

The Explorers



Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A Breath of Spring.....	1
Chapter 2: The More Things Change.....	12
Chapter 3: Onwards and Upwards.....	25
Chapter 4: Stowaway.....	38
Chapter 5: Kicking Horse Pass.....	54
Chapter 6: Nights Alone.....	66
Chapter 7: An Ageless Beauty.....	77
Chapter 8: Claw marks.....	90
Chapter 9: A Talented Orator.....	100
Chapter 10: On the run, on a ragged road.....	113

Chapter 10: On the run, on a ragged road

Gods, my head was pounding. It felt like I had the mother of all hangovers. I tried to pry myself off the bed where I'd fallen, but my arms were as weak as water. Opening my eyes looked little different than keeping them closed, the darkness was almost complete. Almost, but not quite, a faint shimmer worked its way through the open windows, reflecting on the wall beside me. A wavering image that looked like moonlight through a rain soaked window.

One problem, there was no rain. Nor glass, or even moon for that matter.

I could feel my head beginning to clear, chased by the ghost pain that always followed when my regeneration swept something away. What had been in that food?

Slowly, I sat up. I could now make out the form of the windows opposite me, something was glowing an unearthly white from outside. And... wait... there was something in my ears. Huh? I raised a hand to feel cotton stuffed in both sides. I pulled it out and immediately regretted it; a high pitched keening drilled into my head until I forced the baton back in.

I staggered to the window, legs still unsteady. What I saw sent me falling back onto my tail. What... the... hell.

There were ghosts down there! Real, true to life... well, true to death I suppose, ghosts!

I pulled myself back up and looked out the window again to make sure I wasn't just having a bad reaction. They were thick on the ground, spectral beasts. True elk and moose, even the occasional human. They milled about, seemingly not concerned with anything around them, just wandering aimlessly through the town.

I pulled myself back, this couldn't be real – it had to be a dream. There are no such things as ghosts, they just don't exist. I looked down at my own hands; then again, creatures like me hadn't existed until the Cataclysm either... But that's totally different! I exist, I'm real, I obey all the laws of the nature, just different.

Slowly, I pulled myself back up to the window, they were still there – and I would swear I could see *through* them. They were all translucent white, as if made of aged cobweb, and seemed to slough off their own glow that lit the world around them with a cool white whisper of light.

"Rebeca? English!" I whispered it through clenched teeth, no one stirred.

I pushed away from the window and ran to the bed, Rebeca lay there, breathing easily in a peaceful slumber. I shook her shoulder, gently at first, then more violently, she wouldn't wake, even as I all but lifted her free of the sheets.

The same with English. No matter how I prodded him he wouldn't wake, if anything he simply began to snore. Neither even so much as swatted me away in their sleep. The memory of the bitter taste grew on my tongue. We'd been drugged... again.

An instant later I was at the door to the room, but no matter how I pulled it wouldn't open. I put my shoulder into it, and could feel the wood begin to splinter, though I couldn't hear it through the cotton in my ears. A half dozen slams later and the door came free in a shower of shards as I tossed it into the hallway.

The hallway was even darker than the room, being bare of even the soft light that came in from the window. My night vision could make up for some of it, but so little light left the passage clouded in shadows that were impenetrable even to me.

I stalked down the hall, not caring who saw me. Anyone who was concerned would have heard the door crunch, that was of course if they could hear anything over the brain-numbing screech that came from outside. My single minded stride forward was the reason why I almost leapt through the roof when I felt a hand settle gently on my shoulder.

I whipped around, nearly ripping the arm free of its socket. Matt's face peered at me through the gloom, almost as pale as the apparitions outside. A heartbeat later my hands were around his throat, claws beginning to dig into his flesh. I could just make out his eyes in the darkness, they looked as terrified as I felt.

I couldn't make out a word he was saying, only barely see his lips move in the darkness, but it looked like 'Please... safe'.

His body was slack, he didn't even bother to raise his hands to try and ward me off. I took one last look at him before slowly releasing my grip. The old man nearly collapsed to the floor when I let him go. Now that I looked closely, he had cotton baton stuffed into his ears as well.

He cocked a finger towards me, wordlessly urging me forwards, down the steps to the main floor. I took a look behind me, I didn't want to leave Rebeca and English unprotected. Matt gently laid a hand on my arm and mouthed 'safe' again. I wanted to rip his lips off, but I followed anyway.

We paused on the main floor, with all the folks who had come for English's show still there, passed out where they lay. Matt led on, down another set of stairs to the basement.

We descended into the earth, the old man lit a lamp to guide our way. We must have gone down a dozen feet, I could feel the weight of the soil bearing down above my head. A few twists and turns later he shut a heavy wooden, lockless, door behind us, then another. We found ourselves in a small earthen room with little more than a table and a couple of wooden chairs. Matt pulled the cotton from his ears, and pointed to suggest that I should do the same.

Reaching up a claw, I scraped out the fibers, they had been so tightly packed as to block out all but the most persistent of sounds. Down in this small chamber, I could still hear the screech of the world above us. It set my teeth on edge, but was bearable.

