

The Hunters



By: wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Journal.....	1
Chapter 2: Another Day at the Office.....	10
Chapter 3: I Hate My Life, and My Boss Hates it Too.....	19
Chapter 4: Job Search.....	34
Chapter 5: Office Work, with a Twist of Carnage.....	43
Chapter 6: New Best Friend.....	54
Chapter 7: The Lion, and the Lion.....	71
Chapter 8: Swimming in a Suit and Tie.....	82
Chapter 9: Another Day, Another Broken Bone.....	98
Chapter 10: Take This Job and.....	110
Chapter 11: Never, Ever, Take a Government Contract.....	121
Chapter 12: What We Show the World.....	132
Chapter 13: Getting Out While the Getting's Good.....	146
Chapter 14: It's a Grand Old Race.....	159
Chapter 15: A Storm.....	171
Autumn (Epilogue).....	184
Author's Note.....	186

Chapter 15: A Storm

I wasn't sure what I expected when we crossed the threshold into the station. A wave of crushing blue perhaps? At least some form of recognition, I suppose. But there was nothing.

This time we had to wait through a line up, all the tills were running, and we still had to stand in queue just to get an officer to so much as acknowledge our existence. Ahead of us, a couple of Japanese water spirits were complaining about something or other, one line over an Oni was shouting at the top of his lungs about discrimination. I didn't really lend them an ear, I was trying to remain alert, but the wear of the last few days was coming down on me like a ton of bricks.

At long last we finally came to the front of the line, for a moment I almost thought it was Jon again. It could of well been his clone, the dog across the counter mirrored him to a tee.

"State the nature of your concern." He didn't even look up from the papers on his desk.

"We're here to see Inspector Sayer." If he recognized me, he didn't show it.

"Your name, please."

"Tommy Taggart."

He flipped through a few more papers, then walked out the door behind him for a couple of minutes before coming back.

"You don't appear to have an appointment."

Eh? "Okay, dog, I don't need an appointment. I'm here because he's already put me through the nine circles of deep Michigan. I've already painted your whitewashed walls red once, I don't want to have to do it again."

The bugger didn't even have the polite sense to look startled.

"If you have a concern, I'm sure one of our public outreach officers will be able to assist you."

"Get. Me. Sayer."

My hackles began to rise; behind me I could hear English start to growl deep in his chest. It was quiet, but grew louder until all conversation in the room stopped. If there had been any doubt before, we were now the center of attention.

The dog just gave us an oblique look. "I will inquirer with the Inspector to see if he has a free moment. Please take a seat." And then he was gone.

It must have been twenty minutes, after a few moments when the dog didn't return we threw ourselves on the nearby bench with the lust of men who had walked a thousand miles. Around us, the normal day to day operation of the station resumed its hum.

Behind my sleep weary eyes, I watched the police dogs service the public with an efficiency that seemed bred into them. It was odd, I'd never noticed before that nearly all the police were canine, and beyond that, dogs. That would imply that they would all be related – keeping it in the family.

I was almost passed out by the time someone returned, I wouldn't have noticed if the familiar scent hadn't jarred me awake.

Jon.

"Mr. Jones. Mr. Taggert. Mrs. Rebeca." perfect as the first time we'd seen him, he was folded back into his uniform. "Would you please follow me?"

He led us back through another maze of twists and turns within the bowels of the station. I was expecting him to dump us back into Sayer's office, but rather we stepped into a large, spotless conference room. Soft lighting surrounded a polished oak table, on the other side sat the old dane, Sayer, and a small lizard in an immaculate suit, bright orange batches broken out across his green scales.

"Gregg..." English's voice echoed behind me, verging on a snarl.

"Please, gentlemen, lady, have a seat." His voice was light and raspy, a smile touching his lips.

The seats around the table were huge, deep, leather affairs. Night and day from the spartan starkness of Sayer's office.

"I'm so happy you could join us here, my friends." His lips curled up at the last word. "This wasn't exactly the way I was intending to end things, but I guess I have to thank you."

"What?" I lay my hands down on the table, leaning forward I tried to read the lizard. Nothing came from behind those guarded dark yellow eyes. Beside me English had begun growling again, a slow boil that sat and rolled.

"You did something that we would have never been able to accomplish on our own," he said.

"You tracked them down. You brought the hunters to leash, and handed it all over to us in a nice little package. Storm Front will be taking over the operation now, along with the hundred bounties that includes."

"But, why? Why kill them in the first place?" Rebeca's voice broke in. I had to applaud her, it was still, quiet, and smooth. I barely trusted my own voice to come out as anything more than a snarl.

"Why not, my dear? The humans are a genetic dead end, a drain on our society, nothing more. The government has put out a contract on them, and I aim to collect." He spun and pointed a finger at English. "Don't look at me like that. You've done the same thing a hundred times, you brute. You just haul them off in single file. I'm doing nothing different, just being efficient."

"But..." Rebeca's voice was high, it broke.

