

The Hunters



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Chapter 12: What We Show the World

Once we made it out of the warehouse district we split up and went our separate ways. Jon, back to the station to write his daily reports; English, to his café to eat; and myself, home. The lion invited me to review the day over a meal, but I turned him down – he might be used to days like this, but they still left me feeling like I'd been dragged through the brambles. Especially after last night.

The door to my apartment was unlocked, but closed. I walked in wondering if I would find Rebeca still sleeping on my bed as I'd left her. No luck there, the place was as bare as it had been till I laid her there.

The sheets were still wrinkled from where I'd left her. I sat on the bed, it was the first time I'd ever been on the darn thing, and looked out the window. The view was different from the one I'd had in my old place. Being so much lower down I couldn't see as much mind you, but what I could see was more alive, figures on the street looked more like people and less like ants.

I must have dozed off for a few moments; I could still pick up the faint scent of her on the sheets around me. I was startled awake by a knock at the door, not loud, but enough to set my new 'I don't want to die' reflexes on edge.

Instantly, I had a migraine. Why is it that it seems to be worse when you're jarred out of a quick nap then a full sleep? Anyway, whoever it was at the door, it couldn't be English – I don't think he knew how to knock.

It was pleasant, but not really a surprise, to find Rebeca waiting for me. She'd brushed her hair and wiped the tear streaks from her face, looking as good as the day I'd first seen her on the Dice, minus the bunny suit. To be honest though, her face wasn't really the first thing I noticed.

She had on the tightest black shirt I've ever seen on anyone – and I've seen at least a few. That lucky fabric looked like it was painted on if anything, and it left nothing, nothing, to the imagination.

"Hi, Tommy." She smiled.

I must have gone near cross eyed, I couldn't decide what part was better, the shirt or the smile – good thing I've got two eyes. She noticed, that just made her smile even wider.

"Sorry about last night, wolfy. It didn't go exactly as I'd planned."

"What's to be sorry for?"

She just looked at me funny, "I don't make a habit of telling my life story to a guy, then crying

myself to sleep in his arms on the first date."

I shrugged and grinned. "Hey, whatever works for you. I still thought it was good, I still got you into my bed, didn't I?"

"Hey!" Her face went bright red.

I reached forward and took one of her hands. Bending down, I kissed it lightly. "Nothing happened. Remember, I said I'd protect you, not ravage you the moment you weren't looking."

She looked like she was going to go even brighter for a moment. "Anyway, Tommy, to make it up to you, would you like to come over for dinner?"

My gut wrenched, recalling what she'd managed to buy at that last restaurant we'd been at. But weighing the options, it only took a heartbeat to decide.

"I'd love to."

The step across the hallway took but a moment, and I got my first good look at her place. I was a little surprised to be honest; most cats are OCD when it comes to the whole cleanliness thing, she wasn't. The place looked pretty much like a mirror image of mine; just replace anything that had been purchased in a masculine shade of blue with a red, then sprinkle some old take out trays and clothing around.

"Sorry for the mess, Wolfy. The last few days have been hectic, and I haven't really had the time to clean up."

"Is the Dice almost back up and sailing?" I asked.

She shot me a glance over her shoulder as she grabbed a couple of shirts off the floor, tossing them through a doorway. "Nah, all the security checks they were running were getting to be too much of a pain. I quit."

"Looking for a new job now?" I pulled a stool from beneath her kitchen counter that doubled as a table and made myself at home.

"I guess, I'm not sure what's in the future right now."

"Heh," I shrugged, "the town's going in a hand basket these days. The city's even got English and I trying to track down some terrorists."

"Oh?" She was out of sight in the bedroom.

"Yeah, the government thinks we've got a mob of humans acting as terrorists. Even put out a special contract for them."

Her face popped back around the door frame. "They what?"

"A special contract. They don't even want them brought in, just gone – dead." I traced a pattern in the smooth counter top with a claw. "Not sure what's going on, they didn't look that dangerous to me."

"You saw them?" Her voice was behind me now. I felt her fingers on my shoulders; I jumped slightly before melting into a massage.

"Hmm? Yeah." I could feel her fingers working out the kinks in my neck. If I were a cat, I'd be purring right now. "Couple of days ago, right after we had lunch in fact."

"How far are you now, wolfy?"

"Eh?" It was hard to think under her ministrations, where have you and your fingers been all my life, babe? "Dead end right now. Tracked them to a warehouse back that night – dropped in on them. Went back today, but the trail's cold."

Then her fingers were gone, she was across the counter, busying herself with something on the stove, away from me. "You were there, Tommy? You were at that warehouse?"

I had to crack my neck to get feeling back, she'd stopped so suddenly.

"Yep. English had me follow a guy, didn't say why. I fell in on the party right after the guys

from Storm Front crashed through the door." I decided to leave out the part where I landed on my face, scarring a little old lady for life.

