

The Explorers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 4: Stowaway

I hugged my parents goodbye and left before too much more could be said, I didn't want to give myself a reason to start crying. The only thing I stopped to grab were the maps in my bedroom. I'd always dreamed of traveling, and there was no way I was going to leave them behind when I finally got the chance to do it.

It wasn't until I was stuffing them into my backpack that I noticed English had packed his map with me. When I asked him he just shrugged and responded, "You're the explorer, I'm just the muscle."

Rebeca wandered into my old room while I repacked, she sat on the bed, making it creak.

"So, this is where you grew up?" She peered about, looking at my small collection of books, even poking into the chest that lay at the foot of my old bed. "It's so... normal."

"What were you expecting, Babe?" I flicked some dust at her.

"I don't know, Wolfy. Something more, perhaps? Anyone could have grown up here, but it wasn't anyone – it was you."

I hefted the pack back on and gently cuffed her on the side of the head. "And you should be glad it was. You never know what you might have gotten – I could have been born a rat."

Outside the house, the dogs were stilled arrayed. They had, however, been smart enough to never so much as set a foot on the lawn. It took me a moment to find the Sargent, I still didn't know his name.

"I want you guys to stay here."

"Our orders are to protect you, Sir."

"I don't care." I tried to meet his eyes, but he studiously avoided me. Eventually, I had to grab him by the mussel just to make him look my way. "If anything happens to my parents, your orders won't hunt you down. I will." I released his face. "Please..." My voice softened as he held my gaze, "Stay here and look after them. Tell Sayer I asked you too. They're my parents, they're the most important things I have left in the city."

The dog stared at the cracked sidewalk for a moment, but in the end he just huffed out a breath. "As you say, Sir." He finally looked up at my face. "Good luck and Gods' speed, Mr. Taggart. I hope you find what you're looking for, we all do."

The rest of the walk to the edge of the city was far more peaceful. We'd already passed through the worst of the fighting, and now it was well behind us.

I almost didn't notice when we crossed into the wilderness. The trees just seemed to close in around us to replace the buildings, as natural as the setting of the sun.

I looked over at English as we walked, "Why are you coming anyway? You're at home in the wilderness as I am in an opera house."

He laughed, a real one, if stifled with the ghost of something... else. "And what else would you have me do, mate?" He shifted the pack on his back, it rattled and clanked uproariously. "It's not like I had anything else planned for the rest of my life. Home is where you make it, right? And right now I'm drawing the lines somewhere out there, wherever we drop camp tonight." We walked on for a moment before he added, "Anyway, mate, it's not like there's much left behind for me anyway. There's no government, so there's no contracts..." His voice fell to a whisper, "And seeing people turn on each other like this reminds me too much of my father."

We'd been walking for an hour when I heard someone behind us. It was easy to tell, I'd just spend the last four months hunting in the wilderness. We'd just passed through a shallow pebbly stream, little more than ankle deep. English and I had tromped through while Rebeca skirted the edge, jumping precariously from stone to stone. Now I heard splashes again. Masked, but hardly subtle.

I tried to ignore it. We were in the middle of nowhere, no one had any reason to follow us now. I must just be getting paranoid in my old age. Not everyone was out to kill me – that was only when I was lucky. I looked over to both English and Rebeca, neither twitched a hair. I've gotta be getting old.

Looking ahead, to the east, I could see the snowcapped peaks of the Rocky Mountains in the near-distance. They seemed so close now, I could almost reach out and touch them.

We'd continued for a few more hours, until I realized that Rebeca was falling behind, walking by herself a few steps back. I looked over at her in surprise, she just smiled back. The strain was apparent on her face but she kept up.

I called a halt as the sun began to kiss the trees behind us, towers of V-town well out of sight. We'd been following the cracked asphalt of a long deserted highway, the occasional well weathered sign marked it as the 'number one' – none of us really knew what that meant. I wasn't aiming for any particular destination tonight, so we simply stopped where we were and dropped our packs in a clearing at the side of the road.

Game was plentiful this far from the city, the hunters rarely ventured more than half a day's travel; I was back with dinner in hardly more than minutes. I didn't even bother asking either of them to hunt, that would have just been a waste of time.

We'd picked up a supply of dried rations before leaving the city, but none of us really wanted to dig into those before we needed to. Not only did those small squares taste like tanned leather, but they were best saved for emergencies. None of us had ever been in the mountains, likely so much as the prairies beyond, and the hunting could be scarce for all we knew.

Rebeca dressed and butchered the prey I had brought back as English was reluctantly pressed

into work by lighting a fire. I took the moment to rub down my toes, and the fresh callouses that had formed there; I'd gotten so used to trekking over the soft soil that the broken blacktop was murder on the pads of my feet.

I heard a sound again, over the crackling of the flames. English must have noticed it too, I watched his head jerk up, our eyes meeting. With a faint motion of his hands, we slowly slid to the ground and slinked off in either direction. Before she knew it, Rebeca was alone by the campfire.

With the sun dying and the fire behind me, the world quickly washed to black and white as my night vision kicked in. The undergrowth was thick around me, I used it as cover, moving forward, towards where I had last heard the rustle.

There were a few more bumps and clinks echoing in the distance as I edged ahead. Whatever this was, it was no animal; he had to be from the city by the sound of the hardware he was toting around. With the amount of noise he was making he must be carting around an entire armory.

