

The Explorers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 5: Kicking Horse Pass

The four of us, Jon, English, Rebeca, and I, left Merrett the next morning at sunrise. I was happy to put that place behind us. The book too, I left it back where I'd found it, next to the bed.

I tried the radio before we set out, neither I nor Jon had touched it since he'd shown it to me. We were afraid to run the batteries down. I pressed the button, but was rewarded with little more than a burst of static.

"Hello? Hello!" I held the box closer to my ear, hoping that I might just be able to make out a single word, anything to let me know that the city was still standing. All I got was a belch of white noise.

A hand appeared to gently pull the radio from me. I jumped. It was Jon.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Taggart, but the range of the unit is limited. We expected this."

I sighed and let him take it from me, "I just want to know that my dad is okay."

He smiled, one of the few times I'd ever truly seen it. A toothy grin that was far more calm and domestic than anything a wolf would show. "I'm sure he is, Mr. Taggart. Commissioner Sayer would never allow anything to happen to him," He paused for a moment and lay a finger to his chin, "Though, from what I've seen of your father, I doubt he would need the help."

We continued to push upward and to the east, into the stronghold of the mountains. I had to shield my eyes now, the ever growing sun threw a sheen off the white snow that threatened to blind me. It was hard at times to see the molted black river of highway beneath us, often as not covered with drifts so deep and long as to make us wonder if it was there at all.

We were on the road, walking yet another mile, it seems we had passed hundreds of them now in the weeks it had been since departing Merrett, when I heard the crack of thunder. Above me was the unbroken blue of a cloudless sky.

I looked around me, everyone was gone. I could just make out Rebeca laying face down, crouched in the snow.

"Uh, Babe?" I reached down to offer her my hand.

She looked up at me, barely rising her head from the ground. "Tommy! Get down, that was a gunshot!"

Gun? Oh yeah, didn't the humans used to use those for hunting in the old days? Oh.

A heartbeat later I was flat, belly first in the drift beside her.

"Does someone what to bloody well tell me what's going on?" English's voice boomed from somewhere behind me. "When did we suddenly become target practice? And who, in their blimey right mind, has enough spare shells to go about firing shots clear into the wild blue? Those things are worth more than gold!"

"Eh? What?" A new voice came from up ahead, it was old and cracked but carried across the void of snow as powerfully as English's had. "Who's there? You don't sound like those bandits again."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Whoever was holding the gun didn't sound like the fastest wolf in the pack, but they didn't sound like a homicidal maniac either.

"Hello?" I yelled down the expanse of ice in front of me, "Can you hear me?" I thought about standing up for a moment, but quickly decided better of it. I may have regeneration, but I didn't much care for getting a hole shot in me out here in the middle of nowhere, with no one better then this lot to provide medical care.

"Eh? I can't hear you, boy. You need to speak up. Wait, never mind," I heard feet crunching snow, "I'll come to you."

He came into view, hopping over the snow in willowy strides that moved him jerkily and haltingly along. He was tall and thin, with a stock of wisping blond hair atop his human head.

"Who in blazes are you? It's a bit early for travelers. Last one I saw was that rat headed the other way." He set his rifle down, butt first in the snow and leaned on the barrel. At least I assume it was a rifle, I'd never seen one before, but the way both English and Jon looked warily to it, I could imagine it no other thing.

"Hello," I pulled myself from the snow, extending a hand to him. "My name is Tommy. This is English, Rebeca and Jon. We're just passing through on our way to the prairies."

"Just passing through, eh? That's all anyone is around here." He shifted his gun in the snow, Jon flinched and English looked about ready to pounce. "The name is Renfrew, the right honorable David Renfrew that is."

"The 'right honorable'?" I took a step forward, he shook my hand with a heavy pump and a smile.

"Of course, my boy. Haven't you ever spoken to your member before?" From behind me I could hear Rebeca snort as she pulled herself from the snow. "You're member of parliament, that is."

English walked up, eyeing the rifle that the man still held as a walking stick. Renfrew snorted as the lion came closer. "They sure grow 'em big wherever it is you come from, don't they?" English just grunted. "So, fellows, I apologize for the rude reception, we've got a problem with bandits up here in the winter, they're practically the only ones who come by this time of year." He led us down the slope. "Care to join me for a reception? It's the least I can offer you fellows," He eyed Rebeca like a kindly grandfather, "Especially for you, my dear."

