multiple languages. Let's just say I, a wolf, managed a good impression of one of English's roars.

I must have done a good job of it; the guy was off me like someone lifted him by the scruff of the neck. Then he was bolting into the night, bouncing off the walls of the alley like a pinball.

Great. Now I've got a double busted leg, and the guy I'm supposed to be tracking is hightailing himself around the corner.

I looked down at my leg, the cast was cracked in at least a half dozen places, a lost cause. I gritted my teeth, expecting the worst as I wiggled my toes. They obliged with no complaints. Well, it was nice to know they were still attached.

I wasn't going anywhere with this cast on me, it was already half hanging off – I might as well finish the job. I worked my claws under the cracked edges and pulled. Surprisingly, the worst of the pain was from the ragged edges of plaster digging into my tender, newly healed flesh.

A loud crack, and it split right down the middle, I could feel the cool air on my exposed skin. It was nice to see you too, little buddy.

Gently, I lifted my leg out of the nest of paper and debris. All in all it was looking pretty good, I must have been moving along faster than the docs expected.

I was about to head home when I noticed something, or more to the point, I got all but slapped upside the snout by it. My friend had managed to knock over a big, half full can of something on his way out of the alley.

A nasty something, used cooking oil of some sort would be my guess. My face wrinkled, I'd have to dig that smell out of my nose with a knitting needle. More interestingly though, were the foot prints that walked right through the puddle – the trail of my friend.

I'm not that bad at tracking I guess, but trying to follow anyone through the city is an act in futility. You could track them down an alley, a path, even a quiet sidewalk, but the moment they crossed a major road, with people streaming in all directions, the scent gets torn all to heck.

Unless, that is of course, they smell like something that's trying to crawl up your nose and clobber your brain.

I've got you now you bugger.

It took me sometime to finally realize that there was just no way I was going to be able to walk on my busted leg. Not on it and the one other, anyway. I almost never walk on all fours, it's... well, it's degrading. But it did the job now, and it got my nose closer to the ground, though I wasn't all that sure that was a good thing.

From the moment I touched my fingers to the cold, dirt stained concrete, I knew it was going to

be sometime before I'd be able to work up the courage to eat with them again. Knife and fork it was for me.

In any event, at least I could scamper along now. Closing my eyes, I breathed in through my nose, a slow huff. The oil was just short of a big florescent light saying 'That way moron, he went that way.'

All rightly then.

I didn't exactly make good time hobbling along, but I did okay in the end. Thankfully for me, he stayed pretty much off the beaten track and didn't cross too many busy streets. Made him easier to follow, and I didn't need to feel like such a retard, scampering along like this in a crowd.

The path was almost a straight a line as you could get inland. After about forty five minutes the stench got even worse, he must be just ahead.

I ducked into the scant shadow provided by the frame of a doorway at just the right moment. Two humans, one tall and the other short and fat, came into view walking towards me.

It was pretty obvious they were out on some kind of patrol, but wow, they made even me look like an expert. They walked like they were trying to stomp wine, and I could hear their voices a mile away.

As they walked past me, I could almost hear my heart thump like it was trying to beat out morris code. My brain was screaming, "Don't look over here, idiots. I'm a foot and a half away from you." Much to my surprise they didn't even bother to turn. A stray breath tickled the shorter one's hair, he just kept walking.

They rounded the corner, and were out of sight – I just about collapsed. Would have landed face first on the ground if I hadn't so many feet beneath me.

The rest of the way I took somewhat more slowly, dropping to my belly at every scuff and squeak. It didn't matter much though, I didn't see another soul the whole way.

The trail ended at a thick wooden door, painted, well, wood color. It looked like it had been there for decades. Gently, I tried the latch. Figures, locked.

I did my best to look inconspicuous, but it's never that easy when you're really need to. I made my way around the building, not much to see. A big three story brick warehouse, maybe all of three ways in, no windows on the ground floor. Sealed tight.

Another round and I found the only thing there was to see; a single window on the second floor was open. Why couldn't I be a cat or a squirrel or something? They climb, I don't. I thought I had already established just how bad I am at climbing, but it just seemed to be one of those things the universe decided I need more practice at.

My leg screamed every time I put even an ounce of weight on it, but I did my best just to grit my teeth and ignore the fire that shot through. All I managed to really do was bite my tongue and swear under my breath.

Anyone watching me would have bust a gut. Here I was hanging off my claws five feet from the ground on a brick wall, tummy plastered to the rough stone like I was wishing it were made of velcro.