"This is big, Tommy," She turned to look at me, "You could get hurt – people aren't playing around."

I peered into her eyes. She was serious about this, whatever 'this' was. "What do you know about the hunt, Rebeca? What's going on?"

She just shook her head and smiled, seeming to wash any and all concerns away. "It's nothing, Wolfy. Why don't you help me with this?"

I wanted to ask her more, but the moment she pulled chops of venison from the fridge, well – it could wait. She must have learned something since we last ate, the cuts were large, and two for me. She waved some plants and fungi in my face with a giggle, but I just swatted them away.

I'm not ashamed to admit I almost cried when she dropped the meat into a frying pan, the repugnant hiss and sizzle sounded like a scream of pain. While I didn't fight too hard, she was good at keeping me away from the food with one hand while preventing it from burning anymore then she had too.

If nothing else, I will admit that cooking the stuff did manage to spread the scent through the room in a way that raw it never would have. By the time she declared it done, I was almost drooling on the floor and ready to simply lift her out of the way.

There's one advantage to the bar stool seating she had set up, you can get right next to the person next to. Never really understood why you would want to be facing them anyway, why put a table between you and the person that you were here to be with?

She insisted on a knife, fork and all that other paraphernalia. Well, to each their own I guess. I didn't need it much, one hand is enough to hold any size chunk of meat I might encounter, and, conveniently, that left a spare arm to wrap around her.

The conversation was light, she talked about the passengers she'd had on the Dice. I knew she had a dress cut just for the purpose, but some of the stories still left me bristling. From the sound of it, she was hardly special - that was the reason they got paid what they did. The rich types will shell out a ransom to get on board, then they can do almost anything they want as long as the cash holds out – almost.

I asked her once about what it had been like growing up on the island, apart from almost everyone else except a few neighbors. She just got one of those far away looks.

"Wasn't your father a hunter?" she asked me. "That must have been a scary life, never knowing if he was going to come home at night."

I pulled her closer, her stool sliding on the tile floor. "I guess, it's the life I'd grown up with. It can't be strange or scary if that's all you know. He was the best hunter around, and everyone knew it. I guess you never really think about what would happen if he just didn't come back."

"What was it like growing up like that? A hunter's life must have been full of adventure."

I had to rack my brain to try and recall a story worth telling, growing up we'd had hundreds of them. Every night my father had come back with a tale to spin over the kitchen table, but now they seemed to slip away like sand through my fingers.

"I do remember a story about when he took my uncle Gowan out for his first hunt. He's the hunt leader now that my Dad's retired, but this was long ago, back when he was just sharpening his teeth."

I rested my chin on the side of her head, feeling the softness of her hair. Through the window I could just see the sun starting to settle over the ocean.

"It must have been thirty years ago now, my uncle Gowan's a few years younger than Dad. My

Dad had been hunting mostly by himself back then; this was before he had a family or a reputation. You didn't need to range so far from the city to find prey in those days; they practically walked down the streets."

"They were out in the forest a ways, tracking a deer, found it too. A big white tail doe, just standing alone in the middle of a meadow. It was a prize, would have brought in enough money for at least a couple of days, even split between them. My uncle ran straight in, no thought, no subtlety, just a scream and leap."

I couldn't help but laugh as I recalled the story, "The doe took one look at him and planted a hoof in his gut, didn't even bother to run. He landed sprawled out on his back, the doe just stood there, kept on browsing."

Rebeca turned to me with a funny look. "That's horrible, was he okay?"

I just shrugged and grinned. "Sure, that's what we're designed to survive, he just lay gasping a few minutes then got back up to try a second time. The doe knocked him down again, just as hard. He was bruised and bloody by then, had to come crawling back to my father for help."

"It was my father that pulled him back to his feet and taught him the value of working as a pack. Back then he mostly worked alone himself, but any hunter knows the value of working as a team. They attacked again, and the doe went down, by the time she realized that my uncle wasn't alone, Dad already had her by the throat."

Rebeca threw down her fork and pushed my arm off. "Tommy, how can you talk like that? Your father killed an animal and you laugh about it while we're eating?"

Huh? "What? She died quick and clean. It wasn't as though it was in vain, she was sold at market." All I could do was shrug and point at the venison left on her plate. "You think your food gets here any different?"

She looked about ready to throw something at me; this wasn't exactly the way I'd wanted things to go.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I reached out to touch her shoulder, "I wasn't thinking, that's just the way my family is, I didn't realize that things like that mean so much to you." She didn't shy away when I touched her. Well, that was a good sign. "I won't bring it up again."

"It's my fault, Tommy." For a moment she just looked at me, not my eyes, but roving over my face. "I guess that's just where you come from. Let's talk about something else."