Renfrew's 'parliamentary accommodations', as he called it, was a cabin nestled amongst the peaks. The place was so snowed in that if it hadn't been for the smoke rising from a chimney I might just as soon assumed it was yet another snow bank.

The inside was cozy, a half dozen rooms in the simple log structure, most of which were buried well under the drifts. "Sorry for the mess, fellows, but the wife and folks are off visiting the family this month."

He rattled about, eventually pulling a few cans of preserved fruit and some bread from the shelf. He laid a cup of tea before Rebeca and himself, but provided English with a saucer of milk, and Jon and I with scraps of meat.

I will give English credit, he did manage to hold himself in check for a half dozen seconds before lunging across the table to grab the steaming cup of tea. He retreated back across the table with it, nursing the beverage the entire way as though it were ambrosia.

I just laughed as the lion shot us all ugly glares. Renfrew held a hand up to his mouth and whispered to me, "He's not much for milk is he? Heh, I've never seen a cat who's wasn't much for milk."

English just growled at us while he sipped his tea.

"So, Renfrew, what are you doing alone all the way out here?" I asked while making a half-hearted attempt to pick through the scraps he'd given me.

"This is where my constituency is, ain't it? It would be right for me to leave it, bar a little snow. That would be proper and Canadian of me."

I barked out a laugh, this was the first time I'd ever heard anyone describe themselves as Canadian, outside the history books. "What, you work for the Canadian government?"

He gave me a hurt expression. "No, Tommy, I am the government. Or at least a part of it, anyway. I'm the member for Kicking Horse Pass, where you're sitting right now."

"And who made you that?" Rebeca asked.

"Why, I did." he replied, puffing out his chest. "Me and the constituency, the wife and kids, eh?"

"And that made you the government?" She shook her head with a laugh.

"Of course it did, my dear. It was all very democratic, followed the instructions to the letter. Even mailed the results off the Ottawa. And boy let me tell you, a mail box is hard to find these days!"

I laid a hand on Rebeca's arm, drawing her away from that particular line of conversation.

"So, Renfrew," I asked, "Could you tell us the best way to get out of the mountains from here?"

He scratched his stubbled chin for a moment. "You folks from the coast?" I nodded. "Well, the good news is that you're past halfway through now, it's all downhill from here."

I couldn't help but smile when he said that.

"Just keep on heading east, you'll pass the hot springs, then you'll soon be on level ground. Though I don't know why you'd ever want that."

I saw English straighten on the other side of the table, then I heard it. Someone was approaching, multiple someones, and they didn't sound like the wife and family.

Renfrew must have good hearing for his age, he sprang to his feet soon after we'd first noticed. It took Rebeca a moment to clue in.

"What?" She followed me as I sprinted to the nearby window. No good, it was covered over with a meter of snow. I turned and met Jon at the door. English was still eyeing Renfrew warily as the old man cocked his rifle and leveled it.

"Do you folks reckon you'll help an old man defend his jurisdiction?" He paused for a moment and scratched his chin. "I could deputize you..."

I tried to back away from him for a second, I'd left V-town to avoid fights like this, and I didn't want to be dragged back into something I wasn't even a part of.

It didn't do me much good though, I could smell them only a second before the door beside me splintered. They stank of old sweat and stale beer. There must have been five of them or more, they looked somewhere around a cross between a bear and a moose, like nothing I'd ever heard of before.

"The windigo." Renfrew let loose a round of buckshot. The echo of the blast slammed around the room like a marble, making my eyes blur and ears ring.

The beast, whatever it was, pulled back for a moment, but no blood splattered. "Back you varmints!" Renfrew was doing his best impersonation of a cowboy, complete with a fist pumping the air. He lowered the gun for another shot.

If it was anything like the first, I'd take my chances with the beast rather than put up with that again. I laid a hand on the barrel. "We'll take it from here, old man."

I stepped forward, towards what remained of the door. The windigo didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to get in. They just milled about outside in the snow, as if we were little more than an after thought.

That changed when I set foot in the sunlight.

