

The Explorers



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Chapter 7: An Ageless Beauty

The next morning came quickly, Amstys had me up and running almost before the dawn. The promise of making it to Calgary today seemed to give him new fire, and what few words I could get from him last night were long gone.

Today's hike was as long and grueling as the one that he'd put me through before, but it paid off. As the sun set behind us, I could make out the silhouette of failed towers on the horizon. Our destination was somewhat closer, well away from the rubble.

The Preserve, as Amstys called it, was on the western fringes of the city ruins. While the neighboring human structures were abandoned and long past any form of salvage, her buildings seemed to be all but brand new and freshly cleansed.

It wasn't that the place was all that impressive by the standards of V-town; a ranch style compound that topped out at a single story, but everything was *just right* – if that makes any sense. The place was a spotless virgin white, every wall flawless, every blade of grass cut, every cobblestone on the path that led towards it was painstakingly spaced. The stars were just starting to come out for the night as we walked up, the image looked more like something out of a children's fairytale book than what I expected to see in the middle of the empty prairie.

Amstys changed with every step we took towards the domicile. While sprinting through the forest he had begun to stand tall, surveying the trees about him with an acute gaze that picked up every track and flick of motion. Now his whole demeanor fell, no longer standing straight, but hunched over, head almost to his hips, and walked at a scuttle. He reminded me ever more of a weightlifting Jon.

I could make out the rare flash of moving bodies from the corner of my eye, but every time I turned my head they were long gone. The scents, those were the odd thing. The air was still, so I couldn't smell anything from the house ahead of me, but I could detect that strange, just slightly off, scent of the men I had picked up before – only more of them, many more. I couldn't pick out the trace of a single female in the entire place, not even Rebeca.

We stepped up to the large double oak doors, buttressed with steel they looked like they could stand fast on a castle. I hadn't even a chance to glance at my guide before they opened. A... well, he looked like a dragon, stood silently on the other side, ushering us in.

The inside was no less immaculate than without. Polished wooden floors and stainless whitewashed walls were on all sides, with the occasional small table scattered about holding some random object-de-art that I wasn't refined enough to identify, or enjoy for that matter.

Not a single word was said as we walked through into some kind of over-sized audience chamber. For a moment I thought we were alone, Amstys and I. He was all but quaking on his toes as we entered.

"Mistress..." The word was whispered from Amstys' lips, almost a prayer.

"Hello, Tommy." The voice that replied ignored him. It was a dry whisper, as if a century old corpse were trying to speak by rubbing sandpaper over its lips. It came from the other end of the table that stood before me.

I had to wait for my eyes to adjust, straining to see within the shadows that were quickly gathering... someone was there. I could only just make her out, so well she was placed, as though she knew exactly how good my night vision was, and sat just on the edge of foiling it.

"Please, Tommy, sit. You are my honored guest, we cannot have you mistreated," Her voice cooled, "No matter what my acquaintance Amstys may have savaged you with on the way here."

Behind me, the wolf all but curled up and fell to the ground as though struck. I could just make out the ghost of an apology escape his lips, it sounded like little more than a whimper.

"Go, Amstys. We will speak later." Her voice seemed to have smoothed a half measure, as though the corpse grinding its words out was only ninety years old now.

I took the liberty of seating myself on a chair provided, it was closer to her, perhaps only a couple of meters from where she sat cloaked in shadow. My nose twitched as I neared, something in the air... a spice? No, not quite. It reminded me faintly of the perfume Rebeca used to wear...

"Tommy," The voice pulled me from my thoughts before I could finish them, "It is so good of you to come, to humor a lady such as myself."

"Of course, um... you know, Amstys never did mention your name. He kept calling you 'Mistress'." I tried to laugh at the title. She joined in after a moment, a slight hissing sound that skittered across the table.

"Do pardon him, Tommy. He is one of my oldest friends, I really shouldn't send him out any more, he simply can't seem to contain himself. Mistress... indeed. It is a funny title, isn't it?"

I tried to shrug, feeling uncomfortable saying anything.

"Anyway, Tommy, my name is Al-Sedexterous, and I have lived here for a long time, a very long time, little wolf."

"Yes, well, I did come here for a purpose. Amstys said you had seen my friends, a lion and a female human."

My eyes were adjusting to the gloom, shapes slowly forming opposite me. She was ghoulishly thin, her almost toothpick frail arms draped over with ivory skin so translucent that I could all but see through it to the bones beneath. Of her face I could make out nothing, it was covered with a veil. Like the ones you might expect to see on an Egyptian empress, completely impenetrable – I was surprised she could see me at all.