Almost as if on cue, English and I both pounced from the bushes to the target between us. I had just an instant to see his brown eyes pull wide in primal fear as we fell on him.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or scream. It was Jon, the police dog that had accompanied us back when we were tracking the humans. From English's expression though, I knew what he was thinking and it wasn't good. The lion's fangs were barred, held an inch from the dog's face.

It took Jon only a few breaths to compose himself from our sudden appearance, his mask of perfect indifference, nay boredom, had fallen back over his face.

"It is nice to see you again, Mr. Taggert, Mr. English." The clipped measure of his voice had fallen slightly, he didn't sound quite so much like he was on parade operations now.

"Jon," I spared a moment to push English back, before the lion took a bite out of him, "What are you doing here?" I reached one hand up to rub my temples, I could feel a headache coming on.

"I'm on vacation, Mr. Taggert." The dog looked up at me with innocent eyes.

I wanted to whack him.

I considered asking English to drag the dog back to camp by his ankles for a moment, but decided it was better to give him some measure of dignity; we marched him in under his own power.

Rebeca had obviously noticed our disappearance, but didn't question it when we returned with an extra body in tow. This was the first time Jon had ever seen her without her cat disguise, his mouth hung open as she smiled at him.

"Nice to see you again, Jon. Just happened to be in the neighborhood?" Her voice was coy, but her eyes were hard.

"No, ma'am." He sat down by the fire as English and I pulled the pack from his back. I turned it upside-down, letting its contents spill out over the ground.

"Care to tell us why you're really here, Bow-wow?" English still stood over him, staring down as he spoke.

"As I told you, gentlemen, I am on vacation. This is not a police operation."

"Right, Bow-wow. Last time I heard of a police dog taking time off, he was lying six feet under."

Jon put his arms up before him, as though under attack, but didn't say anything.

I rifled through what had been in his pack, it wasn't much. Food, camping supplies, bandages,

much like what we had. The one thing I couldn't help but find was an over-sized two way radio.

"Alright, Jon," I tried to keep my voice level as I spoke, "Spill it. You're not fooling anyone. How many of you are there? What do you want?" I threw a can of tinned food from his supplies, it clanked off a nearby tree. "This is what I left the city to get away from! I don't want this, I want out of your problems and politics!"

For the first time, I noticed that Jon neither wore the dark blue of a police uniform nor the leather and chains of his 'disguise'. He was clad in nothing more than a simple green vest and belt. The traditional clothing looked stranger on him than anything else I could imagine.

He looked up at me, meeting my eyes, but glancing away nervously every few seconds. "I'm here to help you, Mr. Taggart. I really am." His voice curled up at the end in a way that I knew so well – it was usually my own that whined like that. "I took an unpaid leave of the force to join you. I don't know what you're looking for, but I want to help you find it."

"You're serious? The force doesn't know you're here?"

He shuffled and squirmed for a moment before answering, "No one but my uncle... Commissioner Sayer."

"What?" I tried to stay angry, but this was too unexpected.

"Figures, mate." I may have lost my thunder, but English hadn't. He spat the words like a venom. "They're all so inbred there that it's hard to find one that isn't someone else's relative."

"Did he send you?" I looked back to Jon as I spoke.

"No." His voice was firm on that. "This was of my own initiative. He only rejected my resignation when I tendered it."

"You resigned?" I tried to keep the surprise from my voice, but failed miserably. I could even see English's mouth drop open when the dog said that.

"No, Mr. Taggart. I attempted to resign, it was rejected. Under normal circumstances there would be no way for me to take a leave of absence during a state of emergency, so I did what I felt I needed to. Thankfully, Commissioner Sayer deemed that your safety was more important than that of the city."

"English, let him go." The lion released the handful of fur he still held in his fist and sat down next to the fire, continuing to watch him. "Jon, I don't know why everyone is suddenly so interested in me, but it's not worth it. Go home."

"Mr. Taggart, I'm not privy to why my uncle has directed the police force to hold you in such high esteem, but I have my own reasons." He paused a moment, his walls falling, I almost thought we were about to see him cry, "We nearly killed you, Tommy... Mr. Taggart. The actions of the police force were as a direct result of my reports. I did what I was instructed to, and by my actions, if not my hand, almost killed you."

He stopped and looked at me, as if expecting a response, as if seeking absolution. I didn't know what to say, I'm no diplomat, and no minister. I just reached out a hand to lay on his shoulder. "Well, neither of us are dead... I suppose that's all that matters. The better question, Jon, is what are we going to do with you now? We weren't exactly expecting company on this expedition," English growled in agreement, "And I don't think you're much of a survivalist."

A small grin broke out over his face, perhaps the first one I'd ever seen force its way past Jon's studied mask of calm. "I have survived quite a bit, Mr. Taggart, however, you are correct, I'm not familiar with the wilderness." He craned his neck back to look at English, "But, as for what you are to

do with me, gentlemen, I'm sorry to say that is not your providence. I have decided I will be accompanying you. Whether that is as part of your camp or behind, that is your only choice."

English sat down heavily beside the dog with a sigh. "And how would you do that, Bow-wow, if I left you hanging from the trees by your toes?"

"I've been through worse, Mr. English." The grin was back, but Mona Lisa like, I wasn't sure if he was about to burst out laughing or crying.

