

THE HUNTER'S CHASE

Ross answered the phone while he laid on his bed. He took a sip of water before saying, "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Doctor Franklin calling for Ross Daugherty. Can I speak with him?"

"This is he."

"Mr. Daugherty, we've found you a liver, congratulations. We'd like for you to come in today so that we can get the surgery done."

"I can be there in a couple hours!" Ross exclaimed. After setting up the details with Dr. Franklin, he hung up and jammed clothes and his necessities into a bag, darting out of the door. Since he wouldn't be back for at least a week, he double checked the lock and climbed into his car. Ross sped the entire way, ignoring lights and stop signs as he could.

In the hospital bed, two nurses prepared him for surgery, one shaving his stomach and the other checking his vitals.

Ross passed out quickly from the anesthesia, dreaming of nothing and waking up very soon after he returned to his room.

He had a large surgical pad taped to his stomach and an IV feeding him B- blood. He strained to sit up, the drugs trying to keep him on his ass.

A nurse walked into Ross' room and pushed on his chest until he laid back down. "Mr. Daughterty, come on now, you know better than to try to sit up. Lie down. Food is on its way," she scolded him.

He realized how hungry he was when she said it, then groaned at her.

"Now, now, drama king, everything went fine. See? Stitches aren't even bleeding." The nurse looked at the screen, which was beeping softly in the corner of the room. "Your vitals are fine. I'll be back with your food in just a little bit."

Ross stared at the ceiling, listening to the TV play a car commercial in the background. He was ecstatic for his new liver, ready to get out of the hospital and return to his normal life.

Three days later, Doctor Franklin came in with the discharge paperwork. "Alright, Ross, let's get you out of here."

Ross sat up. "But I'm supposed to be in for at least three more days. You should monitor my liver, right? Make sure that my body doesn't try to throw it out?"

Doctor Franklin looked at Ross' blood bag, then his charts, then back at Ross. "Technically, yes. But," he said, and rolled up Ross' shirt and peeled back the bandage. "Your scar isn't even there anymore. Don't ask me how, I have no idea, but it's gone. The CT scan we did yesterday don't even show inner sutures."

"Wh- What?"

"If it makes you feel better, we can keep you, but I just figured you'd like to go home."

Without another word, Ross took the paperwork from Doctor Franklin's hands, signed them, then climbed out of bed and threw his normal clothes on. "Thanks, doc."

"We'll see you in a couple weeks for a check-in. You can schedule that when you see the nurse at the front."



The next few days were a little painful as Ross readjusted to his daily situation. His stomach didn't hurt at all, but something

about the lights were messing with his eyes. One of his medications was forcing rapid hair growth, which on his head and now less-than-patchy beard, he was happy for. Everywhere else... not so much. He noticed much quicker now when he was thirsty; his mouth would get insatiably dry.

Erin, a friend of Ross', stopped by one afternoon. She immediately took notice of his higher energy levels; he practically leapt onto the couch from behind. "So, what's the plan after all this?" she said as they sat on the couch watching TV.

"Nothing yet. Just go about my day. Go to work, go to the gym. I started cooking, though. Everything lately has smelled *amazing* and I'm thanking my liver for this newfound love of food, but also because I'm apparently amazing at it." Ross retrieved a container of pot roast that he had put in the fridge. "Try it. You don't even need to warm it up."

Erin pulled out a shred of pork with her nails. "Holy shit, this is amazing. What happened? Last time I was here, you burnt a microwave dinner."

"New nose, I guess."

Ross and Erin sat around talking for hours, well into the night. Erin had dozed in and out a little, but Ross found new energy the more into the night they went, and tucked Erin into the couch around four in the morning while he worked on a backlog from when he was absent from work. The first thing, he decided, was emailing work and letting them know he was changing his availability to nights. He didn't think they'd have a problem with it, and he was realizing how well he was doing at such a late hour.

A few hours later, Ross went to bed himself. He closed his blinds and jammed both a pillow and his blanket over his head to eliminate the little light that still peeked through the edges of the fabric. Within a couple minutes, he was asleep.