"Yes, Tommy, your friends are here, you needn't worry. All is safe now."

I could feel a breeze grow out of nothing, ruffling my fur. It came from in front of me, flowing into my face, carrying the smell of orchards in full bloom, despite that I knew for a fact there were none around.

"That's wonderful," I settled back into my seat, a stupid grin spread across my face, I couldn't help it.

"Yes, Tommy, it is wonderful. Aren't you happy you found me here?"

"Yes, I am. It's... it's great you found me." My eyes half closed as I drew a deep breath through my nose, letting the scent of flowers wash over me.

Her ductile tones floated from the other side of the table, "You will enjoy it, being here, being here with me."

Then she was gone.

It was like someone had just shocked me with enough voltage to light up V-town on a Saturday night. I instantly felt a migraine as my eyes searched vainly for where she had gone. The only evidence left to suggest she'd ever been was her fast fading scent.

I breathed it in, quickly, desperately, like a drowning man searching for a lungful of air. I could feel my nose begin to throb.

Amstys was back, gently urging me from my chair. "It would please Mistress for me to help you to your room."

I went. Who was I to stop him if it would make her happy?

We trudged down the hallways. Torches were lit here and there, I guess this place didn't have power... From the corner of my eye I just made out the tuff of a brown and gold tail.

English.

I stopped dead in my tracks, so fast that Amstys ran into my back, almost knocking us both flat onto the polished floor.

"English!" I ran unsteadily to where I had seen him, no one was there. "English!" I yelled it down the empty whitewashed hallway, all I heard back was the echo of my own voice.

I felt the gentle but insistent grip of Amstys' hand on my arm. "Please, Tommy, it would please Mistress for you to retire to your room."

Yes, Mistress... I mean Al-Sedexterous, would like that. I let him lead me on.

I was laying face up on a simple bed in a small room. A single window to the right let the light of the moon splay across my chest. Why was I here? I was looking for someone... English. And someone else... Rebeca, oh, yeah, her too.

Every time I tried to think... the whisper of her scent, her flowers, orchard in bloom, came back to my mind. The gentle gossamer threads of that scent scythed through my thoughts as sure as a sunbeam through the very air itself.

I let a hand drift up to my nose, it was itchy and red, almost hurting to breathe through it. I'd never felt it like this before. I stared up at the ceiling, a smile plastered to my face.

I must have drifted off, it couldn't have been for long. But the next thing I knew, she was there. Her.

I couldn't open my eyes, her hand lay over my face, her single, beautiful, flawless hand was touching me. Her scent lay all around me, she smelt of the ocean, the mountains, the prairies, like every perfume I'd ever experienced, and like nothing else at all. A single breath of her alone was enough to make me see pinwheels of violet and blue circle under my closed lids, fireworks and lilies.

"Tommy, I like having you here." Her voice was perfect, like a million angels singing out at once in a harmony that not even the gods could match. "It would break my heart to ever see you leave. You won't leave me, will you?"

I tried to open my mouth, tried to whisper assurances, to reach out and wipe that single note of sadness from her voice, but I couldn't. Her other hand lay under my jaw, holding my mussel together. It was all I could do to keep breathing through my nose, so swollen it was.

"Tell me, Tommy, tell me you will never leave me." She whispered but yet she wailed, it was all I could do not to leap up and shelter her in my arms. "Say it, my little wolf. Speak."

Her hand was free from my lips, the words spilled out unbidden, "Anything, Mistress. Anything."

"Very good, Tommy. That pleases me." Then she was gone.

I lifted a hand to my nose, I could feel it running. Raising my fingers, I saw blood.

Yellow and clear in the spotless prairie sky, daylight announced the new morning. Its life fell across my chest, warming me. Everything was right in the world, I let out a breath as my eyes drifted open.

The room was spotless around me, not a single table or chair marred the tidiness of the small space, not even a blanket or pillow atop the thin mattress that held me. Perfect.

Beside me, the door opened on silent hinges. It was the dragon that had greeted me... was it yesterday? No matter. He cocked a finger, bidding me to follow. I did without hesitation.

He led me through the halls, down polished wooden floors, our claws ticking in perfect time. Beyond the last door was a long room filled with tables down both walls, it looked like a mess hall. And it was full.

There must have been a couple dozen men here, everyone it seemed was twice my size. They ranged the full gambit from wolves to felines, even things I'd never seen before were shoveling food into their hungry mouths. To a man, their faces were grim, no one looked up as we entered.

