

The Hunters



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Chapter 14: It's a Grand Old Race

My eyes cracked open, staring up at the green canopy above. The sun threw pale yellow casts of light down between the leaves. Rolling to my feet, I shoved the lump beside me.

"We've got to stop waking up like this, mate."

"You've got my vote. I'm partial to the bed back at my apartment. I liked the chair, but you reduced that to splinters."

I picked up the scent again, still relatively fresh, I doubted it was from their initial flight, they couldn't be more than a few hours away.

We trudged through the trees, the rising sun on our right shoulder. Surprisingly, we ran across more crumbling concrete. Obscured by the branches I read a sign, 'Horseshoe Bay'.

"Looks like we've found ourselves a new home, English."

What I didn't expect came next. The sharp crack of stone to the back of my head sent me crumbling to my knees, seeing stars. English whipped around growling, but held his lunge.

"Hunters!" I heard voices in the sudden fog around me, my eyes wouldn't focus. "They've found us!"

"No! Wait!" I waved my hands above my head, but my voice felt heavy, honey on my lips.

"We're here to talk." I dragged myself to my feet, trying to force my vision to clear.

Twenty of them had already formed a haphazard circle about us; I'd no clue where they'd come from. They were dressed in much the same rags as I'd seen them before. But now the quiet desperation that had been was replaced with a wild frenzy. Killed by the humans I'd just saved, how would that look on my tombstone?

The growl deepened in English's chest. If I didn't solve this soon, it would be a bloodbath. In our weakened state, I wasn't so sure that both of us would walk away from it.

"Rebeca." I tried to speak slowly and clearly, forcing my lips to move. "I need to see Rebeca."

"Rebeca who?" A voice called off from somewhere among the indistinct shapes around me.

"I... I don't know." I was drawing a blank; did I not even know her last name?

"Tommy!"

I heard her voice from behind me, whipping my head around I felt a throb from between my ears. She was there, still wearing the same leather jacket and backpack I had seen her off in. She

slammed into me like a force of nature, sending both of us tumbling to the ground.

"What are you doing here?"

"Things, well, things didn't work out to well with the police department." The smell of her so close to me instantly cleared my mind.

She let go of me just long enough to see the scars that still crisscrossed both the lion's body and mine. "Gods, Tommy, I'm so sorry." She squeezed me again, all I could do was wince.

"I take it you know these two, Rebeca?" That black haired guy from the warehouse ranged around the loose circle of humans that surrounded us. He poked my foot with his crude spear, it was little more than a branch with a knife lashed to it.

"They were the ones who got us out of the city, Jack. Without them, we would have all been dead the night before we left."

The man grumbled and wandered off, but not before throwing more than a dirty glance our way. "What we're getting away from." The circle around us slowly disbanded.

For just a moment a look of horror crossed her face. "Tommy, if you tracked us out here then that means..."

I laid a hand on her cheek, gently pulling her back towards me. "Don't worry, babe. I'm related to half the hunters in the city. They've got the cops so busy chasing their own tails right now, they won't even know what direction you left in."

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, wolfy?"

"Well, it wasn't quite so clean as that..."

English tapped me on the shoulder. "Sorry to break up this little love in, but someone promised me a meal and a soft bed if I made it all the way out here."

"English." She was up and embracing him like an old companion. "Any friend of Tommy's is always welcome here."

"I should hope so, lass, accounting for what we had to go through to drag our tails this far."

"Come on you two, we had better get you introduced before anyone else thinks you're out to make a meal of us."

The three of us weaved our way into a small settlement hidden in the shadows of ruined buildings. Every few steps we were greeted by a fearful stare. How quickly we had fallen from 'that guy next door' to monsters.

As we worked our way deeper the moss covered buildings seem to grow up around us. While they were certainly not the construction of V-town, neither were they hovels.

"Where did all this come from, lass? You certainly didn't just happen upon a spot like this – some of these places seem like you've put more than a little effort into them."

She stopped and turned towards us. "Well boys, it looks like you're already all the way in, you might as well know. Despite our apparent chaos, we've been planning this for a while. We're not as stupid as we look. Not quite, anyway."

"Oh?" This was news.