I tried to flop through the window with a little bit of grace, but got more of a thunk. Good thing I managed to keep at least some of my wits about me, there wasn't much on the other side to fall onto.

I was on a narrow iron beam that ran the length of the building, beneath me it was mostly empty, a couple of boxes here, a few small fires spread about. And more humans in one place then I'd seen in a long time.

There must have been upwards of a hundred of them, in as wide a range as they come, from cool ivory to coal black. They didn't look all that well for where either. Most of them were clothed in

rags, huddled around fires, clutching whatever they had, including each other.

I could hear snatches of conversation as I hugged the girder, inching my way forward. Nothing specific, mothers whispering to children, husbands and wives, old men together. I didn't know why I was here; this looked more like a refugee camp than a terrorist cell.

A little further and the rancid cooking oil hit me like an ice pick to the sinuses, found you. He was in towards the center, him and a group of other men and woman, humans all.

"He won't do it." The voice was quiet, my ears twitched but I could hear it well enough, doubted that anyone else in the room could. "He won't take us."

"You tried everyone?" I couldn't see who he was talking to; her face was masked in the shadows of the whimpering flames.

"Who else? It's not like we know that many smugglers."

"Okay. We can't smuggle ourselves out by sea. We wouldn't last a season if we walked out by land, and we can't stay here."

"So now what?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

My mark threw his hands up in the air, walking a few steps away, but not far enough to leave the fire's warmth. "Teddy and Rux didn't come back last night."

"I know. They were taken in for vagrancy." The voice was just above a whisper, I almost fell from my perch, straining to hear it.

My man sat down, face away from the fire, staring out into darkness. I just hoped he didn't feel the need to look up.

A knock shook the door. Everyone froze, and I mean deathly still. You could hear the crackle of each and every fire, not a breath was drawn, including mine.

Another knock, less of a knock actually, more of a demand in solid form. A pause, the world would seem to have stopped if it weren't for those fires.

This time it wasn't a knock, the door flew inward with a boom that set the walls shivering, and me sliding off my little hidy hole.

I saw a flash of orange. If it would bother to stay still long enough to focus on, I would swear I recognized it. The growl I did know, what in the name of all the gods was Huston doing here? Did English call him too?

The moment of stillness that had captured the room just the barest of moments ago was shattered with a scream, the humans were off in all directions, like chafe in the wind. For just a moment I thought I recognized a flash of auburn hair. Then, I fell.

I can't reiterate enough times just what a bad climber I am. I was hanging onto that girder for dear life, but it wasn't doing me much good. I was practically upside down by this point, and the rust flaking off under finger wasn't doing me any favors.

It was hardly that much of a fall, but I didn't manage it gracefully. Flat on my back, with the air forced out of me like a popped balloon. My tongue lolled out so far I could practically taste the dirt smeared floor.

I landed right next to an old lady that hadn't quite taken off yet. She took one look at me and her eyes bulged out of her wrinkly, embalmed face. The screech she made was so loud that I thought my ears were going to implode.

Thanks, lady. I may not be at my best tonight, but you don't have to treat me like I'm the freaking werewolf of London. I don't eat babies, and quite frankly, I'm not going to make off with you - you're just not my type.

Huston flew around me like a flame-thrower in a tornado, cracking skulls on all sides. About

me humans fell unconscious to the floor. At least I hope it was unconscious, he wasn't exactly being gentle.

A few moments on my back, gasping for breath like a fish out of water, and I was on my feet, or at least as close as I was going to get.

The one sided battle was winding down, I tried to catch Huston's eye. "Did English send you?"

He whirled about on me, claws ready to strike. "You're not welcome here." If his hackles straight out weren't warning enough, the wild shimmer to his eyes reflected me in the dim fire light. He'd kill me without a second thought, and likely leave my body here to rot.

I just backed away. Figured it was smarter to keep my mouth closed. The nearest door was twenty feet. I backed away to it, never taking my eyes from the tiger as he lunged through the screaming humans like a shark in a shoal of fish. The next three blocks I took at a flat out run, tail down, leg screaming.

It took me some time to get home, I managed to get lost at least twice – wasn't really watching where I was going.

Limping my way through the door, I was hoping for another letter from English. No luck.

I sat down on the toilet as I snapped the light on. I'd better have look at that leg before it manages to fall off again. It was still tender, and more than a little bit out of shape, but surprisingly all in one piece.

Just below the groin, I was now the proud owner of a blazing slash of white fur that ran in an almost unbroken line. It stood out starkly against the brown of my coat. Well, I guess I had the first souvenir of my new job. All said and done, a nice scar on the bicep might look manlier, but I'd avoided either a missing limb or eye, so I guess I can't complain.

