

The Explorers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 6: Nights Alone

My ears popped as we walked out of the mountain. We had to scale a sheer cliff to get back on the highway, I was just glad that none of us broke our necks.

Back on the road all thoughts of the world seemed to slip away, but I did remember to check that I had the radio. Still nothing but static when I pressed the button.

We slowly descended over the next several days, too slowly for my tastes. It was still winter up here, but I could see more and more signs of spring as we continued, even a few bare patches of ground. The next part of the path, however, was a little more extreme than the stray patch of mud.

We could just make out the foggy, shifting outline of the prairies in the distance, but our problem was a tad closer. The road was gone, and do I mean gone. Well, we could still see it – what remained was a few hundred meters away, mostly down. The only thing I could think of was that an avalanche must have hit during break up, its passing washing away the road, and the entire ledge that it had run along. The highway had been etched right into the side of the mountain, but there was nothing left of that now.

My toes were curled around the edge, nothing but a dozen meters of air stood between us and the other side of the road where the highway picked up again as if nothing had happened.

"This could be a problem..." My voice echoed in the empty mountain air.

"What's wrong, mate, never had to deal with a little adversity before?" English had already sloughed off his pack and was digging through it; I was surprised he'd room for anything in it anymore, after he had loaded up back at the pass. "I was wondering when I'd have to pull these out." He held a hammer, pins, and a length of rope towards me.

"You've got to be kidding." The breath caught in my throat. Beside me, I could see Rebeca turning a shade whiter.

"Not unless you plan on turning around, mate. There aren't many ways through the mountains. I checked back at the Pass." He grinned, but he was showing a few too many teeth, hands shaking slightly. "Last time I had to do this, I was little more than a kit. The Rockies are a long way from

India." He began tying the rope around himself in a loose three point harness. The line was a neon blue, contrasting starkly against the black and gold of his suit.

He almost didn't bother to wait for us to grab the other end of the line before stepping out into the void. The noonday sun cast a long shadow beneath him, almost reaching to the distant ground below.

He had his claws out, almost hanging from them alone. His belly was plastered against the rough stone as his hands slipped slowly forward, questing for a slightest imperfection in the surface of the rock.

He hung there for a moment, a golden spider against the dark skin of the earth. Then I heard a pebble skip down from under one of his toes.

I almost hadn't the time to brace myself as he disappeared from sight, I didn't even hear him yell. I did, however, hear a string of curses quite clearly when the rope came taught. I'd expected the line to snap, it seemed only logical. But instead it stretched, like a thick elastic. After a few moments I could see him again, and the weight came off my hands.

"Oi, mate! I think I've got a few more gray hairs down here!" He spared me a hand for a thumbs up before continuing once again to slide his way across. Admittedly, now at a somewhat lower altitude.

While it felt like it took forever, it couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes for him to reach the other side, and that included the vertical climb back up to the road.

I waited until he was safely across before shouting out, "What the heck was that? You buy this rope at a novelty shop?"

Even from this distance I could see his mane shake. "Nah, mate, it's my ol' climbing line, it's almost as old as you are. Dynamic, that's what they call it. This little beauty has saved my tail more than a few times. It stretches so you don't come to a sudden stop at the end of your fall – that would be almost as bad as hitting the ground, eh? Just be careful, these things can only take so many jolts."

There was no question on who was to go next, despite her protests, it was Rebeca. With one of us on each side, it was a trivial matter to hold the rope end to end as she crossed. Good thing too. Without English's claws she had almost no purchase on the stone, her weight nearly completely on the line the whole way. Thankfully, between English as I it was no problem.

I breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the other side safely, before breaking out into a cold sweat between my toes. She'd had the benefit of a person at either end to help her, my crossing would include no such luck, nor did I have English's claws or experience. I flexed my fingers for a moment, looking at the cracked black nubs on their tips. They had grown longer over the winter, but were no match for the rock. I couldn't rely on them for anything more than to make it harder to feel the subtle edges in the stone.

I peered across the gap at English. "Are you going to be alright, mate? We can find another way..." His voice was almost lost in the crosswinds.

"No. I've got to do this."