She shrugged, "When your friends and family start disappearing, you tend to prepare for the worst. We don't have much here, only started maybe a couple months ago, but it's better than nothing. Anyway, here we are."

She pulled aside a sheet covering the entrance to what remained of an old brick building that had at least not quite completely collapsed.

Within sat a small group, older men and women, gray hairs all. Someone must have run ahead, as none of them startled at our arrival. The single room wasn't large, the six of them plus the three of us made for tight quarters, what little light there was leaked in from the entrance.

They started without preamble, "You have hounded us here. Why?" With no seats left, English and I were stuffed into a corner, shoulder to shoulder.

I held out my hands, trying to look as inoffensive as possible. Just in time, I remembered to try and keep my teeth hidden as I spoke. All the humans I had ever met were long used to it, but knowing my luck, these six would be a little too jumpy.

"We were persecuted by the police force after aiding your escape." I held up my scars out demonstration.

Another one spoke up, "Rebeca had told us she had help in easing our escape. Are these the two?" She nodded. "Then why, of all places, do you come here?"

I just shrugged. "Where else have we to go? If we strike out alone, we'll die cold and hungry in the wilderness. If we try to leave by sea, we'll be caught. We're all in the same situation. You're here for what you are, we're here for what we've done. You may not have had a choice, but we did. We made the decision to risk ourselves because we thought it was the right thing to do, we can only hope to be met with compassion."

"So you come to us. The very people you have wronged."

"I have wronged no one, especially you." Now I was indignant. The headache that had so recently subsided came back in full force, making it difficult to focus on the alien faces before me. "What have I done against you? I lived my life, did my job, and when I realized it was wrong, I risked my hide for people I've never even met. I don't know why I even bothered. I could have just collected on the contract and be back in the city right now, swimming in cash! Instead, I'm here, stuck in the middle of nowhere, arguing with over evolved monkeys who would just as soon have me dead. For what? What do I get out of this?" I looked over at Rebeca. "Nothing. I lose my job, my apartment, even my family, for what?"

I tried to storm out, but it didn't work so well when I could barely take two steps without walking all over someone.

"What is your name, wolf?" Yet another one of them spoke up. Couldn't they just elect a speaker or something?

I gave up trying to escape and just stood fuming. "Tommy. Tommy Taggart."

"I know you. Your name is familiar to me."

I barked out a short laugh, it echoed off the walls, harsh even to my own ears. "Should be. It's the only reason you haven't been overrun. I'm related to half the hunters in the city. If it weren't for me, they would have tracked down your little paradise before you even set foot here."

"And you, lion?"

"English. I'm just a bounty hunter." He hardly moved, crouching half a step back and behind me.

"We're sorry, Tommy. We all are." A squat older woman stood up, making her way slowly to our edge of the room, the crowd of people parted before her. She looked like a kindly grandmother character from some old fairy tale book. "We owe you two our lives, and we can't even find the words to thank you. In some ways, we are just as guilty of wronging you as your society has us. We are closer than we would like to admit." She looked me up and down, as if inspecting a six year old who had just walked home in the rain. "You are as welcome here as any son of Adam or Daughter of Eve would be. You may not look like us, you may not even act like us, but you are welcome here for who you are, not what."

"Tell me, Tommy," she continued, a hand reaching out to grab hold of my chin, pulling me this way and that without fear, inspecting my scars. "Are either of your parents human?" I grunted a negative. She looked at English who nodded without a word. "Then we have all that much more to be

grateful for, you haven't even the slightest reason to aid us, yet you did."

I pulled my head back, slipping from her grasp. "It was the right thing to do."

She turned, fading back into the crowd, "Was it, Tommy? Was it that obvious? Then why were you the only ones to do it? The right choice is rarely the obvious one, and almost never easy. If right were so trivial, we wouldn't live in a world of wrongs."

Another one spoke up as they filed out of the room, it felt suddenly empty now; the room that had been so small moments ago, now yawned about us. "Tommy, English. You are both welcome here, we can offer you little, but what we have to share is yours."

And that was that, the three of us were left alone in that small, dark chamber that still stank of too many humans and not enough wash water.

"Not much for introductions are they, mate? I guess we're part of the family now." The lion poked his head back out through the door and was gone.