I could make them out clearly now, a half dozen in total, the same size as English and at least as heavy. They were a dark brown black with shaggy fur that would put a musk-ox to shame. I tried to see a hint of intelligence in the wool enshrouded faces, but I couldn't even make out their eyes past the hair.

They stood and stared for a moment, unsure. The first one came forward, howling out a warbling scream in a language I couldn't guess. His arms were drawn wide as though to embrace me, I never gave him the chance.

He was fat and slow, I took a single step back and he missed me, thick arms grasping air. As he passed by I lashed out a claw tipped hand, letting it slice into the cloud of hair that covered him. For a moment I almost missed in turn, I had to lung forward at the last instant to make contact with the body behind the foot deep mat.

I must have barely nicked him, pulling back my hands I hardly saw a stain upon them, but he screamed bloody murder and wrenched away like I'd stuck him with a hot poker.

An instant later three more were upon me, one for each arm and a third for my snapping jaws. They held me face up in the snow, fur pressed into me so that I could clearly smell the scent of fish sticks gone bad.

For a moment I wasn't sure what they were going to do, then the one holding my neck began to tighten his grip, jabbering incoherently the whole time.

I was starting to see black spots and hear the blood rushing in my ears when I could just make out an unmistakable sound – a lion roaring five feet from my head.

I could see the sky again, the beast holding my neck was peeled away like the lid off a tin of sardines. The feeling of blood returning to my head made me giddy.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the flash of a load of buck shot arcing through the sky, a few moments later I heard a thunk as something heavy dropped to the ground a couple of feet away.

Rebeca appeared, vaulting over my body to swing at the thing holding my left arm, it scrambled

back as her sword whistled through the air. The moment I could move again I slashed at the last one restraining me.

I'll give him credit, this guy didn't scream as much as the first had. He waited until I'd garbed him by the hair of his chest before trying to escape. I gave him a bop over the head for his troubles, he fell to the snow like a sack of kibble.

I turned and watched Jon face off against the last of the things, they were a couple of meters apart, eyeing each other. The creature attacked him with a bellow, Jon didn't even seem to move. He stood stock still as the larger form charged towards him. If I hadn't known the dog, I would have said he was paralyzed in fear.

Jon moved faster than I could follow. One moment he and the beast were nose to nose, the next Jon's hands were held before him and a foot shot out to trip the mammoth as he pulled the larger creature's wight forward. The fuzball fell face first to the snow, crumpling to the ground with Jon not so much as taking a step. The beast had hardly time to move before Jon calmly walked up behind him and administered a single sharp below to the back of the padded skull.

I heard Renfrew cheering behind us like we'd just won a football game, he had his hat off and was waving it in the air. I almost expected to see him jumping for joy.

"You did it, lads, you did it! These fellows have been hounding me for the last four months, and you handled them in four minutes flat! You deputies are worth every penny I'm not paying you!"

The hairballs made it back to their senses a short time later, windigos Renfrew reminded us, and he had us let them go. "They won't be bothering me again." I was just as glad to seem them limp away, I'd killed enough to know that there was nothing to be gained in yet another death.

English patched up the door, nailing enough wood together to keep out the snow and some of the wind. The lion then proceeded to help himself to Renfrews tea pot, sitting in the corner of the room and growling at any of us who came near.

"So, fellows," The old man was back sitting at his table, this time he had provided us with food more befitting reality rather than our fur, "I am most indebted to you for coming along when you did. They were becoming quite a menace, showing up every day as they were."

"What were they, sir?" Jon seemed to be the only one holding up a conversation. He'd immediately taken to calling Renfrew 'sir' as soon as he claimed to be a member of the Canadian government.

"Residents of some cliffs to the north, a couple hundred kilometers. They've always been there, but they tend to range further in the winter when they're fewer travelers to molest. You've likely made the road safer for a number of years to come."

He sipped his drink and watched me for a moment before putting it back down and speaking, "You know what, Tommy? I like you." Huh? "It's a gift, you know. I have that with people, I just know if they're worthwhile, and I like you. I like all of you." English looked up from his tea for a moment before ignoring us again. "And I think I should show you something, as you are my deputies and all that."

We didn't have time to argue as he dragged us outside. Even English, who looked longingly back at his tea cup.