The dragon led me on towards one of the few remaining seats, leaving me before a simple bowl of what seemed to be growl. I looked at it for a moment before pushing it away, I'd have to find something better to eat.

Her scent preceded her long before I knew she was in the room. She walked down the lines of tables, pausing at each man to draw her finger down them and whisper a few words in their ear. I had to fight back a growl. What was she doing with them? Wasn't it me she had begged to stay, wasn't it *me* she had come to in the night?

By the time she'd made it to me it felt like she'd been flirting with the other men forever, like it was never to end. I had to fight my rising hackles and keep my lips from pulling back. She stood before me, I was ready to accuse her, berate her, do anything to keep her attention.

Her finger touched me and it was like a live wire. My body went stiff, unsaid words dying on my tongue.

She ran a single finger up the fur of my chest. I could feel it touch every strand, lighting them up as if by magic. She continued until just under my chin, ever so gently lifting my eyes to her face. I could see her clearly in the light, how I'd been fooled by the veil yesterday I would never know, it was gossamer thin now. Her face was finely chiseled, ghost white, and hairless. Dark green eyes stared back at me from behind that veil, surrounded my endless circlets of rich brown hair.

"Tommy," Her voice was nothing but a whisper, likely not carrying further than my ears alone, "It makes me so happy to see you again this morning." A ghost of a smile played across her lips, briefly flashing perfect white teeth, long and sharp. "You must forgive my theatrics, but everyone here needs their attention, no?" Her teeth flashed again, I would have given my soul to fall to my knees and forgive her for anything she could ever do. "But never you worry, Tommy, you are my favorite, of course you are. Why else would I love you so? I do love you, Tommy, you know that, don't you?" It was all I could do to nod my head. She seemed have stolen the breath straight from my lungs, holding my mouth closed so I could revel in her scent all the more. "And you love me, Tommy," A ghost of a laugh escaped her lips, "I know you do." She was gone a moment later, but only after trailing a finger across the edge of the bowl before me. "Eat up, my wolf. I need you, I need you big and strong."

I didn't even notice her moving to the next guy in line, I was too busy savoring the amazing spread she had set for me.

That was the last I saw of her, of Mistress. No, wait, that wasn't her name. I tried to pull her full name from the recesses of the shifting sands in my mind, but it was no use. Everyone else called her Mistress, why shouldn't I?

I looked up briefly as I ate, seeing the milling bodies around me, we were all hunched over our bowls of ambrosia. Up towards the head of the room where Mistress sat on a small dillis, watching us, I thought I recognized a form. He was the only island of gold in a sea of blacks, browns, and creams. But it wasn't of much interest, I let my eyes drift back down to my bowl that was quickly becoming empty.

With breakfast over, I was handed a sheet of paper by the dragon. He passed them out to us all, not a word was said.

I flipped the page over in front of me, eager to see what Mistress may have written. My ears fell for a moment, the scrawls were too base, too unintelligent to possibly be from her. She must have had one of us do it. And why not? Why should she be lowered to such menial tasks as this?

The paper was short and to the point, a to-do list of sorts. Around me, others lifted their papers reverently and stomped away. I wasn't sure of what to do, so I followed them.

The list was truly simple and menial: trim the grass here, paint a wall there, brush the cobblestones that lay before the Preserve. I did each of them with a smile on my face. This was what Mistress wanted of me, wasn't it?

My final task was to repair a fan in the Mistress' own chambers. I'd been waiting for it all day. I would have done it first, but it was the only one with a time attached to it. Perhaps Mistress wanted to see me alone? I was her favorite, after all.

I made sure to knock on the door at the stroke of the clock, not a second sooner or later. No one answered. I waited for a moment before trying again. Perhaps she had missed me behind the sound of the chimes? Still nothing.

Tentatively, I pushed the door open. I saw no one within. Stepping across the threshold, I fell to my knees as a blinding flash of color lit behind my eyes. The scent of her was so strong here that it nearly drove me wild. I would have done anything for her, even slit my own throat if she had asked me in that moment.

Sadly, the feeling of euphoria passed, leaving me on my knees in the middle of the room. The chamber was large and luxurious, silk and fine linens draped over every surface. The walls were painted rising sun red and robin's egg blue; the effect anywhere else would be garnish, here it was

beautiful. I could just make out another scent under that of Mistress, but it was of no matter – I strode on.