"I'd love to, babe." She leaned back into my arm again. "What would you like?" I wasn't going to take any chances this time.

"What about all those books you have?" I tried to keep from stiffening. There was no way she could know where they were from. "You've got more books than anyone I've ever met. Have you really read them all?"

"Not all of them, not yet. I've collected books almost my entire life, it seems that they're always getting harder to come by as the years wear on. I just got the last batch from a friend; he gave them to me just before he died."

"That's so sad."

I felt like a bit of a heel, but kept on going. "Don't worry, we weren't that close, he died a quick death anyway." She hadn't reached back for her fork, the food was long forgotten.

We sat side by side for hours, I told her about the first book I'd found. It had been in the ruins of an old house on the corner of our neighborhood, before they tore the place down. I'd been playing hide and seek when I found it in the cellar, under a staircase. It had been little more than a toddler's picture book, 'Mr. Smiley'.

I brought it home proudly to my father, asking him what it was. Its bright pages had entranced me from the moment I dug it out.

His reaction had changed my young world forever. He was my father, the mighty hunter, he knew everything. But not this. He'd known it was a book, for sure, even knew what they were for, but he'd never learned to read.

It was my mother who had come to my aid then; my father led me proudly by the hand to her, and had me repeat my request to know what it was. It had taken me years to learn how to even read such a simple book. Back then, to wrap my head around a scent or a sound would have been a simple matter, but the scrawls on its stained yellow paper were alien to me.

New books had been few and far between, every so often I would dig up an old torn magazine or manuscript, even finding joy in a mold covered sod of paper dredged from the shoreline. In those pages I'd seen a time before the Cataclysm, when people like us were just dreams, when we were slaves to the whims of human imagination. We filled in the roles of evil intentions, the personification of whatever it was the humans could not, or would not, give their own form to.

Other works too, dreams that seemed to run in the other direction. In those creatures like us appeared much less often, writings that looked forward in time, rather than back. It was ironic I suppose, that all the books that put us in the distant human's past had been wrong, while those to exclude us from the future had been equally as incorrect.

The nights I'd looked up at the stars, I could only imagine how the humans had gotten to the moon, and back no less. We it seemed had no ambitions of the sort. I remembered the words of the principal, they rang true, all we were interested in was killing, eating, and screwing.

The evening wrapped itself around us, seemingly by its own accord. The next thing I knew we were laying on an old threadbare sofa in the corner of the room, with no memory of how we'd gotten there. I laid on my back, her spread out on my chest, soft and warm. She murred and pushed up toward me, I nuzzled a soft furry ear atop her head, a quick nip.

And it moved.

I don't mean it moved as in it flicked or flinched, I mean it moved as in it slid to the side. She must have been half asleep, otherwise she would have felt me go rigid. Tentatively, I poked it with my nose, before grabbing it with the small teeth between my canines.

I looked for any response from her as I pulled. She lay across me, not a whisper past her lips as her ear came free.

I must have looked a sight, eyes as wide as sauce pans, and a bloodless cat's ear dangling from my mouth.

"Rebeca?" I let the ear fall into my open hand. "Rebeca?" I don't know why I whispered, it seemed that if I shouted I might break this moment, as though it were a dream.

"What is it, wolfy?" She snuggled closer, voice heavy with sleep. I held up the ear, "Did it fall out aga-" She stopped in mid word. Not a single sound ravaged the silence as she leaped to her feet, black shirt wreathing around her as she scrambled backwards.

She didn't say anything, standing just out of reach, staring at me. One ear was still on her head, the other lay in my hand. Hers still twitched every so often, mine was dead as felt.

"I really want to hear you say you can explain this, and that everything is fine..." I turned the ear over in my palm, it was still soft and warm. If I looked closely I could just make out wires and a tiny motor inside. "Nice hardware." I poked it with a finger, the ear jumped.

She looked as though she were about to smile, but it never made it to her lips.

"Are you going to say anything? I should be the person who's mortified here; you're the one

lying to me."

"Are you?" She took a step closer. Her voice was strained, tightly under control.

"Ask me again after you've finished talking." I tossed the ear onto a nearby coffee table. "I still think you're cute, ears or not. I just don't normally go for girls with removable body parts, makes we wonder what bits are real and what's a lie." I patted the seat beside me, it was still warm. "I won't bite. Well, if I were, I would've done it long ago."

She hesitated for a moment, not really looking at me, or at much of anything for that matter. Her eyes focused, I was suddenly the center of attention.

"I brought you here because I trust you, Tommy. No reason to stop now."

She sat back on the sofa. For a moment she was pushed up against the far shoulder before, with a deep breath, she laid out again. Inches from my nose, the one remaining ear twitched.

"So, are you going to start talking or do I have to chew on the other one?"