Rebeca was beside me again, holding my quivering hand as the adrenaline of the moment fled. "I'm sorry it ended up this way, Tommy, but I am glad you're here." She gently pulled my arm, leading me back through the door, out into the warm sunlight.

Around us it almost looked like we were in a poorer suburb of V-town, shops were setup with wares here and there, children ran through the dirt streets, their voices echoing hollowly off the walls.

We walked down the middle of the small road; hardly any traffic marred our way, so unlike the real city I had to grin. If you tried this trick back in my old neighborhood you'd be crushed to jelly in short order by a horse's hooves.

Before the thought had even slipped my mind, I felt a bump against my leg. A small toddler, fully human of course, sat toppled over in the dust. A bemused expression dawned upon his small hairless face as he looked up at us. Where the others still blanched from me, he just looked up and smiled. "Doggie." His small arms reached towards me, grasping air.

All I could do was shake my head and smile

"Up. Up!" he demanded in a squeaky voice. I caved into him, reaching down I gently lifted him from the dirt. His feet dangling down he nuzzled in the crook of my arm. After what had happened in the last few weeks, it felt somehow good to have his little weight.

When I looked down again his eyes were closed, asleep in a heartbeat. I guess all that demanding must have worn him out.

A few moments later a woman broke out onto the street, the motions of a distraught mother are universal, no matter your species.

"Over here." I waved my arm and she came running.

She must have gotten within three steps before she looked into my face, stopping dead.

"He's fine." I held him out, still sleeping, a smile plastered onto his face and tufts of my fur pulled in his small pale hands. "Take him."

She just looked at me for a moment, as though if she were to take her eyes from me I'd eat her alive. "Really," I tried to sound calm. "Take him."

Her walls broke as she clutched him from me. The child woke as she pulled him close, big eyes going from her to me. "I'm sorry," Her voice was breaking as tears rolled down. "I'm sorry, it's just..." She turned and was gone, disappearing through a doorway.

"It's been hard, Tommy. It's been hard on all of us." Rebeca was close at my side, a hand on my shoulder. "We've had to give up husbands, wives, even children. You and English are the only one's here. For a few days at least, the lines were clear. No one likes it, but at least it was simple: us against them. Now that you two show up, it's just not that straight forward anymore."

We continued on our way through the community. Idly, I wondered where English had made

off to. At the end, we found ourselves before a small tent listing from a tree branch. It was made of simple green tarp, looked like it had come from any of a dozen hardware stores. And it smelt of her.

Peering inside left no doubt, every shirt, pant and knickknack I had helped her pack was neatly stacked into the small space.

"You live here?" I poked the bedroll, nothing more than a thin sheet laying on the ground.

"It's a bit of a step down, but I make due. What about you, wolfy? You came here with nothing but the fur on your back." She was right. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't even a jacket or wallet for that matter.

"I don't know." I grinned. "Perhaps I'll find someone to take pity on the savior of the human race? I think I saw some pretty red heads back there, I've always been partial to red head."

If the first kiss I'd gotten back at the elevator was a butterfly's wings against my lips, this reminded me of when I'd been young and wondered into the sea at dawn, the waves beating against my body.

The tent was small, the two of us barely fit. I had no idea how we'd even managed it in the first place, but we'd had better things to worry about. I was glad that my little swim a few days ago had washed the dog's blood from my fur.

Looking down at her under the thin blanket, I couldn't understand how she stayed warm during the cool nights. We'd hadn't had a frost yet, but it would come soon enough.

The sun rose in the east as it always did, away from V-town. I watched it slowly creep up as Rebeca stirred.

"Morning, babe." We lay against each other as she pulled the blanket back over her head. "Come on, babe, rise and shine. It's well into the morning, and your wolf is hungry. I haven't had anything to eat in days."

She grumbled as I extracted her from the covers, her pale skin bright in the early light.

"Good luck with that, wolfy. All we've got around here is the green stuff. No one has any refrigeration, so the meat wouldn't keep, even if we had any."

My stomach growled, not good. "Don't you send out hunters? You're far enough out the hunting should be a snap."

She gave a shove as she pulled on some clothing. It must be annoying to have to dress every morning, and the two of us in the tiny space made it almost an act in futility.

"You're the one who's so proud about being related to so many hunters. How many of them are human?"