Standing in the center of the room, I looked up. There was a large fan assembly above my head. From what little I knew, it pulled air from Mistress' bed chamber and circulated it through the house. Why, I couldn't guess. Right now the fan was stopped. I dropped the tool box I carried to the carpeted floor with a crash and began stretching up towards the just out of reach ceiling.

I had barely the chance to raise my arms when I felt someone watching me, but by the time I turned my head it was gone. The air felt suddenly thick, like the soothing and familiar scent of Mistress was closing in, choking me.

I turned back to the fan again, but this time I heard a scuffle. It was faint and elusive at the edge of my perception, but there.

"Hello?" There was definitely someone here. "Mistress?" I heard a growl, it seemed to come from the very air itself. That was all the warning I had before being swept off my feet, left laying on my back, staring upwards into the golden tide that came crashing down around me.

It was the lion from breakfast, I knew him... I think. I knew those eyes, wide golden irises that stared down at me. I knew those teeth too, they were barred wide, an inch from my face. I'd been in this position before, I think... no, I know I have.

"Hello, En..." The word almost made it to my lips, before running dry and beaching itself on my tongue. "Do I know you?" Was all I could get out in the end.

The lion pushed himself off me, leaving one hand in place to hold me to the ground. His eyes searched my face, not quite sure what they were looking for. "Do you?" He replied, "Do I?" His voice was flat and toneless, with an accent that I couldn't place. Though, I could just recall having heard it once before.

"May I stand up?" I asked him. He still had me pinned. "I'm here to repair Mistress' fan."

The lion looked confused, not removing his hand. "Mistress does not allow anyone within her chambers, save me."

"But... I have my orders. Mistress would be displeased if I were not to follow them." I waved a hand towards the tool box where I had carefully stored my instructions.

He reached over, snatching the paper. He stared at it for a moment, as though having had forgotten how to read. Every few moments his attention flicked back to my face. I could see a glimmer of something start to form every time our eyes met, but it never quite materialized.

He grumbled for a moment before finally releasing me and handing back the paper. "Fine then, get on with it." He retired slowly to a velvet draped couch in the corner, gaze never leaving me. "And hurry up," A shutter worked its way down his spine, "Their's something I don't like about you."

With teeth his size, I didn't want to annoy him anymore than I already had. I set to work with my tools, pulling down the grate above my head and disassembling the parts within.

The problem was rather simple, a burnt out motor. Thankfully we had a replacement, though I hadn't the slightest idea where we'd gotten one way out here. The only problem? The busted part was a good meter out of reach above me. I was about to pull a sofa over to stand upon when I heard a warning growl from the lion behind me.

"Do not presume to move Mistress' things."

Oh. That could pose a problem. With no stool, I hadn't any way to reach the damaged component above me.

"Could you help me?" I turned to the lion, extending a hand as I asked him. "I need a lift."

He laughed for a moment, the sound reminding me of something I'd seen him do before. It sounded too forced, too fake. "No."

"Come on, friend, you owe me one... I think."

His face screwed up for a moment, a frown ticking at the corner of one of his lips. It pulled the lion into a most ferocious scowl.

"I do, mate." He stopped dead after saying the last word, as though it had come from him unbidden.

I directed him to the center of the room, to stand under the fan. Clenching a screwdriver between my teeth, I climbed the titan like a ladder. My face ended up in his mane for a moment while I scrambled, giving me a snout full of lion musk in the process. It was sharp and sour, hardly the subtle wafting scent that Mistress was, but it seemed to clear my mind. The lion's name was English.

Huh?

Where had that come from? I grabbed the machinery above me as a wave of nausea passed.

"Are you okay up there, mate?" He shifted slightly, trying to keep my weight centered as I swayed, sitting on his shoulders.

"Yeah, sure. Just give me a moment, English." I raised a hand to my forehead, trying to push back a migraine that had suddenly appeared.

His body jerked beneath me the moment I said his name, sending me tumbling to the ground. I curled in to a ball as I fell, rolling to a corner of the room by the time I'd stopped spinning.

I looked up, he was standing on the other side of the chamber, pushed as far away from me as he could get, back to the wall.

"What did you just call me?" The lion's voice was ragged, pulling at the edges of his lips, as though he couldn't decide if he wanted to smile or snarl.

"English. That is your name, isn't it?"

His head snapped up, as though I'd shocked him with a high voltage cable. "How do you know that?" He took a step towards me, eyes narrowing. "No one but Mistress..."