Tying the rope around my waist, I took a single step out into the air and felt my toes scratch for purchase. Have I mentioned I really hate climbing? I do, I really do. But the world just seems to think I need more practice. Why couldn't I have been born a squirrel?

Another few steps and everything seemed to be coming along. I'd found the cracks that English and Rebeca had widened, almost making it a good quarter of the way across. I reached out for my next

finger hold. It wasn't there.

"Gah!" I began to overbalance, my body pitching towards the far side of the rift, but it was still impossibly out of reach. It was my tail that saved me. I love my tail. Without ever thinking – I never do, it seems to have a mind of its own – it shot straight out, providing just enough counter balance to find that fraction of an instant to steady my good hand and wrench myself back to relative safety.

"Tommy! Are you alright?" I could hear Rebeca's voice over the wind, but I didn't dare turn my head or shift my weight.

"English, you'd better make sure that rope is ready," I yelled it into the mountainside, hoping he could hear me.

What now?

I slowly inched my hand out, gently questing over the hard stone, looking for even the shallowest depression in which to hook. There was nothing. I could just make out the faint scrapes of English's claws from when he had passed. How, I had no idea.

I couldn't stay here, and I couldn't go back... I found the best niche there was and shifted my weight ever so gently forward. So far, it held.

My toes were an even more difficult proposition. I couldn't see where they needed to go, and they held most of my weight.

If you stopped to think about it for a moment, it was a rather laughable position. That would be if I wasn't the one in it. Suspended a hundred meters in the air, hanging by the very tips of my claws, the only safety being an oversized elastic that was a decade past its best by date.

My toe found a hold, or at least I thought it had. I shifted my weight ever so gently, getting ready to move my other hand when it came loose. Much like English, I heard a single pebble trail down the cliff, pinging along the stones. Its high pitched notes almost sounding like someone striking an xylophone.

Then I fell.

"Tommy!"

Rebeca had seen it almost before I'd even felt it myself. My foot came out from beneath me, I might have been able to hold it if not for the poor grip I had so recently taken. As it was, I hadn't a chance.

It felt like the world fell out from beneath me, tenacious holds evaporating as my body pulled down. I had only a single glimpse of the snow dusted trees and rubble below before I began tumbling.

A few meters down, I felt the rope come tight. It only slowed me for a fraction of a second before snapping cleanly in two.

The first impact against the stone dislodged my pack, having been still strapped to my back, it went off flying somewhere out of sight. The second nearly knocked me senseless, stars flying through my head as blood rushed free from my scalp.

My vision cleared in seconds, I was still plummeting. Only now headfirst, going down on my back. I craned my neck, but I couldn't see where I was headed. Just as well, I suppose.

My hands stretched. I was doing everything I could to bury my stub claws into the unyielding stone. They found nothing but burns as the rough rock streaked by.

I'd crossed the distance to the tree line in seconds, the highway above me was out of sight now, replaced by the trunks and branches of evergreens that flashed by too quick to count. The only thing that

saved me was the clear path the avalanche had made as it came down, and that was quickly dwindling.

The moment I hit one of those outstretched branches, that would be it – a dagger straight to the heart. Even if it didn't kill me instantly, I would quickly bleed to death. My regeneration can only handle so much, and an impact at near terminal velocity is a bit more than I would care to test it with.

The only chance was to try and steer my way towards the edge of the slide and slow down. I reached one arm out, blindly into the dark trees. Instantly, I was rewarded with a snap, and a blinding shot of pain lanced up my arm. Sparing a quick glance, a ragged tare running up the outside of the limb was clearly visible, staining my brown fur crimson.

Despite the pain or perhaps because, it was almost numbing, I thrust my arm out again. It took two more attempts before my flailing fingers caught hold of something.

I felt a pop in my shoulder as it pulled free, dislocated in a single moment as my fingers slipped lose of the cutting bark. It did slow me however, sending me careening into the woods. My left arm was useless, so I reached out with the right, praying to whatever gods that might be tormenting me to deliver me from this without a branch up between the legs.