"Oh." That would be a problem.

"Why don't you catch something?" She said it offhandedly, pulling on a boot.

"I... don't hunt. I don't kill."

She stifled a giggle. "You don't kill? You're the guy who took out half the police department, and then ran them on the largest chase I've ever heard off. You don't kill?"

"Well, I don't." I tried to find a good explanation, but I didn't have one.

"You and English go catch us something and I'll skin it, deal? I'm sure between you two big scary carnivores you can find something."

She gave me a shove and disappeared back in the tent on her hands and knees, I watched her go.

Wonderful. I was running on empty, and I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of vegetarians. Do the gods have a sense of humor? I was starting to think so.

I wandered down the rubble strewn streets and byways of the small encampment, with only a hundred odd people it wasn't that large. Word of my arrival must have spread, I still got more than a

few guarded looks, but at least no one ran screaming.

Even with the stench of human so prevalent, the musk of a lion wasn't hard to search out. It led me to a small hovel, half collapsed. A union jack was pinned to what was left of the crumbling concrete wall over the door. I pounded on it a couple of times.

"Just a tick, mate!" Rustling, and a feminine giggle, worked its way out. Someone was settling in nicely. They emerged into the sunlight, arm in arm. He must have been at least four feet taller than her, but they could have just as well been related; her long blond hair flowed into him as though they were joined at the hip.

He let a finger trail along her hairless shoulder as she whispered something into his ear, I could just make out a husky British accent. Figures, we're half way across the planet from the isles, and he still manages to find the one UK soul in the whole place.

He stretched, and she faded back into the shadows of the building.

"Cheers, Mate. Long time no see. How was your kip?" He didn't bother to wait for my answer. "How bout we get ourselves some vittles, eh?"

Gods, I'd have to get him away from that woman, his accent was getting worse. At this rate I wouldn't be able to understand a word in two weeks.

I shrugged, "Sure thing. Once we can find some. They don't have a scrap of meat in the whole place." His face fell. "And I doubt you'll find a cup of tea either." Now he just scowled.

"Well, mate, then I guess it's up to you."

"Oh no, you know I can't do this."

He just smiled. "Well, it won't be me, mate. I'm about as much use out there as a sun tan to a mole rat. Moral support is about all I can offer; we're not exactly talking long grass and elephants here."

"Come on elephant hunter, maybe we'll find a mouse our size." I just grabbed him by the shoulder and started dragging.

Our first hunt was an absolute catastrophe. I got within about thirty feet of an elk when it took off for the hills. Ten strides and I ran smack into a tree when the prong dodged, and English almost broke his leg in a crevice.

Our next round we thought we were doing well when he sighted a bear, that was until it sighted us. Whoever said man and his descendants were the scariest things in the forest never met a pissed off black bear. The plan had been to run it down; you know somethings wrong when we're the ones running for our lives. Yes, we are wimps. We can take down a three hundred pound minotaur, but bring out a bear with a brain the size of a pea, and we're lucky to survive.

The third try we went for something simpler, and safer, a rabbit. Okay, it's not exactly the manly thing for a fully grown wolf and lion to hunt, so sue me. Predictably, we fell flat on our faces. I got a good view of its little cotton tail bounding off through the brambles as I spat out a mouthful of turf.

If I'd had something to throw, I would at least tried to bean it. I'd probably just pull my arm.

The two of us were laying face up on the soft soil, looking up at the blue sky above, filled with billowing white clouds. "Okay, mate," He gulped in a breath, "do you really want me for a fourth round?"

I had to admit, the only way you could have done worse on these hunts than me, was to be English. Somehow, he had almost managed to break at least one limb on each try.

"You win, English." I levered myself to my feet, my legs felt like rubber. "I'll take this one.

You just stay here in case I manage to find a grizzly."

"Sure thing, mate." He threw an arm over his eyes. "You shout if you get your knickers in a bind, and I'll just run right back to camp - for help of course."

I still didn't feel at home out here, but at least I wasn't shying away at every rustle anymore. Now that I was alone, I could almost hear my father's words fill the void around me, his voice younger, stronger. I could all but see him again, training me in the woods before my first hunt.