"No buts to it, my dear. We know where they are, and no one can keep us from them. In a fortnight, the humans will be collected by Storm Front and this contract will be closed. We'll move onto another, nothing more than another entry in the logbook. In any event," He smiled, thin lips pulling back. "Everyone needs an enemy, someone to focus in the crosshairs, otherwise we'd eat ourselves from the inside out. And who better than the trash we've to throw out anyway?"

"Can't we appeal? Isn't there some way to stop this?" I bit the words off, tasting blood on my tongue.

"And who would you appeal to?" The Dane spoke up for the first time, no more than a cracked whisper crawling across the table. He didn't smile. "The courts? We both know they would take a month to even hear your case, and a year to uphold the just decisions of the government who appoint

them. You speak like the government is a single person, like it's someone you can argue with, someone you can kill. The government..." He shrugged, "Is the government. It's the will of the people, enacted. The sum of the cats, dogs, wolves and spirits who construct it. The government does what the people want, what the people demand. The humans are a small minority of the city... or should I say, they were." He fell silent, seeming to collapse in upon himself, back into the folds of the chair.

VanDerhoom broke back in, filling the silence. "We didn't need them, we didn't want them. All the government is doing is the will of the people, whether they know it or not. Why do you think there was no public outcry? No one cares, they are just so much flotsam to be cleaned up."

"So why didn't you just kill them straight off?" The question came from my lips unbidden. I looked over at Rebeca, she shuttered.

"Murder is messy." The old dog wrung his hands as though washing them. "We can't start sending the message that we can simply kill off those we please. Every action was legal, every action was checked. We did nothing wrong." His voice was speeding up, pitch rising. "We only followed orders; we only did what was right. The police force is an arm of the government. If a law states that something is right, then it is. Any order from the government is moral, any order is just."

The lizard shot him a look that shut the old dog's mouth in a heartbeat. "Much cleaner to just make people disappear, everyone has done something wrong. It worked well for years – just wasn't fast enough. Once they started catching on, we couldn't make people fade into the night quite so easily. But with so few left, we can take a more direct action."

"So the government hired Storm Front?" I asked. I reached up to rub my forehead, claws kneading roughly into my flesh.

The lizard just laughed, "Silly pup, we've been involved for years." Beside me, English stiffened. "But people fail. Your kitty friend Huston thought he could just walk in and they would all give themselves up like lambs to the slaughter. We underestimated their will to live, so did he."

"And you hired us."

The lizard's smile was in full bloom. "My best hunter walks off the job with a sudden outbreak of scruples. You like to run Michael, you always have. Don't even know what it's from half the time. Well, this time you ran right into it. If you wouldn't hunt for me directly, I'd just drop a nice juicy contract in your lap, and you'd dance on my line no matter what your petty morals may be."

The lion looked as though he were about to jump the table and pull them both limb from limb. The old dog just stared back into the middle distance, whispering. "I didn't know, English. I didn't know."

I could see a full set of the lizard's small needle like teeth now. "Things just moved a touch faster than we expected. You did the impossible and found them, but something must have tipped them off. I guess you're not as good as you thought."

"But if they're out of the city, why did you torture us?"

His smile faltered for a moment, "I regret that. I don't make a habit of damaging my best tools. We didn't know where they had gone, it seemed only obvious you would."

"And so that's it?"

He shrugged. "What more do you want? It's just another contract. In any event, the three of you are welcome to remain in the city, of course. Now that we are free of the human concern, there is no reason to bar you. I may even find it in my heart to offer you your jobs back. And we could always use a new lady at the office." His smile turned lecherous as he eyed Rebeca. Her cat ears were firmly in place, I'd never even seen her don them before we entered downtown.

"No." My single word dropped on the oak table between us like a physical thing. We sat there for a moment, the lizard lazily eying us, seemingly about as concerned as if this were a weekly event.

"Come now my friends, be reasonable. Michael already well knows my generosity; I can be a very accommodating man when it suits me. And suits me it does to have the two greatest bounty hunters in the city working under me again. Why would you not? You're human sympathizers, well that's fine. Soon there'll be no humans to sympathize with, problem solved." He spread his hands as though stating an obvious truth.

"No." I stood up, beside me I could feel both English and Rebeca following suite, as though of one mind. We left, his soft laughter watched us leave.

"You know where to find me."

Jon met us on the other side of the door and let us out to the street. For just a moment before the door closed between us, the whipped dog clawed its way through his eyes, a visage we had never seen before, no matter his cloths. "It was an honor working with you, despite the outcome." Then he was gone.

I wandered a few blocks, no real direction, taking turns at random. I didn't know where I was going, just trying to get the stench of dogs from the air. At some point I sat on the curb, staring at some random gray stone building. On either side I felt two bodies joining me.

"What are you two still doing here?" I didn't even bother looking at either of them. "We've lost, it's over."

"We're still partners, mate." The lion tried to put an arm on my shoulder, but I just shrugged it off.

"No you're not, English. We're cogs in the machine, crushing the humans of V-town. If I was looking for a wakeup call to tell me to get out of this life, well, this is it. I'm out. I quit. It's over, okay?" I threw up my arms, trying to push him away, his bulk only swayed back.