It was a rough hike, straight up the faceless side of a mountain, at least a good five hundred

meters. It wasn't until we were practically upon it that I noticed an indentation in the bare rock, colored to match so perfectly that I could be staring at it and just as well not see a thing.

Renfrew put a shoulder to the stone and pushed, nothing happened. Jon joined him a moment later, and the two of them dug their feet into the frost until a click sounded from deep within the earth. Renfrew put a hand to Jon's arm and drew him back, a few moments later the very mountain before us moved.

It must have been a good three meters square, solid stone and heavy as a building, but it slowly moved back by its own accord without so much as a scrape. For a moment we all stared into the pitch blackness before us, then, with a tink and hum, lights began snapping on.

"Electricity, out here? How?" I hadn't heard a generator, and there would be no one to run it in any event.

Renfrew shrugged and walked in, curbing the snow on his boots in the antechamber. "He tried to explain it to me once, but I haven't the foggiest."

"He? I thought you folks were alone up here."

Renfrew kept walking, "I'll let him tell you himself."

The tunnel was a good two meters wide, enough for us to walk side by side in pairs, Jon and Renfrew, Rebeca and I, and finally English. It was also tall enough for the lion to stride through without whacking his head against the concrete ceiling above. The lights bolted to the roof were the buzzing florescent kind that you see around every so often, even with half of them burnt out they were still worth a fortune alone.

The walk was flat and level, straight into the soul of the living stone around us. It wasn't long until I got the unpleasant feeling of the very earth pressing down, watching me. The feeling was hardly helped when I saw a camera mounted on the wall, it swiveled as we passed by, keeping us in focus.

It wasn't until we'd already passed through it that I realized that we had put a hatch between us and the world outside. It slammed shut with the sound of grinding metal on metal, leaving us facing another identical doorway in front of us.

I wasn't the only one to jump as we were penned in, Rebeca practically ended up in my arms, and I could have scraped English from the ceiling with a spatula. I hadn't know his claws were good enough to get a grip on concrete.

"Don't worry, fellows, it's just security," Renfrew said as he knocked on the steel plates before us. "Ornithi, let us in. It's me."

I wasn't sure who he was calling to, no one on the other side of that foot thick steel door would ever hear us.

"I know who you are, old man, but you still need to follow procedure." A voice came from a grate next to the door, but it didn't seem right, like someone had chopped off the high and low notes to the sound, as if it had been spoken down the length of a long copper pipe and had taken on the characteristics of the metal in its travel. "You still have the card I gave you, don't you?" I got the feeling this wasn't the first time they'd gone through this routine.

"Of course I do, you tyrannical stickler... somewhere, I think." He set his gun against the wall and began digging through the innumerable pockets that lined his coat. "Here," He pulled a palm sized plastic rectangle from somewhere or other, sliding it into a small slot under the grill.

"One moment, Mr. Renfrew, confirming identity." A grinding sound came from behind the wall.

"Do you acknowledge the admittance of four additional personal?"

"Yes." The old man's voice sounded tired now as he leaned on the wall. "They're my new deputies."

"Understood, Mr. Renfrew and company. Your arrival has been logged." The massive door in front of us slid aside, slowly and silently. The smell of stale, recycled air washed over my face, a higher pressure than what had been outside. I almost fainted as I saw stars before my eyes, I hadn't realized how much pressure we had lost during our climb, nor how much oxygen.

Renfrew took a few deep breaths and continued forward, apparently accustomed to the change. He stopped a few steps on to watch us, a sheepish grin on his face. "Why don't I give you fellows a few moments to catch your breath, eh?"

The inside of the complex was much like the entranceway, aged gray concrete and humming florescent lights. The bulbs snapped on as we walked forward and clicked back off behind us after we passed. It was an odd experience to watch our shadows constantly flickering about us, never content to stay in a single place, not to mention that we were constantly walking into darkness. Every so often we passed through an intersection large enough to turn a small car. The lights never came on in the other hallways, so I had no way of knowing how far they went.

"Where are we going, Renfrew?" I asked as we continued to make out way down the seemingly endless corridor. If not for the fact the thing was a straight as a ruler, I would have almost thought we were going in circles.

"Like I said, we're going to meet Orthi. I'm not sure where he really is, somewhere in the mountain I suppose, but he likes to chat in the main conference room."