"Watch where you step. Place every foot carefully, you can feel your toes for a reason. Will you make a sound? Where is your traction?"

I stalked the forest for at least an hour, felt a bit silly to be honest. Every move I took, I acted as though prey lay around the next tree. Every stride was silent, never brushing the leaves.

"Follow the wind, it brings you scents and sounds. Humans trust their eyes, where does that leave them? Your eyes may grow dim, but the air will always flow about you."

I stopped dead. Okay, perhaps 'dead' was a bad term. I could smell it, I could smell her. A moose.

She wasn't yet in sight, but I knew she was there, up ahead. I slunk to the ground, all fours, forcing my back low as I slipped into the shadows and followed her scent upwind.

She was before me, plain as day, walking through the forest without a care. Odd, normally one would expect to see a cow like her feeding in the swamps and muskeg, but here she was. I wasn't about to turn away such an offer.

"You have all the time in the world. If you hunt alone then you must use the only two tools you have. Yourself, and the moment of surprise."

Ever so carefully I moved closer, heartbeat after agonizing heartbeat I inched nearer. A bird cried somewhere in the bushes to my right and the cow jerked her head. I was seen, and the chase was on.

Still on all fours, I raced after her. Streaking through the foliage, the trees were nothing more than a blur of shadows to be ignored. All I saw was her, all I saw was my next meal running for its life.

I tried to pull anything I could about the chase itself from my father's musings, but nothing came to mind. For all he had ever spoke about hunting the final act of killing had always been silent, as though it had been a small, dirty technicality at the end, best ignored.

A burst of speed as we broke into a clearing, and I was airborne. I landed on her back, felt her rear legs lurch under my weight. In a hair of a second I had clawed my way forward.

My jaws clamped around her neck, I felt blood gush.

Her head turned, I couldn't see her eyes, but in my mind they were just as they had been so many years ago. My stomach rolled and my teeth clenched, I wasn't a child anymore. I wasn't scared. Was I?

Her body convulsed, her feet kicked. I held on for dear life, more ways than one. It seemed in some ways to be over in a second, in others it took hours. At last the final heart beats bled from her in slow pumps, I was alone.

I lay atop the cooling body, alone with my thoughts. Behind me the bushes rustled, I leapt to all fours, growling and snapping at the hand as it came through.

"Woha, mate." English pulled himself from the underbrush, toting at least a small garden's worth of brambles with him. He looked down at the body. "Victorious, I see."

I paused for a moment, then turned to look at the dead body behind me. "I suppose."

"Come on, mate. We've been out here for hours. We'd best get moving, or they might start thinking we've hightailed it out of here without them." He hefted a pair of hooves with a grunt.

The trek back was a long, slow journey. The moose was large and weighed a ton. By the time we made it the sun was falling red behind the trees, every muscle in my body was screaming.

The camp was lit up with dozens of fires, pricking the darkness here and there with a little sparks of light and warmth. Around them the humans huddled, staring inwards. Our arrival was met with jumps and ticks at first, but soon burst into whispers that spread like a plague.

You never know how many friends you have until you've got food. The same people who had, just hours ago, still watched me with suspicion now greeted us like old friends; they didn't even seem to mind the blood that smeared me.

While the evening may not have gone down with festivities and merriment, I did notice a handful more smiles than I had seen up until now. People no longer shed away when I walked past.

"Looks like you came through, wolfy," Rebeca said. I lay back against a tree as she wandered over, a hand trailing on my shoulder.

I wasn't sure wither I was quite ready to smile about that yet, "Seems like it."

She sat in my lap; I could feel the warmth of her body seep through my fur. Looking up through the leaves I could see the stars overhead, so much brighter than they ever were back home.

I woke, and my lap was empty. My shoulder was being shaken, and the morning sun had replaced the starlit sky that had been above me. I had to drive away the tatters of a dream involving a chocolate bar the size of my head.

Beside me stood a short woman, even sitting down we were eye to eye. "We need you." I looked up at her, but she skirted out of reach while I strained to my feet, muscles sore from yesterday.

I followed her through the town, never hearing another word. Around me the shys and glances had returned – what had I slept through this time?

The town was small enough we were to the other side in a matter of moments. The first thing I saw was the bulk of English waiting for us, behind him stood two smaller forms.