"Come on, mate, you can't bail on us now." He paused for a moment, accent dropping. "I cocked up big time, Tommy, big time. If I hadn't brought you in, then none of this would have happened." A crack appeared in his voice. "I guess I'm just not that good at keeping people alive. Everyone I work with, everyone I care for, seems to end up dead sooner or later." He pulled a blond hair from his mane. "Under this sun, or another."

I turned to my other side. "You ended up not so bad off, I suppose, Rebeca." She fixed me with a glare that could cut glass. "All you need to do is keep up the performance, and you're running as if nothing happened. They didn't even catch on."

Her hands flew out, fingers grabbing me by the scruff on either side of my neck.

"You think that's what I'll do, Tommy? You think I'll just roll over and play dead as they murder everyone? People I know, people I trust?" She threw me back, colliding into English. "If that's what the two of you beasts will do, then fine. I'm not giving up. There are more important things then our precious hides." She pulled both knives from the folds of her jacket. "I'm going to die anyway, so I might as well take that scum with me." She turned and levered herself to her feet. "If it buys us an extra day, it'll be worth it."

"Lass, wait." English's hand shot out, snagging the thick leather of her sleeve and holding fast. "If it's time you want, then perhaps we can help." I turned to see a full grin pulling the lion's face into a snarl.

"What are you talking about, English?" I sat up, ears perking as he pulled Rebeca back to the ground.

"Our little lass may have a point, mate. We can't save them, but mayhaps we can buy just a little more time."

"Spit it out, you over grown house cat. I'm not in the mood for your games." I wasn't ready to

be dragged back in just yet.

"Only what lass here might as well do without us. You forget, mate, VanDerhoom may run SF, but it's my company. I built it from the ground."

"Last chance, English. Out with it, or I'm back to a desk job."

"What I'm saying, mate, is SF's not the problem, it's VanDerhoom. We cut the head from the viper, and it can't strike. Dear old Storm Front is the only company with the skills to ever take on this job. The police could never do it, by the time they sent that many dogs out into the woods the city might just as well fall apart behind them. No one but SF can cut this, and I'll bet you my last ounce of flesh that it's our boy who's driving the push. Everyone wants the cash, sure, but we can't be the only ones with human connections. If we take him from the chair, well, it won't solve the problem, but it sure as the gods won't be SF leading the charge after I'm back around."

"You're crazy, English. That will gain us what? A week, a month?"

"I'm waiting on a better idea, mate."

I looked over at Rebeca, my arms out. "Babe, please..."

She just pushed me back.

"I'm not going to live like this, Tommy. Come with me if you will, but I'd rather die by my own hand trying to protect my friends than hide in someone's arms, even yours."

"Fine, you win." I grabbed one of her hands and pulled her in. "One promise though." She looked at me, face hard. "If we pull this off, I get you all to myself."

Her face softened, she cracked a smile, "What are you, a lovesick pup?"

"I prefer the phrase 'drop out romantic'."

She put a finger to my nose, slowly pushing us apart, "Try it again when we're not about to get blood all over ourselves."

I peered over my shoulder and watched as a shadow slowly detached itself from the wall and strolled casually over.

"Gowan, how long were you there?"

"Long enough, pup. Sounds like you're back on the war path again."

I nodded. "Can you keep any tails off our backs?"

He laughed. "For you, pup? Anything. You had better make this worth it though. Even with us at your back, you won't get a second swipe at this."

I nodded, "We only need one shot. After this, it won't matter much anyway."

According to English, VanDerhoom always works late, the best chance we would have to hit him would be at Storm Front after everyone else filed out for the night. Stalking him at home was out of the question, the security he had put city hall to shame.

With nothing to do for at least four hours, we dragged ourselves back to my apartment. Up on the floor, both of our doors were boarded up, covered over with police tape. It wouldn't do us any good looking for the super, he was human. If he was lucky, he was a huddling next to a fire out in the camp somewhere, if he was unlucky... well, then he wouldn't be in a position to complain.

I kicked open the door to my apartment, gods knew where the keys were. We didn't bother with Rebeca's, nothing of value was left there anyway. It took a few smacks, but the cheap plywood splintered under my foot.

Within, the scent of police dogs was everywhere. The entire place had been neatly and systematically taken apart, then put back together again. While they'd slotted everything back in place, it was obvious they hadn't been concerned with hiding the fact they'd pawed through every nook and

cranny.

For a moment my hackles began to rise, the image of countless police dogs running their grubby paws over everything here, all of my property... I had to fight down the urge to turn and walk back to the station. I'd already extracted my revenge on the cops when we escaped, there were more important matters to worry about now.

The fight for the shower almost broke into a bloodbath; the only way I won was by growling and snapping, insisting that this was after all my apartment. Just before slamming the door behind me I grabbed Rebeca by the waist, dragging her in. If this was my home, I might as well do as I liked.

For a moment she just looked at me from under her layers of leather and cloth. I turned on the hot water, letting the steam fill my lungs as warmth edged into the room.