Ross awoke midafternoon to the smell of spaghetti. Sleepily making his way to the kitchen, he saw Erin in there, meat sauce on the stove. "Oh good, you're up." She cut up a chunk of butter and mashed it into the pasta noodles, stirring it. "Where's your garlic? I got hungry when I woke up, figured you would be, too."

Ross shook his head. "I'm allergic to it. Sorry."

"Ah, that's okay. We'll make do. These other spices seem to be giving it enough flavor. What do you think?" Erin asked, holding the spoon up, giving Ross a taste.

"Add a little... hm..." Ross went through his cabinets, smelling the little jars of spices. After smelling the thyme, he jammed his fingers in and pinched a chunk, tossing it in. "Just a little extra, since it won't cook as much."

The two of them sat at the breakfast bar, giant mounds of pasta in front of each of them. "You did good, Erin. This is fantastic," Ross said, a noodle dribbling out of his mouth.

Erin laughed. "Hey, Ross?"

"Mm hmm?"

"I know."

Ross laughed. "Cocky cook. I like it!"

Erin put her fork down on her plate and wrapped her coat around herself tight. "No, Ross. I know."

Ross searched her eyes for answers. "You know... how thyme works? The cooking time of pasta?"

"Damnit, Ross!"

"What? You've given me literally zero information!"

Erin huffed. Shoving a hand in her pocket, she slammed down its contents on the counter. A hollow-point bullet rolled around the counter, toying with the edge, wanting to roll straight off. "I know where your liver came from. And yes, that's silver inside."

"Silver bullets?" Ross chuckled. "You've been watching too much television."

"Ross, listen to me. I'm a monster hunter. I was tracking a werewolf last month who jumped off a cliff to avoid me. I got a shot in her arm before she fell; I just thought she landed on her feet and kept running.

"It's generally a known thing in the monster world that if you are one, not to be an organ donor. Stupid bitch thought it was because they'd be rejected from human bodies. You got her liver, which I'm still surprised about - she was a heavy drinker." She looked at Ross desperately, waiting for the realization to happen.

Ross played with his spaghetti, forming little mounds of

meat sauce. "So, the bullets are for me."

"I have to," Erin said. She twisted her head under his to make him look at her. "It's my job. When that full moon comes out, you're going to be far too dangerous, and you're not going to have any control over it." She paused, trying to catch Ross' eye. "If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't even be telling you."

"Well," Ross sighed. "I'm glad you did. Because I have something to tell you, too."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I'm not a werewolf."

"Damnit Ross, this is not the time for denial!"

Ross looked into the mirror that was in the hall next to him. Erin couldn't see what he was looking at, just his sly grin. Ross winked at the reflective silver, which showed only a very confused Erin. He spun his chair to face her, and planted his hands on her shoulders. "I promise. I'm not."

Erin coughed as the cloud of smoke thickened in her face. When the smoke cleared, Ross was no longer in his chair, the kitchen window was open, and a small bat was flying off into the distance.

"What the fuck!?"

She grabbed her bullets and raced out to the back yard, tearing the porch door nearly off the frame as she visually chased the bat. It hadn't gone too far and was hovering over the lake behind Ross' house. Erin watched the bat explode into another puff of smoke and from it, Ross fell from the sky and dove into the water.

Ross swam deep in the water, finding a rock to float under. Two merfolk swam up to him and grabbed his arm and leg, trying to yank him from underneath the rock.

"No!" Ross bubbled. Air pockets rose to the surface and the merfolk held on to him, but he put a finger up to his lips then pointed up. Then, made a finger gun and aimed it, one by one, at each of them. The merfolk darted into hiding as well.

"Ross!" Erin shouted, making it to the edge of the lake. "Ross, where are you?"

Ross could hear her, muffled, and steadied himself. He could see the gleam of the merfolk's eyes as they, too, retained their hid-

ing spots.

Erin saw the stillness of the water return, no bubbles, no ripples, no hints that Ross was still in the water. Taking a second to decide her next move, she held her thumb over the hammer. Annoyed, she took aim at the water, waiting for any motion.

She stood in place breathing quietly for twenty minutes, her free hand wrapped around her other wrist, both arms resting cautiously in front of her. Satisfied that Ross couldn't be in the water and frustrated that she lost her trail over a hunch, Erin uncocked her gun and stormed off.