I limped back out to my chair. Putting my full weight on the leg did still twinge, but by the feel of it I just had to work the kinks out of the muscle.

Sitting down, I flipped through the stolen books again, trying to get Huston's flashing eyes from my mind. I'd managed to page my way through almost all the tomes in the last week or so, but still the vast majority made almost no sense to me.

I looked up at the clock, gods, it was almost midnight. Well, if I could walk and fall flat on my face, then there was no reason I couldn't go back to work.

I started trying to read the books again, that did the trick. Somewhere between the origins of Mendelian genetics and the base structure of DNA I was out like a light.

I fell asleep to the image of a flash of auburn hair, lit from behind by fire spitting from a trash can.

The next morning I found myself walking up the wide, shallow stairs of Storm Front alone. Hadn't gotten any more mysterious letters slid under my door, even stopped by the café on the way here to no avail. The place wasn't exactly on the way, but then again, it was closer than the Storm Front HQ.

The café looked empty without him holding court. The cute little bunny waitress said she hadn't seen him in days. From the sounds of it that must be as odd as it felt, apparently he practically opened the place most mornings.

The main floor of Storm Front was as spotless as ever. Other than English, I had no idea who I was supposed to report to, so I made my way to the front desk. Déjà vu of my first day here. The cute little bunny from last time was nowhere to be seen; in her place was a rodent with a permanently etched scowl. I tried to smile as I made my way up, but she had a gaze like I'd eaten her firstborn.

"Tommy Taggart?" She didn't even wait for me to get to the desk. Her voice was about as encouraging as her stare, felt like getting hit with a slingshot.

"That would be me," I said, redoubling my efforts to try and put on my best smile. I guess my reputation precedes me. Perhaps she was just surprised I was back from my leave so soon.

"You are to go see your human resources contact immediately."

Huh? "HR? What's up?"

I just got that stare again. Okay, Okay, I'm going.

I lucked out, Graham was in. I assumed he was my 'contact', in any event he was the only guy I even knew here.

I sat down at his desk. The papers covering it seemed to have grown since last time. He was scribbling madly at some form or another, didn't even look up. I waited for a moment – who knew a cat could be so oblivious?

"Graham?"

His head snapped up, and once he saw me he practically fell backwards out his chair with a windmilling of arms.

"Tommy!" He paused for breath, clutching a paper to his chest. "Don't do that! Oi."

"Some lady at the front said I was to come and see you. Are you my contact?"

He slumped in his chair, glaring at me through one eye. "That would be me. For better or for worse."

I held my hands open in front of me. "Whoa there, who did I eat to get everyone so pissed this morning? I've been out on med leave for the last forever in case anyone forgot."

He stayed slumped forward, but at least he stopped glaring at me like he wanted to remove choice tender bits of my anatomy. "I guess you haven't heard, have you?"

"No clue." I put my elbows on the desk in front of him, leaning my chin on my hands. "Come on, spill it. Why does everyone suddenly think I pissed in the well?"

"English quit."

"Eh?" Okay, that was a surprise.

"He just up and left. One afternoon he was here, the next morning he was gone. Didn't even clear out his office. Rumor has it he just about gutted the CEO, then turned tail and left without another word."

"Nice." I sat back in my chair, tried to let my muscles relax. Fat chance. "So what happens to me? English was the guy who hired me in the first place."

Graham laughed quietly. "Well, I'm not sure. Someone either likes you or hates you."

"Oh?" This didn't sound good.

"The good news is you still have a job. The bad news, you're off the hunting team."

"So just what kind of job might this be?" I didn't exactly have a good feeling about this.

"The records department." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "The dungeon, in the subbasement."

I couldn't help it, I barked out a laugh loud enough to make the people around us stop and stare. "No way. No smegging way, Graham."

It was the cat's turn to hold out his hands and shrug. "It's not my call, Tommy. It came down from the third floor."

I smiled grimly, trying not to show my teeth, likely not doing all that good of a job. "Did Huston call this?"

"What?" He just cocked an eye and twisted an ear. "Why would you think that?"

"I saw the bugger last night. He didn't exactly look happy to see me. Anyway, I just took down

the highest profile case Storm Front's had in years. Do you really think they're going to shove me underground after I just made them enough money to plaster their offices with bills?"

"Well, I... not really." He shuffled the papers on his desk again; a few fell to the ground before he found what he was looking for. "I'll admit that the order did just come down today, but this is strictly from the third floor – Huston isn't attached to it at all."