It was Rebeca who broke the silence by unceremoniously dropping a chunk of roasted meat in his lap. "If you boys are done deciding who's dick is biggest, we do have dinner to eat, you know."

The question of Jon's immediate future was put off until after dinner. It was obvious from everyone's reactions that all of us, save Rebeca, preferred our meat raw, but she would have no such thing.

We set our tents up afterwards, the three of us were quickly back into the canvas that we'd spent the last few months in. Jon wasn't quite as experienced at pitching camp.

I sat and watched him for a few minutes, it never seemed to occur to him to ask for help. He must have grabbed the backpack, prepacked, at the last moment as he followed us from the city. The tent didn't have any instructions.

He got as far as pulling it from the bag and assembling the rods before becoming lost. He stood there forlornly for a moment as he tried to figure out what to do next. Things started off in the generally right direction, fitting the rods through the eyelets in the fabric of the tent, but in seconds he had everything crosshatched to the gods and back. He'd thrown the rain cover off into a corner, not even having the slightest what that was for.

"Do you want a hand, Jon?" I walked over, his tent was little more than a few steps from mine. When we'd chosen the small clearing we only been expecting the three of us.

"Thank you, Mr. Taggart, but I would hate to impose."

"To impose, he says?" I gently ushered him to the side as I pulled the rods out from the tangle of fabric that should have been a tent. "You've already made yourself my problem, Jon. You might as well accept some hospitality."

"Thank you... Tommy." The strain was plain to hear in his voice. "I'm sorry to cause you more problems."

"Never mind that, Jon. You're here now, we might as well make the best use of you we can. Who knows, perhaps you'll be able to call in some reinforcements if we find ourselves in a bind."

"That might just be possible," He turned for a moment and dug through his pack, "I was able to recresition this from supplies before I left." He handed me the radio.

It was steel, painted bright yellow, and large enough to club someone over the head with. The entire thing was adorned with only a speaker, microphone, and a single large black button.

"Standard issue emergency communications device. It will connect you to the central dispatch office in police headquarters. The system is guarantied to be manned twenty-four seven, and will render any services they are able." He looked at me for a moment, "Especially to you."

"I've never seen an officer use one of these." I turned it over in my hands, it was cold and slippery, felt like it was made of lead.

"I can assure you, Mr. Taggart, we do use them. We just don't make it public knowledge. We

are, however, limited." He sighed, "The range of a portable device like this one is only a few dozen kilometers at best, less in the mountains."

"It's better than nothing, I guess." I pushed the button and spoke into it, "Anyone there?"

I didn't hear anything but static for a moment, then a voice came through, tiny but clear. "This is HQ. Please state your identification and situation."

I was at a loss for words until Jon quietly cleared his throat to prompt me on, "Tommy Taggart and Jon Oaks, traveling east."

"One moment, confirming identities." The voice clicked off for a few seconds before coming back. It was much less hurried now, more attentive, "Identity confirmed, Mr. Taggart. We are at your disposal, what can we do for you?"

"Nothing right now... uh... HQ, just checking the radio. What's the status of the city."

"The situation continues to deteriorate, Mr. Taggart. We believe that we have the major hostilities confined to the midtown area, but number of participants continues to grow. HQ, however, has been re-secured. We do not anticipate any interruptions in service."

"That's great... HQ. Uh, over and out."

"Understood, Mr. Taggart. HQ out." The box clicked off.

Jon and English had long since retired to sleep, even Rebeca lay in the tent behind me. I sat before the dying embers of the fire, staring up.

The stars above me were bright, I could make them out even through the aurora that danced neon green against the sky over my left shoulder.

"A penny for your thoughts, Wolfy?" I could feel her hands on my shoulders as she came up to lean against my back.

"A penny, Babe? What good would that do us out here? We haven't a single place to spend it." I laughed.

She made a pained expression and sat down beside me, hand still on my shoulder, "It's an expression, Tommy. But really, what are you thinking about? I haven't seen you like this since we first left the city."

"I don't know, Babe. It's nothing... everything... all of the above?" I cocked a grin as she playfully punched me. "Every time I think I've got it figured out, the gods see fit to throw another wrench in my plans. I guess I didn't really know what I was doing walking away from V-town to start with, but it seemed right. You, me, English, finding a place for ourselves out there. Maybe even doing something worth actually doing. Finding whatever it is that's so important the Japanese sent one of their precious boats over. I don't know," I made a face, showing my fangs like my Dad did when he used to tell me bedtime stories, "hunt down something that's worth being hunted."

She giggled and poked me in the nose, that made my lips fall as a sneezed tickled up in response. "If you say so, Wolfy. As I see it, V-town's not the place for us, and neither is Horseshoe Bay. So I guess this is where it is, out in the middle of nowhere – with you."

I laughed. "Yeah, me. And two tag alongs. Real private."

We sat there for a while, in silence. It wasn't until after she'd gone to sleep that I worked up the courage to pull my journal out. It lay on my lap for some time before I put it back, I still couldn't bring myself to write anything in it. So much was happening, and I just couldn't write.

We broke camp the next day and continued our hike down what remained of highway one. I had to help Jon repack his kit, he was lost without the aid. English still refused to give him anything more than the occasional snarl.