"I'll talk as long as you don't – they cost me two months' salary a piece." She brushed her long brown hair out of the way, revealing a full set of human ears underneath.

"You're human?" I reached out, one claw gently brushed the ear, this one was real.

"No lies."

I couldn't see her face, turned away from me as she was. Reaching a hand around, I set it on her cheek. "Why?" I'm sure I could have said something better, something deeper, but this was all that came out.

"We're a dying breed, Tommy." Her fingers came up to touch mine, smaller, more delicate, they almost disappeared against my fur. "You've seen the streets, you know what our numbers are, we're dropping like flies. If a single one of us is left in five years, it'll be a miracle."

"Your father?"

She just shrugged. "The gods know. I didn't lie to you, Tommy." She tried to turn to face me, but accomplished little more than almost falling to the floor. "I really didn't. I never said I wasn't human."

"Keep talking." I wrapped my arms around her; I told myself it was to keep her from slipping. "Where are the ears from?"

"I went out with a guy named Joyce..."

"Joyce James?"

She nodded. "How did you know?"

"Don't ask." Great, some guys run into a girl's old boyfriends on the street, I send them off to rendering. "He gave them to you?"

"I bought them." She huffed, "Like I said, they weren't cheap."

"How many humans play this game?"

All I got was a laugh. "Just me, wolfy. I'm the only one I know of who's smart enough – or maybe just dumb enough to try and dress up as something I'm not."

I buried my nose in her hair and breathed, it was still her – not the scent of a human. "You don't smell human."

I sneezed, not exactly romantic, or intimidating for that matter – I'd forgotten which I was going for anymore. She eeked and tried to squeeze through my arms, no such luck.

"Spray on." she said. "Haven't you ever heard of perfume?"

To be honest, not really – they only place I'd ever run across that was back in my books.

"Sure."

She struggled again, pulling from my grasp to sit at the end of the sofa, I pushed myself up on the other arm. "So, what are you going to do now, Tommy?"

"I guess that depends a lot on your next move. Heh." She'd pulled off the other ear. "Not exactly what I was expecting to happen this evening. If you want to dress up like a cat and prance around as something you're not, I'll hardly stop you."

"That's not-"

I lifted a finger to her lips, it was a stretch, but I could reach. "I know. Just tell me one thing." She nodded. "The government branded a group of humans as terrorists – are you among them?"

Her eyes snapped open wide enough to almost make me laugh. "What?" Her voice wasn't quiet or secretive any more, it was more a startled exclamation, like I just grown a second pair of ears.

"That's what they said. The government's put out a contract, and English and I are planning to collect." I kicked my legs off the sofa and stood up, my back was to her now, I'm not sure if that was a good idea.

"Tommy." I didn't bother turning around, "I don't know what they told you, but they're not terrorists, we're just trying to survive."

"Where are they, Rebeca?"

"You can't collect on them, Tommy. They're not hurting anyone!"

"Where are they, Rebeca? If we don't find them the government will just send someone else. We both know the next team in line won't care what happens." I turned, reaching out I took her by the wrists, her hands looked so small in mine. "Where are they?" I lowered my voice, looking into her eyes.

"West V-town, across the Lion's Gate bridge. Twelfth street." She didn't look at me as she spoke. I'm not sure what she saw, but it wasn't me.

"Thank you, Rebeca. When I get back we can try this again – I really would like to watch the sun come up with you." Letting go of her hands, I lifted one to my lips – it may be my only romantic trick, but it served me well.

I was across the room and out the door before she could rise. For a moment I contemplated slamming it closed on my heels. I couldn't be in that room anymore; if I stayed, I was sure I would do something I'd regret.

I contemplated making it all the way to the bed, but the smell of her would have been too much, I staggered to the chair before collapsing. This wasn't exactly the bed I'd been hoping to fall asleep in tonight, but I'd have to make due.

I couldn't have gotten much sleep considering it must have been well past midnight by the time I walked through my door, but the morning came anyway. I rolled to my feet and made for the hallway, I'd have to catch English before Jon showed his face, otherwise he'd start limiting our options.

Opening the apartment door, I was a little bit surprised.

"You didn't think I would let you leave without me, did you?"

Her cat ears were back in place, looking as though they'd never been uprooted. The new accompaniment was black leather. Not that tight getup you see on stage, but thick and boxy, she looked like she could take on a tank.

"Wow." I had to laugh when she pulled out a pair of knives. They were no claws, but, at six inches, they looked nasty enough. "You know how to use those things?"

She shrugged, "Not really. I promised myself that I wouldn't go the same way my father did. Anyone who wants to drag me off will have to do it with me kicking and screaming."

"So, I guess making you stay here is out of the question?"

"Absolutely. I keep telling you I'm no wilting flower – and I plan to prove it. Someone has to keep you and your big kitty in line, it might as well be me." She started off down the hallway without

me. "Where are we going, anyway?"