My right hand found purchase, and I swung around the trunk of the tree, almost a full one-eighty as I nearly cleared the snow. The last thing I saw was a pine needle leaden snow bank as it came rushing up to meet my face. It smelt like an air-freshener.

"Tommy!"

Eh? Who was that? It sounded far away, like I was standing on top of my old apartment building and they were calling from the ground.

I opened my eyes to darkness. All I could smell came to me like I was in the middle of a lumber yard, fresh cut wood. I tried to brush my nose with a hand, but couldn't reach it. Something was in the way. The world's largest pillow, perhaps?

I shifted my head a fraction, and pain came crashing down on me like a freight train full of bricks and glass shards. So did the knowledge of where I was.

"Gah!" My head snapped up and out of the snow. Bad call. Multicolored pinwheels twirled towards me like I'd been licking bullfrogs. It took them a good ten breaths to even begin to clear.

"Tommy!" The voice came again, weaker this time, more frantic.

"Here," I tried to scream it, but it came out as little more than a whisper.

I dragged my unresponsive body to its feet, nearly biting my tongue off in the process. It felt like someone was trying to yank my skeleton out through my nose. One knee wouldn't bend, and my left arm hung limply at an odd angle, swollen to almost twice its normal size.

"Down here!" My voice was returning, slowly, but the yelling wasn't helping.

It felt like it took forever to retrace my journey back through the trees, but at long last I made it to the slide that the avalanche had left in its wake. Looking up, I had to shade my eyes as I stared into the cloudless ultra blue sky. I could just barely make out a couple of black dots backed up against the dark stone.

The wind whipped at his calls, but I could just make out English's booming voice. He was putting his prodigious lungs to good use – likely all but deafening Rebeca as she stood beside him.

"Tommy... can't get down... all right?"

I did my best to wave, though it sent shots of blue lightning down my entire side. I didn't bother

to shout back though, there was no way they would ever hear me.

He must have seen something, I could hear his voice again, "Meet to the east... follow the highway... be safe."

I waved again, and set off to try and find my backpack – or whatever was left of it.

It took me a good twenty minutes to trek back even part of the way I had fallen in a matter of seconds. The rocks that laid about were the size of my skull, it was only the light dusting of snow that had kept the very pelt from flaying off my flesh.

I did find my pack, after a fact. It lay tangled in a thicket, fabric torn to shreds. Its contents half on the ground and half hanging from whatever convenient branches happened to be just out of reach.

I almost howled in joy when I found the radio, dented but still in one piece. The thing still looked like a brick dipped in yellow paint, and apparently it was built like one too. I pressed the button and was rewarded with a burst of static. Sounds like Jon had yet to get the transmitter up and running. I hadn't a clue if anyone was picking up on the other end, but I shouted out a status report as I wandered about, picking up my things and shoving them back into what remained of the backpack.

The only thing that saved me from having to leave half my stuff behind was the old secret weapon, duct tape. I had to seal so much onto the pack that you could hardly see the red fabric it had originally been made of. It now appeared, for all intents and purposes, that I owned a shiny, silver pack.

The sun was already starting to set by the time I'd gathered up my bits and pieces. The high peaks of the Rockies made for short days, even shorter in the failing winter. I looked up towards the ledge where the highway had been, no one peered back. At least Rebeca wasn't alone up there. She might starve with English, but, other than that, there was no one better I could hope to have watching over her.

I mused the idea of some hunting for tonight's dinner, but my arm was still aching from the fall. Regeneration was taking it sweet time, and, in any event, I don't like leaving a carcass half eaten. I have this bad feeling every time I abandon a body to rot, and being alone I wouldn't be able to finish off any prey bigger than a hare.

Digging through what I'd been able to recover, I pulled out some survival rations taken from Kicking Horse. They weren't much, just a couple of label-less bars shrink wrapped in foil, but they would do. I hadn't tried any of this ancient food yet, and I was curious about how it tasted.

My first problem was getting into the darn things. It was no wonder they'd lasted intact for a hundred years – I couldn't get them open. My claws just slid down the foil, and the pull tab was stubbornly resisting me. It took a good wrench, with all the strength I had left, before the pop of imploding air announced my success.