I tried to pull the lion's attention from the dog, and, in any event, the massive package he trudged on his back was starting to intrigue me. It was the one he'd picked up from Smith, and had yet to unwrap.

"English, what is it you've got there anyway?" I tried to reach for the tightly bound mass, but he just swatted me away offhandedly.

"Do you promise not to laugh, mate?" Huh? That was a first from him.

"Sure."

He stopped, dropping bundle to the ground, avoiding the slushy melt-water snow, and cleaved the ropes with a single swipe of his claws. The wrapping fell apart to expose the contents within, almost as if designed for such a show.

The innards of the bundle were hardly more evident than the packing had been. It was a mass of black cloth with the occasional strip of tan. English had to dig about for a moment to find its top, he pulled it up, the whole mess unfolding as it met the fresh air.

It was a jumpsuit, I think, I've never worn one. The thing was overly padded and seemed oddly proportioned.

"So, what is it, man?"

"A snowsuit, mate. In case you hadn't noticed, one doesn't see much snow in the Serengeti. I had Smith make it for me years ago, in case I ever needed to follow a bloke into the mountains on a contract. You might not be my quarry, but here we are, so it seemed like the right thing to pick up."

He began shoving a foot into it, careful not to slice the fabric with a claw. "I've never really had the opportunity to put it on before, I could only wear it for a couple of minutes at a time before overheating." He cursed when his foot went down the wrong leg and had to start again, hopping up and down to try and maintain his balance as he struggled with the contraption.

I heard a giggle behind me, Rebeca walked up. "So, the great lion can't stand the cold?"

"Neither can you, my dear," he shot back.

"Poor Tommy," She put an arm over my shoulder, "Didn't he bring two? How am I supposed to fall in love with you all over again if you're not in matching suits?"

"Hey, Babe," I let her arm sink into my fur, "I've got one built in. Who could ask for more?"

English finally managed to fight his way into the snowsuit, pulling it up and over his massive shoulders, it fit like a glove. I'd bet Smith had spent some time making it, the thing reeked of craftsmanship. Despite its padding, you could see every ripple in English's muscles, every flick and off hand motion. It even wrapped around his tail, leaving only the poof on the end exposed.

Its outer part was pitch black, standing out on the snow like a shadow come to life, reminding me of nothing so much as my uncle Gown's dark coat. The inner fifty percent, from the center of his chest and thighs out to the nipples, was tan, a perfect match for his own fur. If I hadn't just seen him put it on, I would have almost thought he was standing behind a pair of closely spaced pillars.

"So, mate, how do I look?" He struck a pose, like he was modeling the latest fashions.

"Gah!" Was all I could say, Rebeca almost collapsed into me, laughing. "You look like you

should be mounting a rocket to the moon." His whiskers drooped as I spoke, it wasn't often that someone got the chance to laugh at this particular lion, and walk away after. "No, seriously, English," I struggled to keep a straight face, "You look fine, I'm sure Smith is proud of his work. One question though," I pointed to the words 'Ski-doo' monogrammed in small letters on his chest, in the same tan as his fur, "What's that for?"

English reached down, pulling the fabric of the suit out so he could read it, albeit upside down, "Haven't the slightest, mate. Smith demanded he put it on, claimed that's how all winterware used to be done."

Jon chose that moment to walk up behind us. "Is that the new fashion, Mr. English? They do change to the strangest things."

The lion turned on his heel and stalked away, it was another three hours before I could get him to say a word to me.

It was two days before we saw another soul, two long days that formed more calluses on my feet than I even knew I had room for.

I thought it was a trick of the light at first, a shadow slowly working its way towards us through the noon day sun. He was downwind of us, so I couldn't draw a scent. I elbowed English to get his attention.

"Heh, looks like we've got company, mate." He smiled for the first time since Jon had joined us.

It was a ferret, odd choice of someone to be out with the snow still on the ground, and not a big one either. He pushed a cart before him, loaded up with a massive pile of what I could only conservatively call junk. With every step he took it shuttered and clanked, seemingly all but ready to fall over at the slightest stray gust of wind.

He must have been all but oblivious to us, it wasn't until we were hardly more than a stone's throw away that he even looked up. The moment he saw us I watched a mischievous smile light his lips. That sign was universal – he was a merchant.

"Fellows! A good day to you!" The voice was high and reedy, with a rounded accent that I couldn't quite place. "And what a fine day it is," He nattered on without one of us even having to say a word, "So wonderful to meet you like this, one sees so few fellow travelers on the open road these days – or any day for that matter!" He laughed uproariously at his own pale joke.

Leaning on his cart, the ferret stopped, waiting for us to come to him. "Now, my good fellows, what can I do for you today?" He turned and began rummaging through the heaps of trash.

"Really, we're not looking for anything. We just left V-town."

"Ahh, come on my good fellows, everyone needs something!" He pushed away from the cart and began swaggering towards Rebeca. I could feel my hackles rise in response, I had to claw down the growl that grew in my throat. "What about some jewelry for the fine lady? Who are you with, my dear? Or are you someone's brother? Naw, a fair maid like you is too fine a flower to be anyone's brother. Who's the lucky man?"

I pushed my way in front of him, between his advance and Rebeca. For her own part, she hadn't moved. Just stood there waiting, one hand on the sword she'd lifted from English.

"That would be me, hawker. Now back off."