It didn't take us long to make it to café Bristol. It was new to her, so she was properly awed by the outlaying of food that greeted us.

I was more surprised by the dog who'd beaten us there – we'd never even told him about the place. I'd have to reevaluate my opinion on police intelligence.

English cocked an eyebrow as we sat down, but kept sipping his tea.

"Who's your friend, Wolfy? A distant relative?" Rebeca asked. Both Jon and I bristled at Rebeca's question.

"Not quite, Babe. It's a long story, but let's just say that if whip and chain boy here talks – it's a good idea to listen."

I'm sure Rebeca would be less than thrilled to hear that we had a member of the constabulary with us, good thing I hadn't mentioned it. Now that I thought about it, I doubted he would be so hot to work with a human himself.

Breakfast continued at a leisurely pace, English didn't seem in a rush, and Jon just sat and watched as we ate. I tried to come up with any excuse I could to step away with the lion or, better yet, get Jon out of hearing range. By the way the dog's ears swiveled at even the slightest sound, we'd have to put a lot of distance in to keep our privacy.

In the end, English brought it to a head himself. "All right, boys," he nodded to Rebeca, "and girl. If we want to bring in that next payroll, someone had better have a good idea to hork up." He laid his hands on the table. "I'm all out, mates. The trail's cold as far as I'm concerned." He shrugged towards Jon.

The Sheppard paused and carefully waited for a nearby waitress to move away. He looked towards Rebeca, I smiled and shrugged.

"None of my conventional sources have produced notable results."

If Rebeca was surprised by his mannerisms, she didn't show it.

"Well, I guess you're lucky the B team's holding up your tails." I'd had to work out a story on the way here, it held water about as well as tissue paper, but I doubted English would challenge me on it.

"The Diamond Dice is sea going again, and Rebeca overhead the enclave we're looking for."

I reiterated a nice, mildly boring, story about how she had just happened to come across exactly what we needed. And even more conveniently, she just happened to tell me all about it. Surprisingly, she even jumped in at places to reinforce my story, as thin as it was.

"So, you're on the team now are you, my dear?" English shot her a mock salute. "Welcome aboard our little ship of fools. We're headed straight towards the jagged coastline, laughing all the way."

West V-town was a long walk, even with the bridge still standing. It must have been at least an hour before we hit the fringes of Stanly park. Looking behind me, I saw Rebeca trudging along in her heavy leather. My tongue came out to lick my lips of its own accord.

The bridge hove into view ahead of us. It had once been green, but long ago the paint had worn away to reveal rusted tawny orange beneath. The bridge was safe enough to cross, I suppose, but it never struck me as an incredibly smart move to put your life in the hands of a swaying roadway with half of its support wires dangling down into the water.

On our final approach to the span, English jacked a thumb towards a stone lion, laying half hidden and forgotten in the bush alongside the road. "No relation."

Crossing the threshold on the far side of the water, I was happy to have my feet back on firm ground. My old apartment may be just as far up in the air, but at least there I knew someone had been trying to keep it from collapsing from under me.

Where V-town its self was littered with broken buildings, it was generally clean, and as well kept together as one might hope by the population that called it home. West V-town was a different story.

There just weren't enough people to keep the entire area full. V-town may have busy and crowded streets, but West V-town was all but a haven for ghosts. Fires, vandalism, and the occasional earth quake had taken down just about every structure over two stories tall, and those that had survived were open to the elements. Split open in ages past, their walls were bleached like bone.

It would be the perfect place to hide. An army of giant-killers could lurk in the burnt out husks, no one would be any the wiser until they marched across the inlet.

We took the long rout in. It was still well into daylight, and none of us wanted to be taking a mob of angry humans face on. Terrorists or not, I didn't want to be trampled underfoot when the herd mentality set in.

It took us a while, but we found a lookout a few blocks away and a few hundred feet up the mountainside. Say what you will about the coast, but its rugged, and moving vertical is about as natural as horizontal. Beneath us, I could see the remains of houses spread into the distance, kissing the horizon. It must have been a nice place once, filled to overflowing with humans, families, children, whatever. Now they were so many burned out skeletons slowly dissolving into the earth.

The husk in question must have been a grand place. Even in death it loomed large over the graves beside it. At least a thousand feet to a side, I would well expect it had been a school, or some massive shop back in its heyday.

"Alright, mates, who's to take first watch?" English asked, sitting down heavily behind me. I got the feeling he was more accustomed to sprinting after prey on the streets then hiking through the rubble.

"Rebeca and I can take it."

He nodded, "Wake us in four hours. Jon and I will give you a brake, then we'll move in around midnight." He set his head back, with a mane like his he didn't even need a pillow, and was out like a light.