"You might want to take that off, babe. We wouldn't want to get your nice little jacket wet. It makes you look so ferocious, I wouldn't want to ruin it."

The entire walk here she had been stoic, carved in ice. After a week without a shower though, I think the promise of hot water will melt almost anyone. She smiled, I know I did.

"So this is your big plan, Wolfy, offer me a shower and I'm putty in your hands?"

"Is it working?" I didn't have much to lose, I shucked off what belts and knick knacks I had.

"You're choice, babe, hot water with me, or cold without."

She laughed. "I'll take the first option." It took her awhile to undress, peeling off layer after layer of clothing. It wasn't until she got down to the skimpy bits that I realized just how little was left to her. Over the last few days I'd gotten so used to seeing her all toughened up with leather and metal that I'd forgotten just how delicate she was underneath.

Her pink skin was pale beneath the electric lights of the windowless room, she seemed so fragile as to almost blow away on a stray breeze.

She scrunched up in front of me, the two of us only just fit in the stall. To say the shower was erotic or anything would be a lie. We'd both gotten through that phase a couple of days ago, and to be honest, right now we were both too tired to be bothering with anything but getting the stench of a week's worth of country living from our bodies.

The closeness felt good, but it took more than its fair share of time in the scrubbing and cleansing. After we were done and the soap suds hung around our ankles, we just stood there. I held her to my chest as the warm water beat down upon us. We didn't say anything, just stared at the blank shower wall until the steam ran cold.

If I'd had the opportunity to laugh at her while she had to strip, she got her chance when it came time to towel off. Her smooth body was dry in a flash, leaving only her long brown hair to wick away. My fur, on the other hand, was not so quick. I'd never realized just how good it felt to have someone else to dry me off; any excuse for a full body massage is a good one.

Her fingers traced the silver line of the scar on my hip. "A reminder of our first meeting, eh wolfy?"

I smiled, "Sure, babe. I'd like to say I wouldn't have it any other way, but let's be honest, I'm not so crazy about almost losing parts of my anatomy." That got me a damp towel in the face as she strolled out with a laugh.

Following her from the steam clogged bathroom a few minutes later, my apartment was empty. I peered across the way to find Rebecca's door torn down. Within, the sound of running water. I guess English hadn't wanted to wait.

I puttered around my apartment for a bit, just wasting time while I waited. I knew the other two were just across the way, but somehow it felt lonely. I had an uneasiness in my gut that I hadn't felt since the first time English had dragged me out on a hunt.

I pawed through my stuff, trying to cover over the scent of the dogs who had been here before me. Amongst the splinters of the chair, I almost fell over my pile of books. If the cops had cared about them, it didn't show. From what I could tell not a single one had been touched.

Sitting atop the pile was my journal, simple black leather binding seeming to lay in wait for me. I sat down between the splinters, trying my best to avoid landing on a sharp sliver. Flipping the book open, I idly thumbed through the pages. I'd kept the journal since I was a pup, practically since the first day I could write. I watched as the long, laborious scratches slowly formed over the pages into the scrawl of my loose handwriting.

I must have filled a hundred pages over the last twenty years; oddly, I'd only perhaps added an additional couple in the last year or so. That's the way it is I suppose, when you don't have anything to write about, then the words flow easy. When the times are worth recording, you never have the opportunity to do just that.

I had to suppress a quiet laugh, maybe if I ever did get the events of the last few weeks written down, they might just be worth reading someday. My life was boring enough, but the exodus of the humans from V-town... Well, I hoped that someone would care someday, even if no one did now.

I fished a pen from the floor. Holding it to my lips I tried to think of something to write, anything to add that might bring some kind of closure before we left. Nothing came.

The floral scent of feminine soap heralded their arrival long before they entered the room. It took me a moment to realize that it wasn't Rebeca that smelt like a garden in full bloom. My nose wrinkled at the scent of lilac and lion musk from one body.

"English, dude. What did you do?"

He just looked at me with a scowl. "You two love birds were using up all the hot water." He swatted at Rebeca, she danced out of reach. "She doesn't label any of her bottles, mate. How was I supposed to know it was fru-fru soap?"

"It suits you, English." She hid behind me in mock horror as he stalked closer. "Besides, it serves you right for breaking into my bathroom. Is nothing sacred in a girl's life?"

"How am I supposed to hunt smelling like this? A nose-less ferret could track me a kilometer away!"

She just laughed. "Relax, pretty boy, you really think I would ever go out in public smelling like that? It'll go away in an hour."

He grumbled, but let up. "So what's the plan, mate?"

I shrugged, "Not much to it. We get in, find VanDerhoom, rip his head off, and get out, leaving a mess behind."

"Simple and violent, mate. I like it." He smiled.

We spent the next hour or so checking over our weapons and gear. It wasn't as though English and I carried much. But then again, we'd never taken on a whole office of bounty hunters, half of whom he had trained himself.

The uneasiness in my gut had grown to a full on churn. I felt as though I might be sick. I'd never had this much time to think about a mission before. Every other time it had been about money, this time I couldn't fail. Failure would mean more than just missing my meal ticket.