The smell that wafted out didn't make me think it was worth the effort. Whatever it was, it didn't smell like food... more like sugar coated sawdust.

The concoction was made of granola, I think, with chunks of what might have been fruit at one time stuffed within. The entire mess was dipped in a glaze of sugar that made it sticky and held to the fur between my fingers.

One sniff and I knew I wouldn't be eating this off hand. I had to go digging back through my pack for a cast iron skillet, Rebeca had forced that upon me. Dropping the bar into the center of it, I surrounded the inedible thing with some snow.

About twenty minutes later, I had gotten a meager fire crackling in front of my toes. It did little

to hold back the darkness that fell to surround me, but it did give me something to hold my pan over.

I focused on the scent of the bar as it bubbled, dissolving into the melted snow along with a piece of half passable jerky I'd found in another pouch. The smell of cooking food was so alien to me in these frozen winds that I couldn't help but think back to Rebeca.

It had been, what, our third date when she had cooked for me? Just before I'd discovered she was human. In retrospect, it should have been obvious. She was one of the few people I knew who demanded on having her meat cooked, almost charred to a crisp.

I had been in her apartment when I'd watched her fry a set of steaks, scent of the cooking meat wafting around us, like now. Only not.

Ow. A flame flicked up to lick my finger, causing me to almost spill the whole mess over the fire. Well, it was about as good as it was going to get. Might as well dig in.

I'd found a spoon, another human contrivance that I seemed to only use around Rebeca, and began to scoop the thin broth into my maw. Spoons were never a good choice with a mouth like mine, but the skillet was too hot to drink from. Anyway, I'd gotten enough practice to hardly spill more than half of it.

Supper didn't last long, only just enough for me to choke down the foul mixture and pull out my bed roll. I hadn't the tent, so it was sleeping under the sky for me.

I could just make out the stars through the overhanging pine branches. Their needles never fell during the winter, so it was just as hard to see as in the summer months.

Out in the countryside, without the lights of the city, the stars seemed all the brighter. An old sheepdog had taught me once about the constellations, he had been a friend of my father's.

There weren't any real major constellations about wolves, not like the big ones such as Leo. There was Lupus, but I couldn't find it half the time. Anyway, I'd never had a big thing for the stars when I was back in the city, unlike my teacher who had spoken of them in hushed tones.

I'd never really looked up until Rebeca and I had been forced out, away from everyone else. The night's sky was our only real entertainment, save each other, and she hadn't been much of a conversationalist until her wounds began to heal.

I floated off there, gazing up at the sky, wondering if Rebeca was looking up too. This was the first night in months that we'd been apart.

The sun rose to greet the next day, cold and crisp as that before. Thankfully, most of my wounds had healed. I was only dogged by a tightness in my muscles, and a ghost ache that always lingered long after the damage had passed.

Progress was slower down here than it had been up on the highway. While the road may be covered with drifts and flaking asphalt, the land down here was untouched. It seemed I spent more time moving vertically than I did forward.

Heading east, I could see the ridge that held the road over my left shoulder, no figurers were visible upon it. I could only hope that they had struck out ahead, trying to find the nearest point the skyway touched to the mortal ground I now occupied.

The sun and moon circled my head at least a half dozen times as I trekked, nothing seemed to change in these endless expanses of pine. If it wasn't for the thought of Rebeca at the end, I would just as soon have given up and let my face fall back to the snow.

Slowly, my ears began to betray me. Every chickadee and owl that had awoken for the spring

took on Rebeca's voice. A few times I could even swear they were chanting 'mate' in a perfect english accent.

A couple days later my eyes followed in the rebellion. I could see her perfectly, just out of reach, standing atop the next outcropping, dressed in the leather jacket that I knew for a fact had met its demise under Huston's claws.

That was likely why I hardly noticed it when someone did show up.

It was noon, and I'd taken a moment's rest to sit, propped up against an ancient outshoot of stone. The sun was becoming warm enough that I could feel it through my fur as the snow withered away about me. I was going to start shedding soon. I hoped to find Rebeca before that happened. It was always a chore to pull so much dead hair from my pelt, and much more fun to have someone like her do it for me...