I cocked my head, uncertain. "We've met before. I know we have..." The next part took effort to say, as though the fog in my mind on coalescing into a brick wall as I spoke, "It was before... before Mistress. I remember you... and a tea pot."

His lips peeled back in a grimace of disgust. "You may have something there, mate." No smile returned to his lips. "But I don't like you. Get out." He raised an arm, a single claw extended. "I'll repair the fan. Alone."

I left Mistress' private chambers without a word. The lion, English, didn't seem interested in holding up a conversation, and I had vague memories of not wanting to see him mad. I had a feeling it would result in very bad things for me.

Being the last item on my list, and near evening meal as it was, I returned to the mess hall. I wasn't the first one there. We were all slowly filtering in, feet and tails dragging on the polished floors. The one person I didn't see was the lion.

Dinner was much as breakfast had been earlier, a bowl of ambrosia and a fleeting touch from Mistress. That was all. The sun was setting by the time we had finished. I returned to my own

chamber.

The hard bed was exactly as it should be beneath me, and the perfect white walls were spotless. A grin tried to spread on my face. Life was as it should be – almost.

Not even the smile on my face could wash away the dark thoughts that cut at the edges of my mind. I'd come here, been led, I knew I had. I was looking for someone. My encounter with English had jarred something deep in the back of my brain. Next to memories of swimming and shots of pain. An hand floated down to my hip to rub away the ghost of an ache.

Who was I here to find? English. It was English, wasn't it? He seemed happy enough to be here, why would I come for him? There had to be something, someone, else.

Mistress' perfect green eyes and brown hair flashed in my mind's eye. I couldn't keep them away as the hum of a fan started above me. Heh, English must have gotten the motor in Mistress' room repaired.

I floated away, with a moonbeam laying across my tummy. Following the faint smell of orchards in full bloom as they washed over me.

The morning sun came again. This time I didn't wait for the dragon to arrive. I made my own way down to the mess hall, to seek out the touch of Mistress.

The room was crowded, as yesterday, and filled with the scent of too many males pressed into a single space. Once again, the lion was nowhere to be seen. For just a moment I broke into a cold sweat, what if he had told Mistress of my failure? What if he was conspiring to throw me from her favor?

Her touch and sweet whispers showed no evidence of that, though. The thoughts were banished from my mind, wiped clean before I could even form the words to ask.

A piece of paper was once again set before me, this time it held only a single task upon it. I read the brief message and wasn't sure whether to howl in joy or break down sobbing. I was to hunt.

The massive was short, to join Amstys and bring back fresh meat for Mistress. It was wonderful to think of feeling the earth beneath my toes again, but that meant that I would have to be away from her. I would have to leave for the world beyond these walls, away from her presence.

I had to press that thought away. This was what Mistress wanted of me, and who was I to object? In any event, I could feel my tail dragging on the floor as I searched out Amstys.

He looked much like me, downtrodden and shaken that we were to leave the compound, but resigned to his fate.

"So we meet again... Tommy." He paused, searching for my name, "Is this your first hunt?"

I had to scratch my head, a spot behind my right ear. "No... yes." I sighed, "I've hunted before, but not here... not for Mistress."

A small smile split his lips as he stood up from the bench, it creaked as the weight lifted from it. "At least we have one thing in our favor, it is nice to have another hunter about. I've been the only one with Mistress for the last... for a long time."

He led me from the building, the gravel of the pathway crunched beneath our feet, a cloudless blue sky opening around us. To the west I could just make out the faint lighter blue of the mountains, to the east the hulks of Calgary's toothless giants. The rest was so empty as to make me shiver.

Hunting in the long grass of the prairies is far removed from the deep, lush forests of where I

had grown up. My thoughts were coming clearer as we journeyed further from the Preserve behind us, but it was accompanied by a subtle shivering in my hands. All in all, I'd rather be back home, walking the polished wooden floors.

We encountered some deer and elk as we journeyed across the grass covered hills. The land was a sea of green and gold, you could see for kilometers, and that played more to the prey's advantage than our own.

We'd ranged all day, and the most we'd caught was a hand full of rabbits and other smaller creatures that were simpler to chase down. Nothing worth bringing to Mistress' attention. The sun was beginning to set, and my hands were shaking worse than ever before.

I looked over at Amstys, my companion was worse off than I. His eyes were cloudy and flecks of saliva had dried white around his mussel. His nose was almost bright red, puffed up so much as to nearly look ready to pop. I gently wiped the back of a paw across my own, it felt swollen as well.