I looked over at Jon; he sat up against the shattered remains of a wall, skinny arms wrapped up around his legs. He nodded at me before screwing his eyes shut, burring his head in his knees.

Winking at Rebeca, we walked from the building.

"Welcome to the weird crew. English just drops where ever he stands, and Jon looks like he's about to have a nervous breakdown."

"That's all?" She laughed, and began digging through the countless pockets buried in her coat. "And I'd thought you people would be entertaining."

She must have gone through a half dozen zippers, unearthing everything from medical gauze to black makeup, before she finally pulled out a small sheep skin bladder. She uncorked the top and took a gulp before handing it to me.

"Care for a swig?"

I sniffed it for a moment, it smelled faintly of honey and nutmeg.

"Nothing to worry about, Wolfy. Just some flavored water. I picked it up from a street vendor a few days ago in case I needed to make a quick getaway."

I took a shot, palatable but not my thing. I handed it back. "Getaway? From what?" I paused for a moment before narrowing my eyes, "Did you think I..."

She just laughed and threw a piece of lint at me. "Not you, wolfy. It was the Dice, they were getting to close. We were lined up to go through a bunch of medicals, they were so worried about security. I wasn't sure what was going to happen before I quit. To be honest I'm still not so sure about anything, I just needed to be ready in case I had to disappear."

"Would you have disappeared with them?" I poked a thumb in the vague direction of the building below us.

She just shrugged. "That's almost all of us who are left, Tommy. We're organized, but we're not yet prepared. We're just frightened and trying to survive. I might have joined them. If I had nowhere else to go."

"You had somewhere else?"

We were sitting on the low remainder of a wall, I edged closer to her.

"Not really." She glanced over as I moved closer, "I had someone. I said no lies, Tommy, but I do have a few secrets. When we met back on the dice, I'll admit I was coming on to you. You were cute, all dressed up in your little suit." I smiled. "But that wasn't the reason. I came on because you said you were a bounty hunter, and that was what I was looking for."

"A bounty hunter?" My whiskers fell. "That's all you saw me as?"

"At first." She reached out, laying her hand over mine. "I've been by myself for a few years now. I've had boyfriends, and lived with more people than I can count. But I was always looking out for myself, and sometimes them too. I needed someone I could do more than just survive with, someone who could look after me for a change. You looked big and scary, well, scarier than me anyway. What I really needed was someone who could cover me when I was down, someone I could trust."

"Why not English? If you wanted someone to protect you, he could do a better job than me by a mile."

She shrugged again and some magical way she ended up a hair closer to me. "I didn't even know he existed until after I met you." She frowned for a moment, "I guess I'm glad. You saved our lives, wolfy. He just helped."

"I'll have to save your life again, babe. If it gets you this close to me I'd do it every day." We were almost side by side now. The sun was still high in the sky, but we watched it set.

The sun had just crossed the horizon when lights flared up in the target beneath us.

In the shadows, I could see the edges of sentries slowly fanning out. Just our luck, a pair were headed this way.

"Do you see them?" I pointed out into the shadows, I could just make the two out.

"How can you see anything in this darkness?" She just stared out before shrugging.

"How can you not? Call it a racial advantage." I took her hand and we slipped silently into the night.

"What about Jon and English?" Her voice was just above a whisper as we stalked down path strewn with gravel and debris; she had to move slowly as not to slip.

"They can handle themselves for a few minutes. We have to deal with our friends out here before they come knocking."

She stopped dead in her tracks, so suddenly I almost snapped back in her hand. "Tommy," she whispered, groping for my face in the darkness. I took her fingers and led them up where she grasped my mussel. "You have to promise me that we won't kill them."

"Rebeca..." I whispered, they couldn't be more than a few dozen feet away.

"Promise me, Tommy. So few of us have survived this long, we can't afford more bloodshed."

"I'll promise, Rebeca, but we really need to move..." Her fingers were gone from my face.

We pushed our backs up against a broken stone embankment that might have at one time been someone's garden wall. It only made it up to our chests, we had to duck.

Around a corner I could see the blinding light of an old yellow lantern beam. What kind of amateurs were these? You can't see anything when you hunt by flashlight.

I had to shut my eyes as they passed to avoid seeing stars. Just a foot away on the other side of the wall, I could hear them muttering to each other. Their scents carried to me on the cool night breeze, old cloths and older sweat, but above all, fear. These two were not predators in the night, and they knew it.

I tapped three fingers on Rebeca's palm, I could feel her nod. Two. One.

As one, we turned and vaulted over the wall. Silent on padded feet I landed, her boots echoed in the night. They only had a split second to turn before we were behind them. I took the further one; I only saw a flash of blond hair from the other mark before Rebeca was upon him.

As for my own, he was dressed in a mismatched set of clothing that looked like it had been scavenged from a dumpster, smelled like it too. It wasn't until I had one hand over his mouth, the other pulling him to the ground, that I realized just how little there was to this boy.