He just laughed again and began holding knick-knacks up before my nose, at least one smelt so

gruesome that I almost retched. "...if that's not your tastes, how about this? An authentic antique light fixture from the houses of parliament? Fetched it myself, and let me tell you, bud, they were none to pleased with me running off through the night with one of their bits!" I tried to push him back. "Not your thing? What about a -"

I pushed him again, harder this time, his back bumped up against the cart. The junk pile swayed threateningly above us. "Listen, 'buddy', we're not looking for your trash. We just left V-town, and if you're smart you won't be heading there. It's a war zone, someone like you wouldn't last a day. Take my advice and hightail it back off to wherever you came from. All we need is to get where we're going in one piece."

He paused, silent, for a moment and looked at me, "V-town? It can't be that bad. What about the police force? They're the best in the country."

Jon coughed behind me, the ferret looked at him again and recognized his breed. "Murder it all..." He whispered under his breath. "I came all the way from Tee-oh to trade, did damn near the whole trans-can run just to get here." He paused for a moment, looking like he was trying to calculate figures that were taped to the top of his eyelids. "I really don't want to be running the gauntlet back at cow-town... if I swing south I could always head to Spokane, though." He rambled on like that for minutes, we'd almost managed to edge away when he looked up again. "You folks wouldn't be heading south by any chance, would you? I could use a couple of strapping fellows for protection when I dip into the wastes. Could make it worth your while."

"No." I had to keep myself from turning tail and running as fast as I could before he tried to sell us something again. "We're going east."

"East, eh? I could help you with that... for a price."

I sighed, it wasn't like our cash was good for much else out here. "Fine. Tell us what you know about the land on the other side of the mountains."

He grinned like a fool as I tossed a few shiny coins his way. I pinched the money from English, he was the only one who had any. Rebeca and I hadn't spent enough time back in the city, and Jon almost seem confused by the very idea of carrying cash. I wasn't sure if the lion was going to weep, or spit, when I handed the money over.

I pulled a map from my backpack. One of the many I'd taken from my room, not the one English had found. I didn't trust the hawker that much.

He started pointing at dots and squiggles faster than I could follow, speaking in tongues with names I didn't recognize. "You see, fellows, we're here at Abbotsford, right on the ol' One. If you're smart you'll stay on it as you go, it'll take you through Merritt, then up into Salmon Arm. You'll be cresting the rocks when you hit Kicking Horse Pass. Be careful of the old man up there – he's a bit off, you understand."

"Uh, sure."

"Great." He straighted up and turned around, walking back to his cart.

"Hey, that's it? I paid you fifty bucks and all we get is a ten second 'you are here'?"

"What were you expecting? It was only a fifty." He didn't bother turning to look at me as he began pushing the cart.

English nearly started after him before I put my hand on the lion's shoulder, "He isn't worth it." I gently tugged him away.

"He took my cash!"

"Yeah? And what were you going to do with it, man? You could just as well thank him for taking the extra weight off your hands."

"It's obvious it wasn't your money," he growled, turning his back to the cart.

"Nope. And I'm loving every minute of it." Rebeca laughed behind me as I spoke, even Jon cracked the ghost of a smile.

I'd always seen the mountains as I was growing up, you couldn't help it in V-town. They dominated the horizon on the few days that the clouds didn't roll in. There was, however, a big difference watching them from a distance to trying to touch them up close.

No matter how much we walked, and we walked a lot over the next three weeks, they always seemed just out of touch, even as they slowly drifted around and behind us.

We stayed on the One, not really knowing what else to do, with any luck it would lead us to the prairies. The course wasn't too inspiring though, it meandered north, then back south again while climbing ever higher. It seemed intent on going every direction but towards the rising sun.

The days wore on, and I knew it should be getting warmer, but each step seemed to be cooler than the last – as though our ascent was perfectly balanced against the break of early spring.

We'd gone the entire time without seeing another living soul, save for the animals that provided our dinner. I was starting to wonder if there was anyone out here but us, a quartet of fools trying to escape the endless crags of rock.

That was when we stumbled upon Merritt. Or, to be more exact, its church.

We'd made camp beside the highway as normal, and I was off trying to find the main entrée for tonight's meal. Up in the mountains as we were, it was getting harder and harder to track anything down. There seemed to be nothing but the rare snowshoe hare, and they didn't make for much of a meal after being split four ways.

The building came hovering from the darkness and snow mist, seeming to rise up around me like a ghost. It wasn't the first structure we had seen, we'd passed through many small, deserted towns, but it was by far the most intact.

Any roof over one's head is always an improvement when you're spending so long out in the elements. I let dinner's trail fall cold as I looked within.

The giant, dark wooden doors were three times my height, nicked and stained with ages of use. They swung smoothly, if slowly, when I pushed.

It was dark within. Even with my vision I had to squint to see anything but a vat of velvet black before me.

The inside was rundown and deteriorating, but seemingly kept up. The room smelt of cold smoke and... humans. But the scent was old and long faded. No, change that, it had smelt of humans at some point, now it just smelt of human. One.

Any mark of humans was too much to ignore. I turned and sprinted back to camp.

English was less than impressed to see me come back empty handed. "Tommy, mate, where's the vittles? You don't want me wasting away, do you?" He paused for a moment, "Then again, we could always eat Bow-wow if things come to worse." Jon didn't even bother to look up from the fire he

was tending. They'd both become so used to English's one sided conversations that I don't think the dog even minded anymore.