A few moments later the hallway terminated, a doorway materializing out the darkness. It was much like the ones we had first entered through, but less substantial. This one was only a half dozen centimeters thick, and didn't look like it could go head to head with a nuke, unlike the first set. Also, this one was open, and there were lights on within.

This was the first place we'd seen in the mountain that consisted of more than bare concrete and metal. The room held thick carpets, deep leather back chairs, and a single monolithic conference table that must have taken at least a dozen trees to make. The wood was polished to such a shine that I could see myself in it, still a dozen strides away.

Atop the table sat a half dozen screens, looking something like what I'd once seen on a computer, but thinner, almost like a sheet of paper. They all presented the same image, "Kicking Horse Pass Emergency Continuity Facility – Active." A counter ticked up beneath the text, the hour marker was in the hundreds of thousands. The entire image was framed in the wire outline of a red maple leaf.

"Welcome, fellows, to the center of the Canadian government west of Ottawa." Renfrew waved a hand about the empty room with a flourish before collapsing into one of the chairs.

A voice came from a speaker concealed behind the screens. "I do wish you wouldn't leave the complex, Renfrew. You're the only representative of the government who has made it here, you really should remain until the emergency has passed."

"What emergency?" I edged closer to the screens, trying to see if I could track the true source of the voice.

"Why, the current one, of course." The voice sounded slightly annoyed that I didn't know what it was talking about. "This facility was brought on-line, unmanned I'm afraid, as the result of an

emergency continuity signal broadcast from Ottawa. I have no additional information on the situation. As per its design, this complex will remain active until I either receive a stand down signal, or an authorized member of the Canadian Forces arrives with the deactivation code."

"How long was the system designed to remain active?" I poked my head under the table as I spoke, but the mass of wires there was an untraceable rat's nest.

"Ninety days." The voice paused for a moment. "As you can see, I have been able to retain my active status far beyond the original design specification... as no members of the government originally arrived."

Renfrew smiled and put his feet up on the table. "Until I showed up. And let me tell you, it was one battle to get Ornithi to talk to me."

"You were not a member of the government at that time." I could almost hear the voice's nose turn up. "I only allow members of the government, and their guests, to enter the complex."

The old man grinned at me. "He made me hold an election and everything!"

"That's the only way it could be democratic." A note of panic edged into the voice. "All the laws of the land must be followed."

"Bah!" He swatted at the screens. "And you made me mail the results, too. Do you know how long it took me to locate a mailbox? I had to walk all the way out to Revelstoke just to find one. And let me tell you, that thing was so rusted over that the door had fallen off! I could see my own letter inside the box!"

"But the law requires that all election results be submitted to Ottawa. When no response was returned in four months, you automatically became the defacto member of parliament for this jurisdiction."

"And the only person you'll talk to is your member?" Rebeca couldn't quite keep a straight face as she said that.

"Yes," the voice responded flatly. "That is the law. Once he was a member of the government I could let him in. And that brings us to the next question. Who, exactly, are you?" The voice hadn't changed, but I could feel a slight freeze to its tone.

Renfrew was the first to respond, not even bothering to take his feet from the table. "I told you, Ornithi, they're my deputies."

"You know, Mr. Renfrew, that I require more information than that."

It was Jon who spoke up next, we were all surprised when he stepped forward to address the screens. "I am Constable Jon Oaks of the V-town..." He paused for a moment, thinking, "Vancouver, metropolitan police. I am on special assignment to escort Mr. Tommy Taggart, the incumbent mayor of V-town. The current mayor has been killed, and, as a result of martial law being imposed, Mr. Taggart has been nominated as the provisional replacement by Commissioner Sayer."

My jaw just about hit the polished wood of the desk.

The voice didn't respond for a moment. "Do you have any evidence to back up these claims?"

I wasn't sure if the voice could see him, but Jon shrugged. "I have my badge."

"Please place it on the scanning table." The text on the screens was replaced by an arrow, pointing to the far side of the room, and pictorial instructions.

Jon sat his badge on a small glass table, the sound of an electric motor cut the air a few moments later as a beam of light strobed the small chunk of metal.

"Identity confirmed. Your identification is valid, and information is consistent with the intercepted radio traffic."