The night had fallen silently around us, it was nine o'clock. "Are you ready?" My voice sounded like dry gravel in my mouth. I got a nod from either side.

The walk to Storm Front was quiet; the sky above us rolled like my gut, clouds black and boiling, but no rain fell. The streets were not quite empty, but it took me a moment to realize what was

missing, the anti-human protesters were gone. Well, they moved fast, the humans had been awol for less than a week and they all cleared out.

Our rout to the office was more roundabout than I was used to. English led us, pausing at each intersection of the alleyways, ears alert and body tense. He moved like an assassin in a theater production. I suppose he was, we all were.

The SF headquarters thrust its self into view beneath the clouds as we rounded a final corner. It may be dwarfed by the buildings to either side, but the simple facade seemed to be in wait for us, inviting us to challenge it.

We made it to the side doors unmolested, not a single hunter of any creed in sight. A heavy bronze lock held the door, flat and dull from years of use. English popped open a flap on his belt, drawing a key - it didn't turn.

"Smeg."

He tried another key, and another, nothing. He looked about ready to try and tare the door away with his bare claws, but the construction was shear metal, he wouldn't accomplish anything but blunting himself.

"Shove over, pussy cat." I elbowed him out of the way, kneeling in the door jam. I'd had some vague idea of trying to pick the lock, but one look at the door did short work of that. Whoever had put this in did so with the direct intent of keeping people just like us out.

I felt a growl growing deep in my chest, to come all this way, only to be waylaid by a simple lock. A shout from down the alley silenced me in a heartbeat.

"Sodding Jap! Go back, go back where you belong!"

I was about to melt back into the shadows with English and Rebeca when I heard a familiar cry of pain, there was only one set of lungs I know of that could make a holler like that. I skidded off down the alley towards the sound of the beating, my two shadows following without a word.

His massive red head lay upon the stained asphalt, puny arms reaching up to try and ward off the rain of blows that fell upon him from a pair of what must have been ferrets.

"Go back to where you belong, Nip." Slurred voices yelled at the top of their lungs, no one else came to investigate. From the pavement I could just see one of Max's eyes trying to focus on me, a glimmer of recognition.

I set upon them before they even knew I was there, a smooth crimson line pulled down the one's back sent him screaming to the ground clutching his spine. The other one turned to me slowly, reactions fogged by the drink.

"What the fu-"

I didn't give him the time to speak. I lept upon him, driving us both to the ground. My claws tore upon his face, he cried out, more in surprise then pain; he couldn't understand how the battle had changed so quickly.

He scampered away in seconds, they both did, I let them. A snarl clawed its way to my lips, I leashed it to follow them in their flight.

Beside me, Max lay on the ground. I pulled him up, resting him against the nearby wall.

"Tommy?" He looked at me like something he'd never seen before.

I nodded. "Max. Can you walk?" He just stared at me.

"Tommy, what happened to you? You quit days after I got hired, they said you just walked out." His huge eyes tracked down my face. "What's going on, buddy?"

"You work here now, Max?" He nodded.

"But what's-"

"Not now, Max. Give me your key and go home. Go back to Kate, she needs you." I snatched the key from his outstretched hand. "Don't come back here, Max. We backed the wrong horse, we all did. This isn't the right place for us."

I pulled him to his feet and shoved him down the alleyway before melting back into the shadows. He turned to find me, but was met with nothing but dumpsters and spilt garbage.

The key turned in the lock like pure gold. With a soft click the door slid open to reveal a patch of perfect black. English dove through without a second glance, I took Rebeca's arm and guided her behind.

"You've trusted me this long, babe, might as well now."

I could just make out vague shapes as we threaded our way between marble columns and benches. I almost blundered into the reflecting pool, the scent of water tipping me off a step before we splashed through. All the time we followed the lion's tail, he stalked the empty halls as though it were broad daylight.

We found our way up to the second floor, not a soul to be seen in the darkness. From down the hall, I could see a wan light in front of the stairs to the third level.

"English." The rumbling voice near shook the walls in the silent night. The massive ursine stood in the center of the room, normal guard nowhere to be seen.

"Brown." The lion's voice was taut and controlled, not a hint of anger or malice.

"I didn't think I'd really see you here, English. What happened to you to turn on us like this?" He stood arms crossed, not a hair quivered as we slowly advanced on him.

"I haven't done naught, mate." His voice was flat, as though reading a script. "It's you fellows who've changed. I started this place, mate. We're here to make things better, not kill for the government's blood money."

"From where I'm standing, old friend, it looks the same to me."

"Don't make me go through you, mate. I paddled your tail when you were a wet behind the ears street urchin and I'll do it again. We're here to close this, and you won't stop us."

The bear flexed his arms. Truly massive muscles bulged in the dim light. "And I'm here to keep you where you are. Don't make me do this, English."

The lion turned and flicked an ear towards us. "Go, Tommy. Brown and I have some catching up to do."