"Uncle Gowan?" Even in the morning sunlight, the dark black wolf looked like a shadow made flesh. I got a familiar smile from him as I neared, a sliver of white tooth piercing the black veil. To be honest, I wasn't all that surprised he was here. Knowing my parents, my Dad had likely been riding his tail until he found where I'd disappeared to.

The other form was a bit more of a surprise though. Jon stood at the point of a half dozen homemade spears, worn city cloths looking even more incongruous amongst the green leaves.

English waved me to his side, eyes never leaving the people before him. "I'm sure you remember our one friend, mate. But the phantom here claims you can vouch for him."

I walked up, nodding as I eyed the only man I knew who could give English a run for his money. "My uncle."

"Lucky break for you, blacky." He nodded towards the wolf. "The bugger got right into the heart of our little paradise here before anyone noticed him, standing bold as day in the middle of the road."

"Would you expect any less from the top hunter in the city? What about Jon?"

Gowan laughed, dodging the guards who tried to encircle him as though they were so many statues. "I left him tied up a quarter mile back. Pointed him out after the welcoming committee showed up."

Gowan walked in a way that I could only dream of. While he looked like an older version of me in monochrome, he moved as though his limbs were liquid; never seeming to quite stride, but

always closer than you'd last seen him.

As he came forward I offered my hand, but was caught up in a hug that made my ribs creak. "So, little Tommy has finally decided to grow up. An odd lot you've thrown yourself in with, pup, but I guess it beats what your father and I did."

I tried to extract myself from his arms with a squeak. "Did Mom and Dad send you?"

He answered with a smirk as I pried myself loose. "You know those two too well."

My turn to smile. "I should hope so, I survived this long with them." I pointed a thumb to the dog. "What about him? You didn't bring him along did you?"

I got a grunt in return. "Minor oversight. He got one of my daughters drunk. Somehow, he made himself cute enough to lift the location of your little hidey-hole." I peered over at Jon, if he'd heard, he didn't even bother to shrug. "Wasn't expecting to be out here this early, wanted to give you boys a little time to settle in, but rover here had a different idea. By the time I'd caught up with the littlest hobo we were practically at your doorstep, decided to take a look around."

English took two strides and hefted the unresisting german shepherd into the air by the scruff of his neck. "Spill it, bow-wow."

To his credit, he didn't stutter, or for that matter even act like this was anything different from walking to the corner store. Idly, I wondered what he'd been through in his past life.

"I am here as a due representative of the metropolitan police force, on behalf of the government of the free city of Vancouver. I am to request that both you, Mr. Jones and Mr. Taggert," He nodded at me, how the heck he nodded when he was being held by the scruff I would never know, "Return with me to discuss the future of this settlement."

"What?" Okay, this just went from weird to whatzthat? "Less than a week ago you were trying to kill everyone here, you went so far to try and carve their location from my flesh!"

He hung limp and unresisting, eyes looking towards me with complete disinterest. "I am simply here to deliver the message." He paused for a moment, letting his gaze focus. "And may I remind you that I was not present when you were taken into custody."

"So what, you expect us to walk right back into the city to be picked up by the tender meat hooks of the department for a second go?"

"Why would we engage in hostilities? We already know what we attempted to learn from you during your debriefing. We have no reason to hold you further."

"And the cops we ventilated?" English growled down from behind him.

He shrugged again, rocking oddly in the air. "Officers die all the time. You should know that, Mr. Taggert. No different than hunters. The interrogator was not part of the department in any event. He was provided by the government for that particular contract."

"Your call, mate." English looked over to me. "I'd just as soon punt him into the nearest lake and see how well he swims with two broken legs." The dog didn't even bother to flinch.

"Let him go, English." I walked away, hearing him fall to the ground behind me. "Get out of here, Jon." I didn't turn as he got to his feet. "Tell your masters that we'll be there." I spun on my heel, looking him straight in the eye before he had time to drop his gaze. "On our own time. Now get."

I heard English chuckle, but I didn't care, I was already gone.

"You sure you're up for this, pup?" My new shadow was following me.