Dusk came, and Ross confirmed that Erin was no longer at the surface before he swam to the top. The merfolk stayed in hiding, watching the insane human glide upwards, with no injuries to his name. Ross climbed on land and utilized the growing shadows to retreat to his house.

Upon entering, Ross locked and covered all the doors and windows before feeling any semblance of safety. With the final curtain drawn, he shed his wet clothes and slunk, naked, onto the couch. He let the silence wash over him and calm the adventures of the day.

Around two in the morning, Ross' phone rang, and Erin's face lit up the screen. Swiping to answer, Ross began, "Okay, so I'm sorry about that."

"Are you kidding me!? Where the hell did you go? I've been looking for you all night!"

"You saw me, right? I went to the lake."

"And then after *that*, where did you go? It's been hours since then."

"I... stayed in the lake."

"Werewolves can't breathe underwater, trickster."

"No, but merfolk can."

"What the hell are you saying?"

Ross took a bite of the cold spaghetti that was still on the counter. It really was that good, holding up to the test of time. "My lungs came from a merman."

He felt a long, angry pause through the receiver.

"Are. You. Fucking. Kidding. Me."

"I doubt I'd be able to breathe underwater, and especially not for four hours, if I was."

Erin sighed. "And the bat?"

"Marrow from a vampire."

"*What the shit, Ross,*" Erin screamed into the phone. "Where are you? Let's talk."

Ross laughed. "There's no way I'm falling for that. You threw silver bullets down on my counter, did you forget?"

"I need to know what all you've done to yourself. There might be a combination that would make you, well, safe in terms of continuing as a human. I have orders too, you know. If I can't kill you, I have to have reasons why."

"I'm," Ross started. The logic was sound, but hunters were generally a 'shoot first, ask questions later' type of crowd. "I'm not available right now. Please leave a message after the beep. *Beeeeeeep!*" He heard Erin scream into the phone as he hung up.

Chuckling to himself, Ross sat on the bar stool and continued eating cold spaghetti. Small chunks of tomato sauce and cheese had dried to the walls, and he scraped at them and mixed them back into the dish.

Ross heard the doorbell ring as he was putting the pot of leftover pasta in the fridge. He checked the clock. "Three in the morning. I bet I know who that is," he muttered to himself. He peered through the peep hole and saw Erin standing in the rain, arms crossed and furious.

"Let me in."

"That seems like a very poor decision on my part, Erin," Ross jested. "I think I'm just going to go have more spaghetti."

On the other side of the door, Erin shrieked and the Ross heard two shots.

"Hey! There are neighbors around me. That is *completely* unnecessary!"

Erin shot once more and kicked the door open. "I tried to give you a chance to talk. Now I'm pissed." She tossed a large metal egg-shaped device at Ross' feet. The egg burst open on contact and spun a circle of salt around him.

"Well, that's just crude," Ross said, and stepped out of the

circle.

"That... should have held you, as a vampire."

"Unless my eyes came from a siren! They live in salt water, you know." Ross disappeared in the smoke again and used his cover to dive at Erin, scraping his new talons across her face. He then flew up again while Erin held her face and transformed again, tackling her to the ground. The gun slid out of her hand and underneath the sofa.

Erin grunted under Ross' weight, trying to pick herself up and shove him off. Ross obliged and hopped off, bending down near the couch and picking up the weapon for himself. He turned around and pointed it at Erin, who had produced a small crossbow with a silver arrow in it from her breast jacket pocket.

"Game over." Erin pulled the trigger and the arrow flew at Ross, the tip of the arrow crumpling on impact and falling to the ground. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Let me guess. Trog-lodyte skin or some shit."

Ross picked the arrow up and studied its design, amazed. "That wouldn't be a bad idea, now that we're getting to it, but no. That should have hurt me. But I've got the kidneys of a leprechaun. Lucky me!" The arrow melted in his hand and he spiked it to the floor. Ross glistened and fell to the floor and through it, a pile of chocolate coins in his wake.

"Give up, Erin," Ross said from nowhere. "I'm not going to hurt you or anyone else, but I'm also clearly the winner here."

Erin pouted and picked up a couple chocolates from the floor. "Fuck you, Ross. I'll get you another time." She opened the door and slammed it. "Fucking hybrids."