"I've found the scent of humans in a building just off to the south, the place looks intact. There may even be someone still living there."

Rebeca was by my side in seconds, kicking dirt over the fire that Jon had so recently been carefully minding. He looked up at her sourly.

"Let's go, Wolfy. I want to see this." Her voice was carefully restrained as she spoke.

It took us a few moments to break camp and stuff all of our provisions back away. I didn't know what we'd find up there, and none of us wanted to have to deal with packing if we ran into something nasty.

The building was exactly the way I had left it, door ajar. Not a single speck of dust had moved. We found a supply of torches and lamps still in their holders, just waiting for a flame.

The inside room sprang to light before us, our flickering flames pushing the darkness back into wavering corners and edges.

Pews stretched out in front of us. It was a church of some kind, though I had never seen one decked out like this was, in shades of brown and cream.

English shook his head and sneezed. "You've got one thing right, mate, it's definitely humans." He sniffed again, huffing in enough air to lift the dust around him in a swirling cloud. "But they're long gone now... all but one."

"Yep." I nodded my head. Yet... something was wrong, something urged me to run from the building as fast as I could, and even now left my fur on end.

Jon began walking up and down the pews, trailing his fingers along the fabric that draped over them. "Intriguing design... I am not aware of any sect or cult that follows these colors." He paused for a moment. "Or at least any references to these colors in V-town, but V-town is a long distance away."

I ventured further down the aisle, peering to either side. Paintings were hung on the worn, gray stone walls, massive oil drawn affairs that must be almost as large as English. They were all of humans.

A small alter stood before me, hewed of the same gray rock that the building had been, seeming to rise from the floor in a smooth organic ejection. A lone object sat upon it, a small bronze talisman in the shape of a star, five projections from a single center.

One of the spikes ended in a small sphere, the two on either side of it split into 'v's. The final two spikes, opposite to the sphere, were topped with plates that ran almost perpendicular. It had been laying flat when I found it. I set it on its feet now.

Looking around again, I noticed the same symbol on the cloaks of all the men and women in the paintings.

The small nagging in the back of my mind finally came forward, I knew what was setting my fur on end. The smell of humans – and nothing else.

While the scent of humans was pungent in the air, it filled the building from one end of the musty hall to the other, there were no other scents along with it. The place reminded me of Horseshoe Bay, only stretched out to the decades, not months.

I watched Rebeca as she walked through the room, more at home here than I had ever seen her. All the seats and tables in V-town had been designed for a middle-ground between the races that called the city home, a size slightly above that of a human, about my own. Rebeca had always been a shade

to small, as though perpetually thirteen and having one growth spurt left before adulthood.

Now she was exactly the right size, all the aisles and doors matched her perfectly, a touch too small for Jon and I. That left English standing back in the entranceway, looking forlorn as he tried to find a way through the furniture that didn't reduce it all to splinters.

Rebeca's eyes were wide as she joined me at the altar. "It's like the Cataclysm never happened, like the world never changed." She set her hand softly upon my own.

"Yah, Babe, like we never came to be."

Her had jerked back for a moment as her eyes focused on me, then Jon and English in turn. "I'm sorry, Tommy. I never meant..."

"I know, Babe." I shivered in the stuffy air. "This place gives me the creeps."

"How can it, Tommy? It's so peaceful here, so quiet," her voice trailed off.

"So closed, so tight, so... human." I continued on for her.

"I guess you're right, Wolfy. It's not for everyone." She gave me a small lopsided grin.

"Mates," English broke in from where he stood by the doors, "Why don't we see if we can figure out what's up with this place, eh?" He shuffled uneasily. "Someone had to be keeping the building together for it to still be standing, but he doesn't seem to be in attendance. I'd rather know if he's going to be coming back before I try bedding down."

"Fine," I waved a hand at Jon and him, "You two take a circuit of the grounds, Rebeca and I will case the inside of the building." I shot a grin at him. "Unless you'd rather crawl through the hallways?"

"You don't have to tell me twice, mate." He turned to leave. "Come on, Bow-wow, I might need a shield."

There were a half dozen doors leading from the altar room that we stood in, I picked one at random and laid an ear to it. Nothing but silence from the other side.

We had to keep lighting torches every few steps to see our way down the windowless corridor. While they sat ready and waiting in their holders, bolted to the simple stone walls, all were dark and cold.

We made our way through the hallway, the occasional thick wooden door on either side. I tracked a faint path of wear in the floor, newer than the footsteps around it, but still covered in dust.

"Tommy." Rebeca laid a hand on my shoulder, gently drawing me to a stop. "What was it you said back in Horseshoe Bay, about 'mating for life'?"

I tried to cock a grin at her as I started moving forward again. "What is it, Babe? Why bring this up now? It was nothing." I opened a door, the only thing behind it was an empty store room.

"English or Jon were always around. Even when we were alone, they were always just a step away."

"If you say so, Babe." I opened yet another door, a kitchen, unfortunately bare of food. "It was nothing anyway, I was just making a joke. Wolves, like me, don't tend to let go once we've found the one we're looking for." I let my arm curl around her waist, pulling her into me.