"Are you okay?" I reached out a hand to steady him as I spoke. He swayed slightly in the light breeze.

"It's not normally this bad, Tommy." His eyes were wide, hardly tracking me as I stood before him. "But it gets worse every time she sends me away. I'm not sure how many times more I can stand to be apart from her."

I gently helped him sit down on the dry soil beneath us. The prairie dirt crumbled under our weight as we settled in.

"You can go back, Amstys. I'll keep searching until I've brought back something of virtue for Mistress."

"I can't," His hands were shaking violently now, trembling as he tried to hold them in his lap. "It's my job to train you. I can't leave you out here against Mistress' orders."

I laid a hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him. "I'm sure Mistress didn't intend this of you. She would never knowingly put you through this, would she? She loves us." Amstys brightened. "Go home, I'll finish our assignment."

A few minutes later I was watching his tail retreat over the hills, what little meat we had found held clutched in his hands.

The night came soon after. I hadn't any supplies or equipment, or even a pack to carry them in, so I lay on the cooling soil, looking up. Stars rose before me, and the moon edged into view. I could remember sharing these same stars with someone else. Was it Mistress? No, it couldn't be. She never left her Preserve. It had to be someone else, someone before...

I don't know why, I hadn't done it in as long as I could recall, but I lifted my face to those stars and howled. Howled until my lungs were ragged. No one answered back, no one joined in.

I woke the next morning, migraine slowly receding to the corners of my mind, but still there. Looking across the horizon, not a single thing moved – I frowned. The euphoric feeling I'd had waking up near the Mistress was gone. Now I just felt... alone.

I ranged over the grass covered hills, feeling ill at ease and unathome. I couldn't quite lay my claw on where I should be, but these rolling hills were most certainly not it.

The entire day dragged by as I searched, never coming within striking distance of a single creature, not even so much as a mouse. It wasn't until the sun had set that I happened upon her, a doe.

She had bedded down for the night, far from any others, and not a tree in sight. Hunkered down in the grass as well as she could, brown coat almost disappearing amongst the golden cover. It was her scent that betrayed her. I was able to smell her better now as the swelling in my nose had gone down some.

I crept up upon her, no more than an inch a step, the ground beneath me threatening to reveal my presence at any time. I was within a few strides of her when I stopped. She had yet to notice me, downwind as I was.

I looked at her there. She was young, the spots of her youth having just faded, she must have been separated from her herd. There was no reason she should be out here alone. I don't know why, but her scent came to me crystal clear, flowing like a fine wine that I drank in as I lay hidden in the shadows. It was fragile and exact, like the tolling of a single tiny bell, like the smell of dew on the leaves in the morning. And Mistress wanted her meat.

I hesitated for just a moment, I wasn't sure why. I'd killed a hundred times before, why should this be different? It didn't mater in the end, I could have waited all night – she was still there when I set upon her. She was under my fangs in an instant, and dead a heartbeat later. I doubt she'd ever fully woke.

The coppery smell of blood cut through the fragile scent of her that had been in the air just moments before, it was gone now. Looking down at the corpse, I almost cried.

I laid there with the body for the night, the sun had set. Despite my desire to return to Mistress, I knew there was no way I could navigate the unfamiliar lands in the dark, especially with a load.

In due time I woke, the sun had risen again. The light that streamed down around me felt like someone was pouring bleach into my eye sockets. Then swizzling it around with cocktail straws. I would have sworn I had a hangover, but, excepting the pain, the world seemed in clearer focus than I could remember it ever being.

Pulling my aching body to its feet, I took a deep breath of the dry air; it seemed I could make out every mote of dust, every blade of grass in a hundred meters. Raising a hand to my nose, the swelling had all but disappeared. It hardly hurt to touch now, only a slight background tingle.

Well, it was time to get back home with my prize, I had to present it to Al-Se... Al-Se... what was her name? What ever, 'Mistress' was still easier to remember. I slung the doe over my shoulders and trudged off, a vague memory of doing the same thing in the snow covered woods tugged at the corners of my mind.

It was a gorgeous day out, spring had found itself in full form out here; hardly a trace of snow could be seen anywhere among the fresh green grass. I could hear the buzz of insects coming out in the background and the songs of birds as they returned for the warm summer months. It felt good to be alive, I would have spun a cartwheel if I hadn't the weight bearing down on me.

Something nagged at in the back of my mind and just wouldn't let go. Had I forgotten someone's birthday or something? It was a feeling like that. Oh well, who can worry about such trivialities on a day like this?