I was about ready to reach out and strangle the dog. I was mayor? Since when? Sayer had no right to put me in this bind. The least he could have done was to tell me first!

"Mr. Taggart, could you please identify yourself?"

I looked over at English and Rebeca before saying anything, they just shrugged back at me without a word. "That, um, would be me."

I heard a whir, a camera that I hadn't noticed before was situated in the corner of the room. It swiveled towards me, lenses clicking into focus. "Tommy Taggart, mayor of Vancouver?" The voice sounded pleased.

I shot Jon a glance. We would be discussing this later. "Sure."

"Please step up to the scanner, sir. Procedure requires that, as a representative of the government, you must sign in to the facility so that we can register your location with Ottawa."

Stepping forward, I wasn't too sure what was expected of me. I lay my hands, pads down, on the glass, hoping that was what he wanted. A line of light crawled across them.

"Odd..." Ornithi's voice spoke from behind me, "The structure of your finger prints does not fit within any standard deviations that has ever been recorded. Do you have a physical deformity or genetic aberration?"

I pulled my hands off the glass. Looking back over my shoulder at the screens, they displayed a closeup of my fingers. A large number of red markers were blinking.

"I'm about as normal as anyone else I know..." I wasn't quite sure how to answer. "Renfrew's hands would be in the minority these days."

"Noted." The voice was totally neutral, apparently I had passed the test. "It is the policy of the Canadian government not to discriminate against any citizen, no matter their physical condition. Your profile has been stored. Welcome."

Jon quickly butted back into the conversation, introducing Rebeca as my 'fiancée', and English as a bodyguard in my employment. The lion growled at that one, but Jon uncharacteristically held up a hand to silence him.

The only thing Renfrew said during the whole process was, "If I knew you were that important, I would have pulled out the good silver."

The introductions ended with the disembodied voice stating, "Welcome to Kicking Horse Pass. You may access the majority of the installation, but as you are a member of the municipal government, and not the federal, I cannot grant you access to the armory."

"Suits me fine," I muttered under my breath. "You can keep your guns. I'd just shoot my eye out."

The voice continued endlessly, reporting off different statistics and news that had been received over the last hundred odd years. It was Rebeca who broke in next.

"How do you know all this? You've kept a log book of everything that's happened since the Cataclysm?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's my job. I have been in operation since this facility was brought on-line."

"Operational? You mean you've lived here all your life?"

The voice paused for a moment. "I was unaware that you had not been briefed. My name,

Ornithi, is short for Orthogonal Emergency Response and Administrative System. I am an artificial intelligence built into this facility, with the purpose of promoting the reestablishment of stable government after the emergency has passed."

"Wait," I pushed my way in front of Rebeca, "You're not real?"

I could hear its disgust despite the monotone inflection. "I can most assure you, Mr. Taggert, that I am, as you put it, 'real'. I just don't happen to be biological."

"I've seen a computer before," I thought back to the blocky boxes that they'd had at KDP. "They didn't talk at all. And I think the total number of colors they could show on their screens was somewhere around six – six of the ugliest colors I could think of, too."

"I am more than a half-step above any synthetic system that you may have ever encountered."

"If you're so good, buzzer," English said, walking up behind me, voice quiet and growling as he eyed the screens, "Then why are you still in here when the rest of the world is out there? In case you haven't noticed, there isn't much government left for you to preserve. Why didn't you put your brain power to use before the whole place fell apart?"

"Mr. English," The voice hadn't changed, but yet sounded strained, "Every line of my programming, every thought I possess, is directed towards nothing other than sustaining the government. But, this complex is incomplete. It was never finished before the Cataclysm, as you call it, hit. I have no data lines outside the immediate area, and no way to communicate. I am only able to receive radio signals, the hardware to transmit was delivered but never installed. I have done everything I can to ensure continuity of power. And, now that I have two governmental representatives here, I have doubled my effectiveness in the matter."

"Lot of good it's done you. For all we know everything east the great divide could be slag. All I want is to find what's on our map." I flopped down in a chair across from Renfrew as I spoke to the screens.

"There is radio activity to the east, Mr. Taggert. Not as much as from the west coast, but it is there. Did you mention a map? Have you a destination other than this facility?"