Great. I pulled the paper from his fingers. It popped free, he didn't want to let go. For once the thing wasn't a bloody fill out form. Written on thick parchment paper, thin precise blue ink mapped out the letters, and there weren't many of them.

It was simple and to the point. I was off the hunt team, into records, and if I saw so much as a snatch of sunlight heads would roll.

The signature at the bottom was practically the antithesis of English's, it looked as though it had all but come from a typewriter. 'Gregg VanDerhoom'

"This guy sounds like a right Mr. Sunshine," I said. "So is that him, our illustrious leader? VanDerhoom?"

"Yep. That would be him, in the ink." He snatched the paper back like I was going to make off with it.

"Ever seen the guy?"

He shrugged. "Every so often. Comes by now and then, looks in the door, never says much."

"So what, am I just so special that he decides to take a direct interest in me?"

Graham shrugged, but I could see a slight shiver in the motion.

"This is the first time I've ever heard from him. Same for my boss. Like I said, he doesn't talk to us folk much." He lit a smile, for real this time. "Don't take it personal though. He took over after McGaf got himself killed a few years back. Him and English never got along, chances are he doesn't even know who you are, just that English hired you. He can't be happy the breadwinner's gone, but then again, he likely wants to clean up any traces of E as soon as he can."

I got up, tossing my Storm Front jacket all over the papers that covered his desk, a multicolored hail drifted slowly to the floor.

"You can take that new job, and tell our esteemed leader that he can shove it."

Graham leaned back, crossing his arms behind his head. "I'll assume that means 'No' then, shall I?"

"That, and if I meet the guy, I'll give him a scar to match mine."

I did my best to try and storm out of the office, but it was undercut a bit by Graham laughing behind me. As I rounded the door I saw him toss my wadded up jacket into the trash can across the room, two points.

I must have managed to compose myself as I made my way out, either that or my little escapade had garnered me some street cred. I past hunters twice my size, they just stepped back as I walked on.

The whole plan worked real well until I got down the front steps and ended up standing dumbly on the street.

Now what?

English had hightailed it out of my life. I've still got some cash snagged on claw, and absolutely no job prospects.

Well, if in doubt, go for a snack.

It was still the middle of the morning, so I had to wander for a while until I managed to find a street vendor selling some random rancid mishmash of meat on a stick.

"Feeling better I see, mate."

To my credit, I managed to neither jump six feet in the air, nor stab him in the eye with my kabob.

"I'm eating, stranger." Very deliberately I took another bite.

The lion picked up a stick of his own, sniffed it once and tossed it back in disgust. The vendor gave him a dirty look.

"How do you eat that junk?"

"The recently unemployed don't exactly dine of salmon on cedar." I took another bite, chewing slowly.

"Unemployed, you? Never. Didn't you hear, mate? We just started a new company, English and Taggart Inc."

"What, not Taggart and English?"

A hand reached out and nipped a piece of meat, practically from between my jaws. "Don't push it, pup."

I followed him down a few alleyways and across half a dozen streets, he didn't say much.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on anytime soon, or am I going to have to bribe it out of you with some imported tea?"

He stopped dead in his tracks, raising an eyebrow. "You've got British tea? Or perhaps Indian?"

"Nope. Knew I'd get your attention though. Now spill it." I kept walking, as though I knew where I was going.

"Heh. I'm sure the rumors are spinning about me back at SF."

"No smeg, Sherlock. They basically wanted to flay me alive for just knowing you." I paused for a moment, "And you sent me out on a job yesterday, then bailed on me. You weren't even working then." I leveled a finger at him, "You quit, and now you're sending me out to do your dirty work?"

English just shrugged and put on his best grin, too bad I was used to it by now.

"Let's just say that fletcher Gregg and I didn't exactly see eye to eye on the direction he's been taking SF over the last few years. I let him know it in no too few words. That and I made his nose a couple centimeters flatter, my knuckles still sting for it."

"So you managed to face whack one of the more powerful men in the city, then you walk out of the company you just spent the last decade or so building? I'm hoping this is a part of some kind of master plan for you. Either that, or you've need to shave that mane of yours – it's over heating your brain."

He brought his hands up in a classic karate pose. "No one touches the hair."

"Sure, you don't need me. With the way you're futzing with it, I'm betting you'll be bald in two years."

His hands flew to his head with a less than manly "Eep". I just laughed and kept walking.

"So, where am I going anyway?"

"Anywhere." He motioned with the wave of a hand, "Just keep moving so the bugger behind us can't get in earshot."