"I didn't know that, Wolfy." She grinned up at me. "I guess I should have been more careful – I could have ended up with an overly protective doggy that I might not have even liked."

"Hey, I might just have to take that personally." I stroked her hair with one hand as we walked on.

The next dozen chambers were little more interesting than what we had found so far, more storerooms, some living quarters stacked full with bunk beds, and lavatories. It wasn't until we'd been searching for at least a half hour that we found anything of note. The building was huge, but I could still smell it as we neared the far end of the hall. Rotting flesh was hard to miss.

The smell had gone past the putrid sweet stench of the recently dead and decomposing, continuing on to the mossy deterioration of something that had been gone a good long while. I was a little hesitant as I pushed open the final wooden door. I almost expected it to creak on its hinges like a bad theater effect, but it swung as silently as any other door we had encountered so far.

The chamber had obviously been a bedroom, likely for the boss of whatever this place was. The plush space was more than a step or two above the small bunk filled chambers we had seen so far. It was wide and deep, at least a dozen paces to a side. The floor and walls had been decked in carpets and tapestries of the same colors we'd seen throughout.

The center of the space was dominated by an over-sized four post bed. The sleeping curtains hadn't been drawn – I wish they had.

This was the source of the scent I had picked up, a human laying dead and long gone, swaddled between the covers.

The smell turned my stomach, but, growing up with a hunter, I was long used to the stench of death. I looked to Rebeca beside me, she had turned a less than appealing shade of green.

"Tommy, I need to get out of here..." Her voice was choked, sounding as if she was about to vomit right here and now.

I hurried her quickly towards the door, and the clearer air of the hallway. "Go get English, I'll look around." Then I shut it between us.

Even I had to cover my nose. Filtering the air through the fur of my arm did little, but at least it make me feel better.

The body that lay before me was bloated blue, shades of green grew where decomposition had begun. The room was no warmer than the snow covered fields outside, that was likely the only reason there was anything left but stained bones and rotted linen.

I made my way closer to the bed, making sure to keep my hands off the fabric and sheets. This place was rancid, having been sealed up so tight, and I didn't want to be carrying the blight away with me any more than I needed to.

From what little I could tell of the man, and I think it was a man, he had been old and frail. There was little to his body that would have looked anything like it did in life, but he appeared to have been thin and crooked, body withered with age.

I took a circuit of the bed, it sat in the center of the room, I could walk all about it, peering and the chests and shelves that lined the walls. There were portraits, robes, and more examples of that odd little symbol than I could count. There was also a single book laying on a nearby table, well outside the dead man's reach.

I heard the door slide open behind me, but it was Jon, not English, who arrived.

"Mr. Taggert." He strode into the room, the stench not seeming to affect him at all.

"Where's English?"

"Mr. English felt it would be prudent for me to join you rather than him. I am more capable in post-mortem forensics, and," He looked uncomfortable for a moment, "Ms. Rebeca was feeling ill, and I haven't the experience to deal with a vomiting woman. I didn't even know to hold her hair back." He

quickly looked away from me and focused on the bed.

"Mr. Taggert, it would appear that we have the second part of the puzzle now. Mr. English and I located a graveyard just this side of the building, with a number of relatively fresh internments."

"And you think this fellow put them there?"

"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Taggert. The tombstones all reported long lives for the deceased, it is possible that our subject is nothing but the last of a line. In any event," He continued, lifting the corpse's arm with a claw – it gave off a wet tearing sound that made me want to join Rebeca in the courtyard, "I would conclude that our subject died of a heart attack in the age range of his late fifties."

It took me a moment to swallow back my yule. "You can tell all that? He's been falling apart for months now."

Jon just shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the bed. "Standard police training. It was long ago deemed useful to be able to make an immediate assessment of a death scene, so as to decide if a homicide unit is required. And, in any event, it was approximately four months ago. He died shortly before the frost; you can tell by the green shade of his skin–"

"Thanks, I got it." Quickly, I reached out to grab the book that lay at his bedside, it was dark brown and reinforced with metal bindings.

We met Rebeca and English out in the courtyard. A sour smell wafted through the air, but I decided not to ask about it; Rebeca looked steadier on her feet than when I'd last seen her.

"So, mate, what did you discover? I've heard rumors of a body, but my less than reliable sources would paint such a thing as to be a dozen meters tall and carrying the bubonic plague." Rebeca elbowed the lion in the gut as he spoke.

"You wouldn't be that far off, man. According to Jon, we found the last of a line. Looks like we know why the place is deserted."

"So, what, they all just died of old age?" Rebeca asked as she looked up at me.

"I guess. They were all human."

"What does that have to do with it?" Her arms crossed defiantly in front of her.

"Nothing, Babe," I tried to sooth her down as I stepped forward. "Other than that might just be why there were no more to carry on."

"Oh," Her arms fell to her sides.

"So, what now, mate?" English looked at me.

I shrugged, "I guess we might as well make use of a roof over our heads when we've got it. If we clear the pews in the main chamber to one side, there should be room enough to lay out – even for you."

He heruffed, "Why do people keep feeling the need to build things so small?"

I set back off hunting, leaving the others to move in. This time I came back successful with no interruptions.

It was nice to have a night where we didn't have to set up the tents. We may just be laying on the cold stone floor, but any change was better than yet another round on the frost bitten soil.