With meat this good, perhaps I could get away from eating that horrid mashed drivel that they kept serving us.

The gravel of the garden path crunched under my feet as I took the final few steps to the

Preserve. Opening the side door hit me with a gust of warm air that almost bowled me over. It was good to be home.

It took only moments for someone to arrive and relive me of my bounty, a lynx that I only barely recognized. He seemed somehow off, as though his eyes never quite focused on me.

A few steps on and my claws began their familiar, comforting clicks on the spotless floor. I rounded a corner, not really sure what I should be doing, I didn't have any more tasks, when I saw a black form curled up on the side of the hallway. It could have just as well been a shadow made real, if not for the occasional patch of white.

"Amstys?" I walked towards him, dropping to my haunches as I reached out a hand. For a moment he didn't move.

He barely seemed to breathe, until slowly a pair of ice blue eyes came into view, the pupils were so contracted as to be hardly more than pinpricks. "She's sending me away again..." His voice was hardly more than a whisper, it sounded like he'd been bawling his eyes out for hours. So rough were his words that it hurt just to listen to him. "I can't go, Tommy, but she's sent me away again. For two whole days!" He pitched up at the end, like a puppy's whine for his mother's teat.

It was embarrassing to see a full grown wolf shiver and cry like a cub, as though he couldn't stand to be apart for Mistress. Like an addict, afraid of missing his next hit.

"Amstys," I snapped my finger before his red and engorged nose until I got his attention. It took long seconds for his eyes to focus. "I'll do it."

"I can't, Tommy. I can't go..." He kept tapering off, as though he hadn't heard me. Until, in a single heartbeat, it kicked in. "You will?" It was as though someone had rebooted his mind, like a steel trap had snapped shut on my words. "You'd do this for me?"

I shrugged, "Sure, why not? I just got back anyway, what could it hurt?"

He practically launched himself off the floor, pulling me into a bear hug that sent my ribs creaking and the breath fleeing from my lungs. "Thank you, thank you so much, Tommy," He let me go just long enough to ruffle a hand through my hair before squeezing me again and plastering his face against my scalp. "I don't know what I'd ever do without you! Mistress will be displeased, but I just can't leave her. It hurts too much."

"Great, fine. Amstys, I can't help you if I can't breathe." It came out of me as a squeak. He lowered my limp body to the ground. "What did you have to do, anyway?"

He pulled out a now familiar paper, handing it to me as he explained, "I need to take a trespasser from room twelve and escort her to the edge of Mistress' territory, Glenmore reservoir should be far enough, and tell her never to return. It's simple," He almost smiled before his face fell, "All you need to do is walk her there, then return. One day out, one day back."

Simple enough. I told Amstys to stay out of sight until I returned. To be honest, I wasn't really bothered about the journey. The hunting trip had left me feeling invigorated, after the migraines had passed, and I wouldn't mind another breath of fresh air.

Room twelve was on the far side of the Preserve, off in a small building of its own. There were no guards or anything so base, but all the doors locked from the outside. I'd never been over here before.

Sliding back the last bolt I swung the door open, expecting a pathetic beggar or vagrant. But rather, it was a woman. To be honest, it took me a moment for it to even click in. I couldn't remember

the last time I'd seen a woman other than Mistress.

She was dressed head to foot in dirty clothing, a green traveling shirt and pants, and a worn set of leather boots. Her head snapped up as I opened the door. She set upon me almost as fast as Amstys had, hitting me so hard, wrapping her arms around me, that I nearly fell over backwards.

"Tommy!" Her voice was high and scratchy, nothing like the dulcet tones of Mistress. I tried to reach an arm out of her embrace to pry her from me. "I was so concerned when they separated me from English, he's been acting odd since we first met that creature. They've had me locked in here for over a week." She paused for a moment, looking up at my face while I tried to wriggle from her hold without harming her. "What's wrong, Wolfy?"

"Would you please let go of me, ma'am?" That feeling at the back of my mind had started nagging again, like I should know her. It took me a moment, but I finally put my claw on it. The set of her eyes and the color of her hair were just that of Mistress. Ah, that was why I'd thought we'd met.

"Tommy!" One of her hands raised, ready to slap me. I grabbed it before she had the chance. She stared into me, eyes burning. A moment later I felt something wet on my palm. Glancing over, I could see my claws had cut into the tender skin of her wrist. I let her go. Feeling dirty, I turned and walked from the room.

"Mistress has asked you to leave. I'll be making sure you do."