This couldn't be more than a kid. He was surrounded in layer upon layer of shirts and jackets, until once you got down to the flesh almost nothing remained but bones and pale skin.

For a moment, I saw a flash of his eyes as we went down, spinning to the ground. I froze, I could see the blind fear in him. He was just too... close.

He had to be someone's son, didn't he? What was I doing here anyway?

Beside me, I heard a quiet thunk and groan as Rebeca did away with her companion. My promise flashed before me, and I wasn't the least bit unhappy for it.

A quick rap of my knuckles to the back of his head, and his eyes closed as he joined his friend on the ground.

Rebeca looked over at me, she was already dragging her body away. "A problem, Tommy?" If nothing else, she was efficient.

"No. Just had to... decide how to knock him out. Haven't done this much, you know."

She smiled, a bit lopsidedly. "Neither have I, shall we try and keep it that way?"

As we dragged the bodies in, English and Jon were already awake and watching us.

"Have a pinch of trouble, mate?"

"Nothing to worry yourself over, English. Some friends wanted to crash out party, you can go back to your nap." I dropped the body in a corner, Jon handed me a length of rope to tie him.

A few moments later all the housekeeping was done. English stood by the door, peering into the night. "All right lady and gents, looks like we might as well advance our plans a bit. Anyone object to taking a peek in our little shop of horrors right now?" Nobody said a word. "Okay, we'll keep the teams we have right now, one experienced hunter, one amateur." I shot him a quizzical look, but he pointedly ignored me.

"Tommy and Rebeca, you two are our mobile team. Find a way into that building, and take it. I want to know what we have on the inside. Jon and I will circle the perimeter and eliminate the remaining sentries."

"English," I felt like a moron, but a promise was a promise. "We can't kill any of them."

A lip twitched up on one side of his face, away from Jon. "All right folks, you heard the alpha. No blood just yet, got it?"

Jon gave me a sour look. "This complicates things substantially."

I locked his gaze, coming from his face I was amazed he held it, but he did, unblinking. "My

call, Jon. Take it or crawl home." For a heartbeat we stood nose to nose before his eyes fell.

"This is not my command."

We split; the two of them began in a long slow curve around the building, homing in on the wandering flashlights like piranhas in a guppy pool. For a few moments I just stood and watched, as one by one the lights flicked off.

I had to shake my head and force myself away. Rebeca and I zigzagged towards the building, darting from one pile of rubble to the next. Ahead of us an old rusted fence of chain-link had once stretched, now it was little more than the occasional barren pole sticking up from the ground like a blunted tooth.

Through the cracks in the building's wall we could see lights within. Figures, the only way in were the windows a good fifteen feet up. I was just about to start cursing and looking for a toehold when I felt a finger tap my shoulder.

"Boost?"

I never thought I'd be so happy to hear her say that.

Even with her leather and knives, she was still as light as a pup. One foot in my weaved fingers, and a push. She was airborne for a quarter second before her outstretched fingers hooked the frame. It took her a moment to pull herself up, all upper body – her feet were silent, not scrambling against the wall at all. She was gone in a matter of heartbeats, but to be honest I wished she took longer. I could have stood the view.

I waited with my back to the wall, pushing into the thick shadows. Not that I expected anyone to stumble by, but with the background buzz from behind me, I wouldn't have any warning if they did.

The lock clicked open a few moments later and I stole in. The two of us were pressed into a small alcove, cheek to jowl. Ahead, I could see the torches and gas lamps of the humans. Much like before, small groups in ragged clothing huddled around fires, children clutched close. Only fewer of them.

We worked our way closer, it wasn't hard in the flickering torch light, no one seemed to be keeping vigil for us anyway. Voices floated down in the heavy smoke filled air.

"We can't go, this is our city. We built it!"

"The beasts are forcing us out, we have to leave – our lives depend on it."

"We can't leave – we'll never survive out there!"

"I'd rather fall to the whims of nature than the fangs of the renderers."

We continued to edge closer, they were just around the next corner, almost in sight. Then... Rebeca was gone. I reached for her, but all I found was smoke filled air.

"We can't stay here." Her voice rang off the barren walls, cutting through the smoke, murmurs, and the crackle of the countless fires. She strode broadly towards the men, the ears gone. Behind her, her hair flowed out, reflecting the red flames into countless shadows and highlights. "The government has labeled us as terrorists." The words fell from her mouth and died in the room, the only sound filling the void was the crackling of flames.

"We can't stay here." She reached for the men, her hands spread, encompassing the city around her, "If we stay, we die. Not at some point in the future, we die. Now."

"Rebeca." One of the men came towards her, dark black hair covering his face. "When we couldn't find you after the evacuation, we thought you were lost." He took her hand; I had to claw back a growl.