I spared a glance behind me, nothing to be seen but the standard jumble of people. Massive horses pulling loads around on their two trunk like legs, and street vendors screaming.

"Don't worry, he's there, mate. They may be good at stalking, but I'm better at seeking."

"So that reminds me, what did you have me skulking around last night for? You do realize that I wasn't exactly in top form, right?"

He shrugged and looked a little bit sheepish. "Who else was I going to send? You weren't really intended to drop in on it quite this way you realize."

"Drop in is the right word. Huston looked like he was about ready to take a chunk out of me, you send him too?"

I saw a flash of his fangs. "Sent him on a marry chase, mate. Let's just say that if he ever ends up in arm's reach again, one of us is going to end up with some pretty good scars. Guess I do have to apologize though, he wasn't supposed to crash the party until well after you were gone. He knows Gastown too well, I've got to stop running him through that part of the city."

"You sure you didn't grow up in China? One more fortune cookie out of you and I'm about ready to snap."

"Okay, mate, here's the short of it. You're no moron, I'm sure you know as well as I do that the human population is dropping, though I doubt you know why. One thing got me thinking, I watched those overly rich gamblers milling about the ship before they took you away, most humans I'd seen in a long time. Next thing I know I'm looking up the passenger list of the Kayto, the swimmer's last play toy, almost to a man they were all human refugees."

"So mad bomber boy has a thing for humans, so what?"

"You may not have been here long enough to notice, but most of the folks Storm Front brings in are human too. For a population that's what, a couple percent human, our stats are more in the seventy percent of the hunts."

"Okay." I said, shrugging. "We already went through this, the bald monkeys are violent buggers."

"This ain't right Tommy. I don't know if I'm getting to philosophical on this, but it just ain't right."

"Let me guess, that's when you went to talk to our friend Gregg, the CEO of love."

"More or less. Although talk might not be the right word. I barely mentioned the word 'human' and he clammed up. Tried to get some records and stats, he didn't look so happy. Told me it was none of my business, that I should go back to chasing my tail."

"And I'm sure you did the Gandhi thing, turned away with a smile."

"Right, mate. If Gandhi tried to hit people over the head with a chair, and then force feed them their own TPS reports, sure, I did the Gandhi thing."

Never met the guy, but I couldn't help but laugh at that mental image.

"So you found what?"

"Absolutely bugger all, mate."

"You walked out, and cost me my job over nothing?" I would have face palmed, but the subtlety would be lost on him.

"Don't think of it as losing a job, mate, think of it as finding new employment as an entrepreneur."

"So, what does a pair of entrepreneurs like us do, anyway?"

"Same thing, less overhead," he said with a smile. "I started Storm Front, you think I don't have contacts? Say for example our little friend that Gregg sat on your tail. He doesn't have much of a bounty on him, but it's enough to keep us in the pot roast for a few days at least."

Eh? "Storm Front runs people with bounties on them? Isn't that a bit, well, counterproductive?"

"He may work for SF, mate, but I never said he was on the books. Hard to get anyone more loyal though – step out of line and they don't even have to track you down."

A quick U-turn and we were walking back up the street. It didn't take long for English to reach out and tap the shoulder of a gator. He was leaning up against a wall, trying to look inconspicuous, the fact he was reading a newspaper upside down didn't help much.

"Got a moment, pal?" English's teeth glinted as he spoke.

He looked up at us, dark black eyes betraying nothing. "I've got nothing for you 'pal', just move along."

"I think you might just be wrong there, pal. Why don't you step into the alleyway, and we'll talk about the small matter of the bounty on your head. And why it's not collected yet."

The gator bolted. I was kind of surprised, he wasn't a tall man to begin with, but even with his short stubby legs he still made a decent speed.

English just stood stalk still, a hand resting lightly on my shoulder. "Wait for it, wait for it... okay, go." He didn't even sound excited as he broke into a jog. The gator peeled around the corner, us only a heartbeat behind.

I let English take this one; it was only another instant before we were right behind him. A slight roar, and the cat was airborne. Our reptile friend had only a snatch to turn his neck before the weight of the lion bore down on him.

They were on the ground, from his belt English pulled yet another set of cuffs. "Nothing to it."

"So now what?" I asked, coming up behind him, only limping slightly.

"Local police station." He smiled with a wink. "They love me there. Half their residents have my teeth marks etched in their hind quarters."

We dragged him off, he protested all the way until I shoved a stray paper in his mouth. I tried English's tail first, but he didn't like that much.