We edged across the room, hugging the wall the entire way. The bear's eyes followed us, unblinking. The moment we drew even with him he lunged faster than I could ever imagine someone of his bulk flying. He didn't make it though. He'd hardly taken a step when he was intercepted by a tawny missile, the two of them careening off into a wall with a catastrophe of screams and growls.

We ran on, at the crest of the stairs I turned back, sparing a glance. They crashed against each other like titans in a storm, but neither had drawn blood.

It may have been pitch black on the second floor, but the luxury of the third floor extended to lights keeping back the night. The door to English's old office was dark and closed, the only silhouette coming from the end of the hall.

"You are not welcome here." Huston.

The tiger stood before the door, back lit by the lights within. I couldn't make out his face, but the glint off his teeth was obvious enough. He was smiled broadly.

"We're not here for you, Huston." I pushed Rebeca behind me in some vague attempt to hide her.

"I don't how you got past English's old buddy downstairs, and frankly I don't care. I'm not here to keep you away. Come closer, fido, and let me see what you taste like."

He exploded forward with a roar, no subtlety at all. Straight towards us, claws and teeth barred in a smile that promised to envelop me in a single pounce.

I shoved Rebeca one direction and dove the other. Huston landed where we'd been a split-second ago with the whisper of paws on carpet. He growled and whipped towards her, seemingly ignoring me offhand.

I scrambled to my feet as he turned on her, she didn't scream as he reached out. I saw the flash of a single blade in her hand. With a snarl loud enough to make him turn, I lept upon him, landing on his bright orange striped back, tearing with my claws. I would have had my teeth around his neck in an instant, if he hadn't reached around casually and pulled me from behind him. He hefted me in the air as if I were nothing so much as a sack of kibble.

He grinned. I saw my own face reflected in his perfect white teeth.

"You can watch as I tare your little girlie here to scraps."

A flick of his wrist and I was flying through the air to crash into a pedestal, some assuredly priceless piece of sculpture smashing down on my head.

My vision swam before me; I could only just make them out as he advanced on her. He paused for a moment as she brandished her knife, then laughed and motioned for her to advance. She did.

I tried to scream out to run, but it came as nothing more than a whisper from my cut face.

There was no contest. Rebeca used every trick she knew, but she hadn't many of them. In moments he had the knife from her hands, laughing as he held her wrist, pulling her towards him.

She cried out as he drove her to the ground, out massing her by at least triple. There was no way she could fight him.

I dragged myself to my feet, my vision went dark as the sound of blood rushing in my ears threatened to deafen me. Huston watched with a grin, a fire dancing in his eyes, drinking in every moment.

"You can't even protect your bitch, runt."

He stood before me waiting, fangs dripping; a cat's fangs never drip.

I could barely so much as keep my own feet, but I dove toward him, claws out, lips pulled back. He spared one hand from Rebeca as he reached for me. One of my outstretched hands was engulfed in his as the other drove towards his smiling maw.

He opened wide, eclipsing my whole hand between his jaws. I saw a glint in his eyes as he snapped shut, razor teeth digging the flesh of my arm to the bone. He slurped on the blood.

I howled in pain, but my claws reflectively drew down in the back of his throat, rending the rough flesh of his tongue and shredding the soft innards of his neck.

His look of satisfaction died as he spat out my arm and began retching on his own turgid blood. He held Rebeca by one arm, the other holding him up as he doubled over forward on the floor, breath coming in raging gasps between bloody bubbles that flew from between his lips and drooled from his nose.

He made a gasp, a high pitched sound of surprise as he looked down. Rebeca was still in his embrace, her single hand held tight. She had pulled the other knife from her coat, plunging it within his soft, unprotected belly. A look of disgust coated her face as she twisted it. His guts began tumbling to the floor around her.

He tried to crawl away, only made it a few feet before falling still, labored breaths growing weaker. I tottered towards Rebeca, my arm spurting.

She was coated in the tiger's deep scarlet blood, but it was met with almost as much of her own.

Deep slashes from the tiger's claws criss-crossed her like one of my maps; the leather jacket had done its duty, now it lay about her in shreds. She was cool to the touch, her eyes turned towards me when my fingers brushed her brow.

"Go, Tommy. Finish this, Wolfy, I'll be okay." Her skin was beginning to turn ashen.

I let my lips trace her forehead and left without a word, cradling my arm as I worked towards the light that split from the single office.

"I am coming for you, VanDerhoom. Do you hear me? I'm coming for you!"

I flew into the office, heedless of what I might find there. Dark wood paneling covered the walls in oak, an aquarium bubbled in the corner, filled with guppies. He sat across from me, behind a massive wooden desk; it was clear of anything but a single antique pen laying upon it.

"Tommy, my boy." His voice was cloying, oozing out from behind his tight smile. "So good to finally meet you, alone." He paused for a moment, flicking a speck of dust from the shoulder of his expensive suit, eyes never leaving mine as I stalked closer. "Such a relief to get you away from those so called friends of yours, bad influences all."

A snarl escaped my lips as I stalked forward, hunched down, legs spread wide. He sat, watching me idly. I could smell him now, dry and spicy, a hint of fear. He hid it well.