The torches were still burning above me when I pulled open the book that I'd found. It was covered with the same layer of dust that everything else in this place was, but seemed to have been

relatively recently used, and used well.

Rebeca and English were asleep, Jon staring in to the middle distance, as I started to read.

"The record of Brother", that last word was crossed out, "Abbott Coriolis Matart of the Brotherhood of the Sacred Purity."

"It has been four weeks since former Abbott Yanayrd died, Abbott Hemlin was unanimously voted in to replace him. The votes have become quicker, and more common, these days; there are only three of us left now. I doubt there will be any brothers to follow me. So I hope, whoever you are, you keep the wheel of Purity alive within you. There are so few of us Pure surviving now, and less every day it seems."

"As the junior member of the order, it is my responsibility to bury the dead. It would seem a fitting task for the unPure, but I know better than to ever suggest such a thing. Even the simple thought of so much as conversing with an unPure would be hearsay of the highest order."

The next entry was dated a good two months later, "Abbott Hemlin gave a good service today. He spoke of the wheel in a way that I had never thought of before, I guess that's why he's Abbott. He said that we must find new Pure, find new brothers and sisters to swell our ranks before we let the flame die with us. We must go out into the world once the winter has passed, even amongst the unPure, to find what few Pure remain and bring them back to the temple. I know it will be me who goes, Brother Marcus is hardly able to walk, and the Abbott is not much better."

Another soon after, "Brother Marcus passed on in his sleep last night, I found him when I went to rouse him for morning devotions. I had to dig another grave. I'm glad the earth has finished thawing, it's so much easier to dig in the summer. We'll soon run out of grave sites... then again, that may not be a problem with only the two of us left."

"The Abbott is ill. I spent the balance of the night in his chambers with him. I don't know what afflicts him, but he does not seem well at all. He kept breathing out the mantra of the cleansing over and over, commanding me to shave his head again and again. He hadn't a strand of hair upon his entire body, but I still did as he bid me. I'm not sure what else to do."

"An unPure came to the door today. They never would have done such a thing when the temple was in force. He tried to offer me something in exchange for a night's lodging. It is unPure of me, but I couldn't turn him away. He is blasphemous, a dog of some sort, but yet he reminded me of someone I had known when I was very young – before I had been taken by the Brotherhood and educated. I sent him to sleep in the stables for the night, but I refused his offer of payment. I can't take his money – it's tainted."

"It's only been a few hours since sunset, the unPure was still in the stables, and Abbott Hemlin is wailing in his sleep. It's happened before, but never this long, never this chilling. The unPure came knocking at the door a few moments ago, asking what the screams were. I told him to mind his own business and not question his betters."

"The Abbott wailing all night, I don't believe either I nor the unPure got a moment's rest the entire time. He, the unPure, came to see me again, much more gracefully this time. He must know the Abbott is ill, he offered to see him. He claims to know some medicine, but I could never allow his foul eyes to fall upon someone as vulnerable as Abbott Hemlin is now."

"I tried to feed some soup the Abbott at noon, but he twisted and screamed the entire time; I was not able to so much as get within arm's reach of him, he thrashed so. It pains me greatly to see the man in torture, he was never my friend, but he was my Brother."

"The dog, the unPure, was packing to leave when I found him. It felt so wrong to ask aid of one such as he, but I had nothing else I could do. I can't loose the Abbott, can I? He is the only one left, save me. If he were to die then I would become Abbott, and my life has been far too wronged already to ever take such a vaulted pose as that. I had to take the taint of the unPure that was the dog onto my own soul to try and save the Abbott. Yes, that's it."

"The dog was good to his word. His unPure ministrations did seem to help the Abbott. In some ways I was glad that my Brother never did open his eyes, I would rue the day he ever saw one such as the unPure in his chambers. I couldn't bring myself to allow the dog's hand to lay upon the fair Abbott, so I had him direct me in what to do. There was little medication to go around the Abby, so we used what the dog had brought in. I wasn't sure what to do with the beast when we were done. I couldn't let him leave now, what if the Abbott fall to thrashing again?"

"It's been three nights now, the dog and I, Charles is his name, have had to remedicate the poor Abbott every day. I've come to taking lunch with Charles, my soul is stained enough as it is that it makes no difference now."

"Charles tells me that he has come from the west, he claims that there is a large encampment of those like him many days hike that way. He has asked me what it is I do here, who the Brotherhood are. I was aware that the Brotherhood was not well known among the unPure, but could we be completely foreign to them?"

"Abbott Hemlin's condition continues to worsen, the medications we have does little now. Charles says that I should be preforming the rites of the Brotherhood. For a moment I didn't know what he was talking about, until he showed me the passage from one of the books I had lent to him. I had completely forgotten about that rite, I suppose we all had with so many deaths of late."

"The Abbott is dead. I am the new Abbott, I suppose. There is no one else with to hold the vote, so it would appear to fall to me – no matter the wretched condition of my soul. Charles is packing, he says he will leave tomorrow, as soon as the storm breaks."

"I haven't opened the Abbott's room, not since I found him dead. I suppose it's my room now, but it doesn't seem like it. I've yet to so much as dig a grave. Charles is leaving today, heading back west. He says that he has spent too much time here already and needs to go home, to see his family again. My family, my Brothers, are all in the ground. Right here."