My thoughts were disturbed when he stepped into view, only a scant few paces from me. He was downwind, must have been, otherwise there would have been no way I could have missed him, no matter how zoned out I might be.

"Gooday, young master." His voice was quiet, almost a whisper, as though he feared speaking to me.

My head shot up, so fast I whacked it against the stone, seeing stars in the process.

He made a high pitched sound in the back of his throat, running towards me. I had to shew him away with muttered assurances that I was alright.

"Mistress would be most displeased if you were hurt!" His voice was so servile that almost hurt to hear him whimper like that.

It took a moment for my vision to finally clear. When it did, I almost smacked my head back into the rock a second time as I looked up. This guy was huge! He could give English a good run for his money. A wolf like me, he was nearly twice my size, and almost as black as my uncle Gowan, only the occasional random patch of white marred his coat.

Right now his thick fingers were giving my scalp a working over as he muttered to himself, "Stupid, stupid. How could I let this happen? Mistress explicitly stated for you to arrive with no harm." He kept picking through my hair, looking for blood, until I pushed him back.

"Dude, I'm okay. Personal space, man, you ever heard of it?"

He looked at me oddly, a bit of a cockeyed stare, as if he wasn't used to being spoken to in such a manner.

"I'm, um, sorry, young master." He bowed his head, staring determinedly at my feet.

Okay, this 'young master' stuff was getting old fast. I thought it was a pain when the police called me 'sir'. This was almost enough for me to want to club him upside the head with his own tail.

"Okay, dude..."

"Amstys," he provided helpfully.

"Amstys, cut it out with the 'master' stuff, it's not my speed. My name is Tommy."

"Of course, ma..." He struck a pained face for a moment. "Tommy."

"That's better. Where am I, anyway? Who are you?"

"We're just west of Canmore, Tommy. I was sent by Mistress to find you." He puffed his chest out for a moment, "I'm her best hunter, she values me highly."

"Alright, next question, who's 'Mistress'?" I said the name with air quotes. The only time I'd

ever used a term like that, well, it wasn't exactly for a high-class lady.

His eyes nearly bugged out when I asked, rather a sight to see on a wolf his size. "You don't know Mistress? Everyone knows Mistress, everyone serves her..." He paused for a moment, head cocked at a quarter angle, as though trying to dredge up a memory long forgotten. "Everyone I remember..." He shook his head and huffed in a large breath of air through his nose, as though trying to recall the scent of something. I'd seen my father do a similar motion many a time when he'd described his hunts. It was almost as if we, wolves, could still pick up a scent long gone.

"Anyway, Tommy," he continued, a silly, and bordering on creepy, smile sliding onto his face, "She has asked me to escort you to see her. She has determined she'd like to meet you in person."

"Sorry, buddy, but I'm not heading to where ever your lady is,"

"Mistress," he corrected.

"Yeah, sure, mistress. I'm not going that way, I'm looking for my friends."

His smile grew even wider. "A lion, and another?"

I looked at him again, narrowing my eyes. "Yeah. English and Rebeca, a lion and a human."

"Sure, sure," He waved a hand absently, "The lion and the other one. Mistress found them three days ago, camped just to the north, on the highway. She invited them back to her preserve, and of course they accepted her gracious offer."

"Why? They were going to meet me. They wouldn't leave me here..." For a moment, an image of Rebeca being injured flashed through my mind. That was the only reason I could come up with that would send them on.

Amstys put a hand out to me, I wasn't sure if it was to help me to my feet, or to keep me from running off. He was large enough that I'd have a bear of a time trying to get around him.

"Few people ever refuse an invitation from Mistress, your lion friend seemed quite eager to join. They traveled with Mistress in her carriage. They should be well settled in at Calgary by now."

Calgary? Well, that was the general direction of where we wanted to go. "Fine, Amstys, I going wherever they are, and if they're in Calgary, then that's where I need to be. But," I looked up to his face for a sign of deception, "I want to see their campsite first."

He shrugged and lead me on, seeming unconcerned with my demands. We dashed off through the trees, I had a good opportunity to watch his back, he wasn't shy on turning it to me unprotected.