"You do know, my boy, I can offer you things you didn't even know you wanted." He picked up his pen, toying with it between his fingers, spinning it in lazy circles. I was almost upon him now, only that wooden desk stood between us. I could almost taste his blood.

"Your father could walk again you know," he whispered.

Huh?

I tripped, almost falling forward. Catching myself at the last moment I pitched back, dropping into an expensive chair that seemed placed for just the purpose.

"I can do that you know, my boy." His smile was back in full force, small needle teeth clicking together on each syllable. "It's pricey, no question about it, but I can arrange it. I know of a man back in Europe who can use your unique... gift to heal him." He set the pen back down, tapping it a couple of times until it was perfectly parallel to the edge of the desk. "What do you say to that, my boy? Speak up there, I feel like I'm talking to that brute lion again."

I shook my head, what had just happened?

"You can do that?"

"I can." He nodded, eyes glimmering. "And more. The lion is just a pawn, that's all he'll ever be. You, my boy, they listen to you, you have value, my boy. I reward value, I reward it well."

"But..."

"You don't even have to do that much, boy. All you need do is turn and walk away. You can save face, tell them I escaped. We can worry about your... friends later." The scratch of his claws over the polished wood of the desk left no mysteries to exactly what I could expect. "Think of it, Tommy, you could have your father back as he was, you could show him all you've learned, give him the gift of his life again. No longer need he be confined to the city."

Unbidden, the scent of the woods came to me, the moss, the damp soil. I could feel the cool wind in my face, fresh carried down from the mountains. I could almost see my father beside me, running between the trees, nose to the ground. Happy, like how I remembered him from when I was young.

"All you need to do, boy, is turn around, walk out. I'll send for you after the contract."

Suddenly, the forest I could see behind my eyes exploded, drenching me in blood. I could see my father in it, wallowing on the ground, drowning in a puddle of red that seemed to grow ever wider

as the hairless bodies piled up around him.

I ran to my father, shoving screaming husks of flesh out of my way, shredding those I couldn't move fast enough. Then, she was before me. She lay there, clear as day in my mind's eye. She was still clad in her leather jacket, now crimson with her blood. Her arms outstretched on the stained ground, between me and my father.

"No."

The image drained away, all that remained were the two of us. He still sat before me, smile frozen on his thin lips.

"I'm coming for you, VanDerhoom."

I rose from my chair, slowly, I had all the time in the world.

He was prey.

This prey had planned for me though. As I lunged, arms reaching across that expanse of wood, his spindly legs kicked. He sent the desk toppling, rolling forward onto me. It came crashing down like a falling tree.

I couldn't see him as I pried the desk off me. It dashed the air from my lungs as I pushed with everything my good arm had. I could hear him scrambling away. Even with the thick carpet, I could still hear his frantic footfalls as they fell to the other side of the room. A door clicked open and slammed shut again as I threw the desk from me.

I made it to the door in hardly a heartbeat, crashing against it I felt it give, but not enough. Looking down I surveyed the lock, ha, who ever had put this in was nowhere as skilled as the one who had installed the last door.

I scrambled, shoving a thick black claws in the crack between the door and the frame. The adrenaline made my hands shake, but I forced forward. A huff, a slide and a click, the door yawned open for me.

The hallway on the other side was much like the one I'd left moments ago, minus Rebeca's heart slowly bleeding across the expensive carpet. On the far end I could just make out VanDerhoom, he stood for a moment, frozen like a deer in the sight of a hunter. Only for an instant before he was off.

I was after him.

I followed him; he fled down a back stairwell that vomited out onto the street. Above us the skies had open up, the rain poured down in sheets that drenched me in a chilling halo the moment I set foot on the pavement.

He raced down the middle of the street, screaming bloody murder all the way. Much like Max before him, no one came.

I followed him, panting, conserving my breath. He headed downhill, likely thinking that would make him move faster. I simply looped along behind, my legs eating the distance.

It wasn't long until we were at the docks, around us boxes and shipping crates loomed, ahead I could just make out the massive sailing masts of ships in the night.

He stood there, back to the rolling black waves that nipped at his heels. Hands held before him in the air, anorexic body apparent now that his so precious suit had been soaked through.

"You can't do this, Taggart! I'm one of the most important people in the city!" His voice was high, growing to a shrill crescendo. "Killing me won't save your precious humans. I'm only doing the will of the people, you can't change the world! No one can."

He lowered his hands for a moment, eyes fearfully creeping up to meet mine.

"No one, and nothing, can change the people we are." I said, stepping up, pulling him forward by his lapels, my nose brushed his ear as I whispered, "But I can fight. I will fail, but I will fight." I lifted him from the ground and transformed his suit to tatters with a swipe of my claws.

He stood before me now, sickly yellow patches bare on his green skin. Holding his small body aloft with one arm like a rag doll, I reached down with my wounded hand, blood gushing over him.

"Can you swim, VanDerhoom?" A wicked smile curved my lips. "Let us see how you rule in that world."