"Why not, Gowan? They've tried to rip me apart once, might as well give them a second chance, it's not like I've got anything better to do." I looked around at the weary glances that surrounded me. "I don't belong here either. I could do anything to earn their trust, it would be destroyed the next time someone shows up. To them we're all the same, you're either human or you're not. We're on the wrong side of the line."

It wasn't as though I had a lot to pack, but I needed to do one thing before I left. "I'll see you back here, Gowan. I need a moment." He didn't say anything as he fell away.

By the time I'd gotten back the tent was already down. What little remained was being crammed into the small backpack. How did she even know?

"You're not coming, Rebeca." She was sitting on the zipper, trying to force it closed beneath her.

"Don't even try it, wolfy." Heh, she didn't even bother to look up.

"You don't understand. I'm not coming back."

This time she spared me a glance. "That's why I'm not staying."

"Babe..." My finger traced her smooth cheek. "I don't belong here, I don't belong in this world."

"And we do?" The pack bulged closed. She hoisted it over her shoulder with a huff. "If you don't belong here, then neither do I. Last time I walked away you almost managed to get your guts cut out. Who do you think is going to keep you in one piece if I don't? I've made an investment in you, wolfy, and I aim to keep you together until I collect."

"No way I can get you to say here with all the other little pink things? We both know you'll find better material here for what you're looking for."

That got me a shot in the gut. "Not a chance. Besides, how do you know what I'm looking for? Perhaps neurotic little wolves with delusions of grandeur are exactly what I'm in to."

"I should have guessed." Gowan's voice flowed from behind me. "What else would make a little pup go off on a fool's journey like this?"

"How long were you back there?" I turned, a shadow leaned on the tree three feet away, so close I could reach out and touch him.

He just smiled again. "Long enough." He was on one knee, pulling Rebeca's hand to his lips. Drat, there goes my one good trick. I'd copied it from him, but he's still better at it. "And how nice it is to meet you, my dear. But didn't Griss tell me you had ears? I like ears."

She just laughed, letting his lips brush air. "Sorry, playboy. I'm taken."

Back down the road, English was waiting for us, Jon conspicuously absent. He nodded as we walked up.

"Mates."

The six gray haired humans from a couple days ago stood with him.

They looked older in the daylight, as though the short time spent here had weathered their wrinkled hides. The woman was back, standing in front of them, I guess she had been duly elected the spokes-human.

"You're leaving us." Her tone was neutral, arms folded before her, beneath a tightly pulled gray bun. "For what purpose?"

I tried to smile, it didn't come. "To solve this. Everyone knows that we don't belong here." I nodded towards English, "You have your world now. We need ours. And we're not going to find it here."

"And so you will do what?"

This one I could grin at.

"Not much, likely. We're what, three? Four? Against an entire city, an entire society? I expect we'll leave and not come back. I can be hopeful, but let's be honest. Even if their intentions are honorable, they'll do what? Invite the lot of us back with open arms and a ticker tape parade? I think

not. They've thrown their bet, and we've thrown ours. I just ended up on the wrong side and need to live this out."

They didn't bar our way as we departed, Gowan to one side of me, English and Rebeca to the other.

Gowan was in his element once we entered the forest, we struggled merely to keep up. Even trying to lead us on, he just seemed to blend away, lost in every shadow and tangle of roots. The city must still be hours away, but I began to notice shadows collecting behind us. They were of every color; red, blue, white, brown. Rebeca looked about herself and shivered, English ticked nervously from foot to foot, neither sure of why, or what distressed them. They couldn't see it, but this was the benefit of a large extended family.

The city grew around us as we worked our way forward, the vegetation slowly thinning as we moved in, the decomposing husks of buildings replacing trees until we hit the edge. The asphalt was before me, just as it had been days ago, only mirrored now with the black creping pavement a scant stride away. I stepped across the invisible barrier like popping a bubble; it felt odd to have the cutting stone underfoot again, when for such a short time I'd had mossy ground.

Behind, wolves and cats of all stripes materialized as they melted from the trunks and branches of the forest. In the city they were just so many more people. They dispersed almost before they arrived, but to the two police dogs I could see atop a building a few blocks down, the message had been sent.

"Where to now, mate?" English asked. He turned to the now empty trees. "Family reunion?"

"Something like that, buddy." I took Rebeca's hand, "We need to get to the police station, but there's somewhere we're going first."