He traveled at a fair loup, if I hadn't been living off the land recently I never would have been able to keep up. He moved like my father... like my father had. Weaving through the trees and bushes as if they were so many clouds in the sky. He never slowed, never made a sound as he padded on. It was obvious he lived out here, this was his domain.

Perhaps a half hour later we advanced on the camp site. I was just short of snarling – I'd been this close to finding them before they left.

They had been here, of that there was no doubt. I could smell Rebeca, her scent lingered on everything she'd touched. I drank it in. It was like a fine perfume to me, even after just a few days without her. English had been here too, his musk was unmistakable, unique as the only lion on this side of the sea. There was no blood here, of that I whispered a silent thankful prayer to whatever gods may or may not exist. I snuffed around for a few moments, under the distant but attentive eyes of Amstys. I searched for any scent of a battle, any rush of adrenaline, rise in temper, spike of anger.

Of the dozen bodies that had been here, they had all been... mellow. Rebeca and English were plain to anyone with a nose, but the rest smelt off, like they had been just ever so slightly ill. I Tracked

their way off down the road. It was true, they had all left together, save my guide.

I turned, walking back to camp. Amstys was there, crouching alone in the clearing, face to the dirt – huffing.

I stood off to one side, watching him. His nose was flush to the soil as he pulled in the deepest breaths his lungs would take, rushing them through an engorged nose. Every move was measured, almost ritualistic. Breath deeply, hold it for a heartbeat, then release with a slight rolling of the eyes and a twitch of the tail.

I took another moment to sniff as well. Now that I was looking for anyone other than my friends, I could smell it too – faint and fleeting, dissipating far quicker than the other scents. It was a *her*, that was certain, but in no other way could I place it. Not a species, not a perfume, nothing. The scent was light and elusive, for a moment I closed my eyes, trying vainly to snatch enough from the air around me to create an image. My heart quickened for just a moment as I almost had it, only for the shreds to be torn away on a light breeze.

I sneezed, focusing too hard on the scent had let some dust slip up my nose. Amstys curled around when he heard me, tail tucked between his legs like a whipped puppy. His eyes were wide, fear wrapped across his face from the low set of his ears to the droop of his whiskers.

"Masts... Tommy. You won't tell Mistress, please, promise me you won't!" The huge wolf was curled before my feet, almost wetting himself as his fingers scratched weakly at my toes. "...she won't have it when she hears of me sniffing after her... she always tells me I should be grateful for what I have... not want more, not whine when she sends me so far away on jobs..."

What the... okay, I always thought Jon had the scales maxed out when it came to weirdness, but he had nothing on this one.

"Sure, sure, Amstys, I won't tell. Promise." I backed away before his outstretched hands could reach me.

He froze dead for a long moment, eyes looking past at me, out of focus, as though something had snapped in his brain. I was just about ready to poke him, to see if he was still alive, when he simply stood up and turned his back to me.

"Come on, Tommy, we need to get going. One should never leave Mistress waiting." He began walking off into the trees, not bothering to turn and look back.

The day's run was hard. And by run, I do in fact mean *run*. Once Amstys began he didn't slow. It seemed that we only stopped every two hours for water and food, and even those meager breaks were kept to a minimum.

It was I who had to call a halt for the night. He had me stretched ragged, panting, foam flecking at the corners of my mouth just trying to keep up. I heard him say something about not keeping his mistress waiting, but I just waved him away.

I was digging through my pack when I felt his huge paw settle on my shoulder. My entire body tensed.

"No, Tommy. No guests of Mistress need provide for their own meals." His eyes clouded for a moment as he looked at the loose wrappers left from what I'd eaten on the run with him. "Stupid... stupid..." He wandered away from me. "I'm not good enough to return. That's why she keeps sending me away from her."

I tried to walk up behind him, to asking what the problem was, but he turned before I made it

within three paces. Again looking as though nothing had happened.

"Please wait here, Tommy. I will provide a kill in the name of-"

I cut him off, "Yeah, I know. Your Mistress."

He looked at me for a moment like I had just danced on his family's graves, before turning and disappearing amongst the trees. I was alone.