His legs snapped like dry twigs while the rain pounded down around us. A rasping scream escaped his lips as I tossed his body to the dark waves. I watched him sink for a moment before turning. If he dragged himself from the water's embrace... then that would be the way of it.

Autumn (Epilogue)

A snatch of blue caught my eye as I turned from the shore.

"Hello, Jon."

The dog stood half hidden in shadow.

"Mr. Taggert, it is opportune for you that I was here. Always a pity when someone dies such a pointless death as this. Far too often hapless people become drunk, tripping over the shoreline to drown in the sea. It is always unfortunate when a citizen dies, but with so many deaths and missing persons in the last few days, the force will be stretched far too thin to mount an investigation in such an open and shut case."

The dog turned sharply on his heel, disappearing into the night, surely returning home to write his report.

The walk back the Storm Front headquarters was long and wet. The skies didn't know that VanDerhoom was dead; they rained on me all the same.

Rebeca was right where I'd left her, nestled amongst the entrails of the now cold Huston. I touched a finger to her forehead, her skin was gray, but she still breathed. Gathering her gently in my arms I marveled again at how little there was, with her jacket torn away she was a feather held to my chest.

Back down the stairs, English still wrestled with Brown. Their screams had been muted by the thick carpets of the third floor. Here, they were deafening.

"English, we're leaving."

I walked past him without a second glance, behind me I could hear Brown drop to the ground with an audible thunk. The lion was at my side in a heartbeat.

"Tommy, mate, did we..." His voice trailed off as he saw Rebeca in my arms.

"We're going home, English."

"Where's home?"

His voice fell behind me as I moved on.

I didn't bother with the hospital; when they found she was human I would have more questions than I wanted.

The walk took hours, it almost killed her. The wait was even worse, for me at least. It was three days before her eyes opened again. When they did, I could see the most beautiful grassy plains in them.

"Did we win, Wolfy?" Her voice was weak, she reached for me with one hand, I held it between both of my own.

I looked into those eyes, so fragile, I couldn't find my voice.

"We won, babe. I guess we won."

Her eyelids flickered closed. I didn't know what else to say, how could I tell her what we both knew?

Behind me came the whispered foot falls of the only lion who would ever set claw in this camp. A small black book thudded into the dust beside me.

"I thought you might like this, mate." He squatted down on his hunches, peering at Rebeca, a smile spitting his lips. "Took the liberty of stealing back into the city. Couldn't get the rest of your books, this will have to do."

I pulled my journal from the dirt, flipping through I thumbed to an empty page. Before me words sprang to life on the blotted paper, I could see them waiting for me.

They would have to wait though. I tucked the book into the tent next to Rebeca's warm body, swaddled as it was in the thin blankets.

Around me, the leaves were slowly fading into their dark golden livery of the season. I had to help the humans, the snow would be coming soon, and we needed to prepare for winter.

Author's Note

So, just a little history for any of those who might be interested.

The Hunters started out as an 'I know this isn't going to go anywhere, but I'll be buggered if I at least don't try' project back in august of '09. Wow, it doesn't seem that long – I suddenly feel old.

There were three reasons for this story. One, I wanted to learn the ins and outs of what was then still called Openoffice.org Writer. Two, I've always enjoyed writing, and I hadn't had the opportunity to set fingers to keyboard in something like a decade. And three, here's the real reason, everyone talks about how they want to be a author, how they've got so many awesome ideas floating around in their head, but so few want-to-be writers actually seem to write. I've encountered so many people in my life who want to be authors but never write anything, want to be artists, but never draw anything. I decided for better or for worse that I wasn't going to be one of those people.

I was going to write a f---ing book before I died, even if it killed me.

I knew starting out it wasn't going to be earth shatteringly amazing, I'm no Terry Goodkind here, nor William Gibson for that matter. I had realistic expectations. I was going to aim for the moon, but be more than happy if I just managed to get a few feet off the ground.

And that was more or less what happened. The Hunters took its initial form over August to September of 2009. That was what most surprised me about writing a full length novel – how fast the first draft came. I'd always had it in my mind that a novel, a real, honest to dog novel should take more along a year to write. Well, that's not the way it goes when you're averaging a little under three-thousand words a day.

And that's how it went. It took a lot longer to edit that it did to write – and I know for a fact I only found ten percent of my mistakes – but here it is.

Constructive criticism is more than welcome, but please keep in mind this was intended as a full length book and not a short story.

And a special thanks to Negger for the art. I hope he doesn't mind me whacking on it with a dull pair of scissors to add the title.

Well folks, that's it.

The Hunters took up a fair bit of my life for the better part of six months. I know it's not

anywhere near all it could, or should, be. I hope that the few of you (okay, who am I kidding, I'm lucky if even one person got this far!) enjoyed it.

I am, as always, completely open to comments and critique. This was my first attempt to write a novel and I know there are a lot of issues. Please don't hesitate to let me know about them in either public comments or private notes. That is the main reason I posted in the first place.

Other than that... well, I suppose the next step is to decide what I should work on now. Any suggestions?

wwolf