The street was as quiet as it had been last time I was here, and the pups were out playing again. Rose waved to me from her front garden, in her world nothing had changed. I waved back, a fake smile covering my face.

The door was still the bright blue of a spotless sky. Looking up, it didn't match what was above us; the clouds were a slate gray, growing to a black that promised more than merely rain.

We walked up the front steps, Rebeca dug in her bag trying to find her ears.

"Don't." I rested a hand on her arm. "If you weren't what you are, then none of us would be here."

We didn't make it up the walk before the door opened, my father stood there, calm face unreadable. I looked back, English waited at the street, Gowan was nowhere to be seen.

"Hello, Tommy." He was still for a moment, weight on the door, face a composed neutral. It only lasted a heartbeat before he lowered his head, shaking it like he was throwing water. A smile slowly crept to his lips. "I hear you're trying to lead a revolution, now are you? I told you an office job was no good for you." He nodded to Rebeca, "And I see you've changed species as well. A pup becomes a wolf, and a cat a lady. You've had an eventful few weeks."

We made it into the house. I got a hug from my mother, Rebeca one in turn. She seemed a little bit surprised by their lack of reaction to her ears, but so be it.

"So, you're going to go through with this, Tommy?" English and Gowan had joined us, all six sat around a now crowded kitchen table.

"Can't see much of any other choice. If we do, then we might have a chance to keep the humans alive. Everyone knows where they are now. A couple dozen hunters can't protect them against the might of an entire city. If we go, we'll be playing their game, but there may be a chance we might just

come out with something worth the effort."

"Tommy..." Gowan sat with his elbows on the table, "I can guaranty you'll get where ever you're going, but that's it. The dogs won't bother you until you meet whoever it is you're going to see, but that's all I can do. We're hunters, not an army; we're not organized to do this."

"Thanks, Gowan. I owe you one."

He laughed. "You owe me lots, pup. This one isn't for you." He paused for a moment and spun a small chunk of meat from the table on an obsidian claw tip. "I believe in holding the balance. There's got to be a reason for the humans to be here, and it's not our place to change the way of the world. Then again," He shrugged, "it's likely not our place to defend it either, but I'll do it anyway. I prefer the world we know to the one we don't."

It was Rebeca's turn, reaching out to take both my Father's and Gowan's hands. "Thank you. Thank you all." Her voice almost broke, "I hardly even know you, yet you've come to our aid when the whole city seems indifferent to whatever happens to us."

My father lay his free hand over hers. "That's just the way the game is played, my dear. It doesn't matter if you're in the woods or the boardrooms of downtown, you don't take what you don't need. You kill what you must to eat, to survive that day. Nothing more. We may be animals, we all are, but we are not beasts."

I stood up. "We should go."

"Now?" Rebeca looked up at me, English just sat with his arms crossed.

"Why wait? We're living on borrowed time as it is, delaying won't help us, and it won't help the humans back at camp. We might as well go now, get this done with."

Our little impromptu meeting broke up. Gowan slid back into the shadows to ensure our safe passage to downtown.

For those of us who remained, there was much hugging and a few tearful goodbyes, I don't think anyone really expected us to be coming back again.

"You'll take care of our son won't you, Michael?" My mother asked. She held him in a hug like they'd known each other for years.

"As best I can, ma'am. Though I think he'll be doing just as much to watch over the rest of us."

We made our way back down the street, towards the towering buildings of downtown. No hunters were in attendance, but I knew they were about, somewhere.

It wasn't long before we began seeing other people, behind the clouds the sun was starting to set, and everyone milled through the streets on their way home for another night. No one spared us a second glance, not even the cops who became more and more plentiful the closer we came to their den.

In the end, they didn't quite swell up to the same crest they had before. While the blue was in good representation as we turned the corner to police HQ, they weren't on every street corner and hidden in every shadow as they had once been.

The simple facade of the building ahead of us reflected the rays of the setting sun, dyeing it a deep red that seemed to flood and flow as we walked towards it.

"Are you ready for this?" I didn't ask it to anyone in particular, and accordingly no one answered. Looking behind me, both English and Rebeca followed step for step.

I squared my shoulders, nothing left but to do it. "Diplomat or soldier, here we go."