"I have friends, Jack. I'll survive. No matter what happens, I'll survive. You won't."

"How do you know that?"

"The government has put a contract out on us. Not just you," She pointed at one man who flinched back, then a woman, "or you, or you, but all of us." The murmurs grew up again from nothing, louder, more hurried and frantic. "We need to leave. Right away, first thing in the morning. We need to go all the way, beyond the hunters, beyond the explorers."

"We'll die! We can't survive out there!" A voice came from the shadows, loud but trembling, scared.

She turned, face to the shadows that held what was left of the humans of V-town. "We did once. Perhaps we'll die, but we'll die by our own hand. We've all lost those we love, but we can't fight – against them, any of them, we would never win. We have to run. We don't belong here anymore."

Her voice softened, falling to what seemed little over a whisper, though it carried through the room. "The hunters stalk us as we speak, even now. Both outside and within. We can hold them at bay till the morning, but we need to escape with the sun. Tomorrow night will be our last if we remain in the city. They don't want to talk, they don't want to debate, they want us dead. To them, our blood is money."

"We?" The black haired man spoke up, "You're working with someone?"

She nodded. "A hunter is with me right now, not everyone is after our blood."

For a moment, a still wave crashed over the humans around me. I could smell their fear rise up, washing over me. An image of a stampede of dumb animals flared in my mind, if I was seen I would be killed. It may be little more than woman, children, and the homeless that were here, but they would kill me none the less. I would have no chance to survive.

"We are safe for now. They may be animals, but they are not all beasts." Her voice rose, she tried to fight back the blind terror that reached to take hold like a spark on dry paper. "We are safe until the morning."

She walked forward. Hands reached out weakly to stop her, but she ignored them, brushing past without a glance. I fell in behind, hidden within the shadows.

Outside, the night air hit me like a fist to the gut. "What the smeg was that?" I hissed in her ear, her real one, mouth so close my whiskers brushed her hair.

"I can't stay, Tommy. I promised myself I would, but I can't." She didn't turn, didn't look back, just kept walking. Smooth, long legged strides gilding through the darkness.

"You can't seriously be throwing your lot in with them?" I tossed my hands up in the air. "They wouldn't last a season in the wild, and they won't even claw that much time if they stay in the city!"

This was insane.

We were back at the meeting place, the humans sentries still lay in a heap, sleeping soundly. The moonlight drifted down through patches in the roof, casting us both in stark white.

"Tommy, I'm human." She turned to face me, the moon throwing her features in sharp relief. "No matter what these ears may make the world see, I'm human. I was born that way, and I can't change it, no matter what I may show the people around me."

I reached forward, tips of my fingers brushing her hair. "And that's such a crime?"

"In this world, it might as well be." She bowed her head, re-affixing the prosthetics. "We're a dying race, Wolfy, and the Government just wants to put us out of our misery. They don't understand why we're still here, and to be frank, they don't want us."

The felt ears were back on, I stepped back a moment and just looked at her. Now that I'd seen her without, they just didn't look right - like a mustache scrawled on a fine painting. She was exactly the same as when I first met her, but now I'd never be fooled by such simple distractions.

The crunch of gravel slid in on the night breeze, close by. A finger to her lips and we both stood

still, the only sound was that of the moonlight flooding in.

Like ghosts, English and Jon arrived. Much to my relief, neither was stained in blood.

Jon's face was blank, English only nodded, oddly inscrutable. "And what do we know, mate?"

Rebeca simply looked at me, not saying a thing. Why is it always my problem?

"This is the place. The humans are holed up in there." I couldn't bring myself to call them terrorists. "Our best plan of attack is to return tomorrow night with backup from the force, wipe them out. Completely. One single, clean, hit. No one walks out alive."

Jon raised his head, just looking at me for a few moments before opening his mouth. "The contract does explicitly state the need for expediency."

I didn't even bother to glance back. "Jon, this isn't your operation. I don't know how you do your job – but I make sure I get it right." He bristled, fur on end. "There are at least a hundred humans in there, four of us. You do the math. If we attack with the force during the day, they'll see us coming a quarter mile away. A good three quarters might escape. We come back in twenty-four hours with full backup. Circle the building, and end this."

"What about the sentries?" He led his eyes to the bodies in the corner.

"You didn't kill them did you?"

"Nope," English broke in.

"It's dark, people trip and fall. We untie them and fade away; they never knew what hit them. They're human, they're just dumb animals."

The walk back to V-town took twice as long as the journey out. We must have stumbled over every rock and rift in our path. The scant light played out by the moon didn't account for much now, obscured by clouds.

Jon split off as soon as we crossed the bridge, and I had to carry Rebeca the last part of the way. Then I almost had to get English to carry me. By the time I got my apartment door open we were the walking dead.