I puttered about, lighting a fire and preparing my bed roll. Amstys, it seemed, hardly carried anything at all. I doubted he could even get a flame going with the few provisions he carried for himself.

Looking in to the dancing fire, I had the first chance since meeting the wolf to think critically. Something was wrong here, I mean really, *really* wrong. That pup was short more than a few bones of a full kill. He might be one of the best outdoors men I'd ever seen, and I'd met no too few, but his brain was cracked like a scrambled egg.

If it weren't for the scent of English and Rebeca that I could still pick up every now and then, I would have ditched him hours ago. His smile alone was unnerving enough to leave me itching every time he looked my way.

Then Amstys was back, it seemed like only seconds since he had melted away. Yet now he was suddenly before me, as though having stepped straight from between the flickering tongues of flame. He held a rabbit in either hand, freshly killed. I hadn't even heard him run them down.

He tossed one to me without a word, digging into his own with no preamble. I watched him for a moment, across the fire. His black fur was almost invisible against the night, and the white patches were stained a dark crimson. First by the light of the flames, then later by the blood that dripped freely from his lips.

I looked down at my own rabbit, its still warm body soft in my hands. Turning, I reached for the skillet in my backpack.

The other wolf stared as I butchered the rabbit with my claws, pulling the choice cuts to fry in the pan. He didn't say a word as I held it over the fire. His eyes were fixed on what remained of the carcass, I'd thrown it to the snow beside me.

"Do you want it?" I pushed the remains of the rabbit with my toe. "You can have it, I'll never eat it."

His hands reached out for a moment before pulling back quickly. "No," His voice was firm, but his eyes didn't move from the meat. "You are Mistress' guest, that is for you."

I shrugged and pushed it closer to him. "You're twice my size, buddy. Eat it, it's yours." He hesitated for another moment, lips dripping. "Take it, please. You hunted it, it's yours. I give it back to you."

In annoyance, I grabbed the thing with my free hand and flipped it over the fire that sat between us. His hands came up instinctively, snatching it before it had even touched the ground. An instant later he had it to his fangs, ragged holes ripped from end to end.

I puttered about with my cooking for a while longer as he watched, almost managing not to burn it. Almost. From my pack, I pulled a couple of spice cartons. I wasn't really sure what to do with them, that was more Rebeca's thing. I normally avoided them like the mange, but right now I wanted something more, something to help remind me of her. A couple of shakes from each and I seemed to have something that, while not fit for a king... or a mistress, was at least edible.

I cut it into chunks and ate the cooked rabbit straight from the pan while staring into the flames.

Amstys' eyes watched me from the darkness.

"So, Amstys, where are you from?" I tried to come up with any conversation I could while eating. Anything to break the silence and get him to stop staring at me.

His answer was immediate and final, "From Mistress' preserve in Calgary."

I ate in silence for a while, he watched me, every bite. Halfway through I couldn't stand it any more.

"Do you want some?"

His eyes closed. "No. Mistress would not be pleased."

I threw my hands in the air, almost scattering the food. "Your Mistress isn't here right now. Just you and me. I'm not asking her if you'd like some. I'm asking you."

He closed his eyes again, I could hear his claws digging into the dirt. "Yes, please, Tommy. I would like some." I held the skillet out to him, he stole a single piece from the edge.

"There, was that so hard?" He didn't respond. "So, where were you before you met this Mistress of yours?"

He looked at me, confused for a moment. I offered him another piece of meat before he began speaking. "I don't know..." He screwed up his face, as if trying to dredge something from the depths of the mist behind his eyes. "I remember a place called Brooks... I, we had a ranch there... I think."

"You and your Mistress?"

His eyes sprang wide for a moment before his face screwed up again, then his whiskers fell. "No, not Mistress. Someone... someone else. It was a long time ago, Tommy. I can't... I can't remember anymore. I'm with Mistress now, that's all that matters. She makes me happy."

"How long until we meet your Mistress?"

He brightened at the very thought. "Soon, Tommy, we'll be home soon. It can't be more than a day or two until I can please her again."

I ran out of meat soon after, and the conversation came to an abrupt close. The night was dark and warm, I looked up at the stars while the dark titan shape of Amstys snored beside me.