I stood outside the door to the building, letting the clear, dry prairie air rush around me. I didn't like this. She confused me. My life was perfect: I wake up, follow my orders, and make Mistress happy. Why did this woman have to come into my world and shatter it? How could she?

A few moments later she walked through the door, same clothes, but now with three packs. One across her back, and the other two scraping along the floor, leaving trails in its perfect shine. I saw her shove something shiny into her pack before she came out, I put it out of my mind. There was nothing worth stealing in that building.

"I'm not leaving without you, Tommy." She shoved the two extra packs towards me. "Or English, or our stuff."

I hefted the smaller of the two extra packs, fighting back a small smile as its almost familiar weight settled on my shoulders. I didn't bother to respond to her as I lifted the final pack free of the ground. For a moment, I wondered how she had gotten here with so many things, but I banished the thought almost as quickly as it formed. That wasn't my job. All I had to do was escort her to the edge of Mistress' territory.

We set out, heading south-west, but she wouldn't stop talking. Her voice was a buzz in my ears, almost as constant as the insects that flew up around us as we walked forward.

"...Tommy, don't you care about me? What about English, what happened to him? Tommy, look at me!" I could feel her hand reaching forward from where she walked behind me, I stepped aside, letting her grasp nothing but air. "What about your parents, don't you care about them, anybody?"

I stopped dead, letting the pack I was holding drop to the dusty ground. For the briefest of moments I saw my father's face flash before my eyes, before disappearing. I grasped at it, reaching out with my fingers. I couldn't make it come back.

I whirled around, without the thought even fully forming in my mind. The next thing I knew, I had her. Her skinny neck was gripped in my hand as I lifted her struggling body into the air. "Never

speaking of my father again." I growled out the words, they were only a step above an incomprehensible snarl.

"Tommy, you're hurting me!" Her voice was weak and high-pitched as it squeaked out of what little air I let pass. Her hands grasping uselessly at mine.

Gods, what was I doing?! This was... this was... I knew who this was. I dropped her to the ground with a thunk as my hands came to my temples. Shutting my eyes, I tried to breathe through my stuffed and inflamed nose. It didn't do any good, the more I huffed the worse it became. Mistress' scent was long gone out here, and I could just start to detect something I hadn't smelt in a long time.

I turned, grasping the pack roughly as I started walking again. It was a good eight hours journey to Glenmore reservoir, and I needed to get there before I could go home. I wished I'd never taken this job from Amstys.

Behind me, from the corner of my eye, I could just make out the woman as she smiled.

We reached the reservoir just as the sun was kissing the mountains to the west. The sunset dyed the water a light rose that spread out before us. I stood on the edge of a bridge that spanned the water, its crumbling concrete safety barriers hardly coming up to my knees.

Far below, the water ran fast and deep. Its cool breeze was refreshing.

"This, ma'am, is where you go on alone. You are not welcome back upon Mistress' land." I tried to bare my teeth at her as I spoke, but it simply wouldn't come. I dropped her extra packs on the ground in front of me, they were her problem now.

"Tommy, we're free." She was almost crying now, "You don't have to stay here. We can go and get Jon, we could call the police... we'll get English back."

Her hands reached for me, I pushed them back. "Go away." The world was crystallizing before me as I thought of her being gone, life could return to normal again. "Don't ever come back. Strumpet." I began turning around, looking forward to the long walk ahead of me.

This time I didn't see it coming.

Her open, outstretched hand connected flat to my inflamed nose, flaring up a rose of pain that made my vision flush pink as my hands flew to my face. I staggered back a step, the world flying out of focus as my senses centered on the single point of pain.

One problem, there was nowhere to step back to. The edge of the bridge was right behind me, and the remains of the railing did little more than give me something to trip over. For a moment I could feel the air open up around me... then there was nothing at all.

"Tommy!" Her voice was already far away. I could just make her out through my tinted vision as she disappeared around the corner of the receding bridge.

My back hit the surface of the reservoir flat on, like slamming into the side of a brick wall. The dark water engulfed me whole, filling my mouth and lungs, and making the hot agony of my nose run cold. I fought towards the surface only to find myself trapped under and against one of the crumbling supports for the bridge. The water whirled around me, I didn't even know what way was up anymore. It was impossible to swim, and its slime coated concrete offered not a single hold for my desperately flailing hands.

I made one last desperate lunge towards the long forbidden air. It was only a hand's width from reach before I felt the crunching impact of concrete on the back of my skull. The world went dark and cold.