I looked over at English before pulling the map, the real one, from my backpack. All he said was, "It's your show, mate."

"We're trying to get to the spot marked 'E' on this map. We think it could provide some insight into the Cataclysm." I placed the thin rice paper face down on Ornithi's scanner, his light skimmed over it.

"My records suggest that your destination is Edmonton."

"What's Edmonton? I've never heard of it." I carefully folded the map back up and placed it in my pack.

"The capital... the former capital of the province of Alberta. I have yet to receive a single signal or report from that region since the current state of emergency began."

I sighed and put my head back, at least we had a name now. "Can we get there from here?"

"Most certainly, though I've yet to have a report from anyone attempting the journey. Your best route would be..." I could hear a quiet whizzing from somewhere beyond the walls, "To continue east through the national parks to Banff, and on to Calgary, following highway one. Once you have reached Calgary, you can proceed on highway two straight up through Red Deer, reaching Edmonton. With a vehicle and favorable conditions, you could make the journey in under a day."

"And if we don't have a mythical vehicle?"

He paused for another moment. "Approximately one hundred hours walking time. I can provide you with the assurance that you have already surmounted the worst of the distance. The combination of improving weather and leveling terrain should ease your journey. However, Mr. Taggart, I must recommend that you do not proceed. As one of the few remaining governmental representatives, it would be more appropriate you remain here."

"Not going to happen, Ornthi." I moved to stand up. "Wait a moment, you said that you could receive radio signals from V-town?"

"That is correct."

"What's the status of the city?" I thought back to my radio, and how I could get nothing but static.

"There are currently few transmissions. The last major status report I intercepted was that of a party leaving east, approximately one month ago. All other signals have been at too low a level to be comprehensible."

I laid my head in my hands. "That was us."

I felt Jon tap my shoulder as he spoke up, "If someone were to install your missing hardware, would that allow you to transmit and request a status update?"

"Yes. All hardware required was delivered. It would take at least one week to install, but it should be possible."

English looked over at me. "In a week, mate, we could be halfway to Edmonton."

"I can arrange for it to happen, Mr. Taggart." Jon was staring into the schematics displayed on the screens as he spoke.

"Huh? What are you talking about Jon?"

"If you desire it, I could remain here and bring the facility's transmitter on-line. That would allow us a conduit of communication not only to V-town, but also to you, via the hand-held unit, as you continue the journey."

"You'd be willing to do that, Jon? I thought you were bound and determined to stick with us."

He shrugged. "It is my vacation after all, Mr. Taggart." A smile parted his lips. "And I can do more good here, maintaining the lines of communication, than I could traveling with you. I'm confident Mr. English can ensure your safety. Assuming," He looked over at Renfrew, "Our host would permit me to remain with him."

Renfrew laughed and threw his hands in the air. "A doggy of my very own? And one that obeys commands? I'd be a fool not to take you in. Besides, you'd be more than a match for any stray bandits that happen to wander this way."

We spent the night within the Kicking Horse installation, warm air and stale cots were far preferable to what we'd been sleeping on up until now. Renfrew was even able to guide us to seemingly endless storerooms still filled to the brim with preserved food. And, much to English's delight, literal mountains of tea bags. For a moment I almost thought he was going to try and take the whole lot of them in his pack.

It wasn't long until the four of us stood at the front lock of the complex, Renfrew having disappeared off somewhere. English, Rebeca, and I stood on one side of the cusp of the open door, Jon on the other.

"Are you sure you want to stay here Jon?" I asked, feeling oddly uneasy about leaving him here after having him travel with us for so long, a near silent companion.

"You needn't worry... Tommy. We'll be speaking again soon, and I'm sure you'll be successful in finding whatever it is you're looking for."

"Take care of yourself, Bow-wow," English held out his hand. "It's... been good having you around." The lion shuffled his feet and looked down.

"As it was a pleasure working with you, Mr. English." He gripped the lion's hand tightly and grinned, looking more at ease now than any time I'd ever seen him.

Rebeca gave him a quick hug before Ornthi closed the door between us. One second he was a mere stride away, the next there was nothing but steel.

"Please wait while the pressure equalizes to sixteen hundred meters." Ornthi's voice was small through the grill.