Matt's graveled old voice was a relief to hear over the background, "We should be able to talk now..." I didn't give him the chance to finish as I lunged across the table after him, he scrambled backwards to the far wall, just out of reach. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, we didn't mean to hurt you!" His

voice had risen an octave, the fear of the gods was in his eyes. "You're the only person ever to wake up and see the spirits!"

"Alright, Matt," I let myself fall to a chair as the fight fled from me, "Either you start telling me what's going on, or I'll throw you back out there without your ear plugs."

He almost grinned at me. "I expect it wouldn't hurt me half as much as someone with ears the size of yours." I glanced up at him with a half growl, he flinched. "We've be doing it to all the visitors for as long as anyone can remember – they wake up in the morning and carry on without any questions. If you'd drank the ale this afternoon, I would have known how much to dose you with and you'd never have noticed a thing."

"And the..." I couldn't quite bring myself to call them ghosts, "Things out there?"

He shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. They came after the fall."

"You mean the Cataclysm?"

"Whatever you want to call it. We found out later that people like you had come to be elsewhere, around here we have spirits visit us every night. Lots of folks left, a few of us stayed. They don't seem to do anything... but everyone who dies comes back to wander in the night."

"But, why you? Why here?"

He didn't even bother to shrug than time. "Who knows? It gets worse the further you go north – until you make it to Edmonton."

I paused a moment and watched him, looking for a lie in his face, a twitch, a smirk, any kind of tell at all. There was nothing.

"Has anyone ever made it there?" I could feel the bottom drop out of my gut, and I doubt it had anything to do with the aftereffects of the drugs.

"A couple of times... but there wasn't much to see." The old man had relaxed some, now that I wasn't trying to crush his windpipe. He sat in the chair across from me. "Just a bunch of broken buildings, like anywhere else. Why's it so important to get there, anyway?"

"It's... complicated." I was asking myself the same question, the whole journey was bogus. Even English himself said he doubted there was anything to find.

I felt my hand clench into a fist, claws digging into my palm. We'd gone too far now, even if there was nothing but ruins, there had to be *something* there. After all, it wasn't like I'd ever heard reports of ghosts running around before.

"How do we get there, Matt? How can we do it in one piece?"

The old man looked back at me a bit cockeyed. "Have you ever heard of the pebble test, Tommy?"

I didn't get much sleep for the rest of the night, despite Matt's assurances. I didn't much trust anyone here.

He was good to his word though. An hour before sunrise the specters faded into the dew. By the time the sun colored the sky, they were all gone. I could have howled in joy when Rebeca's eyes opened. She gave me a gentle squeeze as I held her close, likely thinking me mad. I just told her I'd had a bad dream.

Dream or not, Matt met us back on the inn's main floor, all the other patrons having cleared out as soon as the sun rose. He prepared us a meal, making sure to visibly pull his own breakfast from the

same pot he served us from.

"So, Tommy told me you're heading north." English looked over at me when Matt spoke, I nodded in agreement. I'd made sure not to tell my golden friend about the drugging. He was still on unstable ice clearing his brain from the *creature* in Calgary, I wasn't sure how he'd deal with a whole new set of mind games. "You'd best know that things get a little... odd as you walk the highway."

"What do you mean by 'odd', mate?" English asked around a mouth full of whatever mash it was that Matt had served up.

"I'll just leave that to you folks to find out." He paused for a moment. "It changes every now and then. But you'll want to carry a supply of pebbles." He lay a small sachet of stones on the bar, pushing it towards me. "Throw them ahead of you as you walk. And watch."

The two of them must have thought the old man's mind was slipping when we left. I wasn't so sure, myself. Out in the daylight, it seemed impossible that I could have seen such things as ghosts walking the very streets that we now trod, not even a single spectral footprint marred the dirt. If I was expecting to see some ectoplasm or PKI meters, I was disappointed.

We reached the edge of town, and I threw a stone ahead of us, it skittered across the cracked and worn asphalt. Rebeca giggled.

"Getting superstitious, are we now, mate?" English gave me a queer look. I just shrugged and walked on.

"I've seen some weird things. Who knows what we'll find."

The first few hours passed uneventfully, I'd almost run out of pebbles. I was starting to feel a little bit silly, then we saw something odd ahead on the road.

It was a shimmer. At first it seemed unremarkable, until we'd gotten closer. I wrinkled up my nose at the smell of old blood, English did the same. Its stench was so strong that even Rebeca noticed it a moment later.

This wasn't the tangy copper taste of a fresh kill, but smelt like a graveyard that couldn't hire a decent digger, like a mass grave that had kept being added to and never covered over. The smell of old, dried blood was enough to almost make me retch, and it had come on in only a couple of strides.

Without thinking, I turned and walked back. As quickly as it had started, the stench disappeared from the air. It was like crossing a line, like popping a bubble. I grabbed English and Rebeca and hauled them back across the invisible barrier.

English, with the finer sense of smell, picked up the sudden difference quicker. "What the he-" He stepped forward, only to rock back with his hands covering his nose. "Mate, that's foul." He looked at me for a moment, mind trying to come to grips with the knife's edge of a line that kept the stench at bay. "Is it the wind? A chinook?" He asked, but we both looked around, there wasn't a cloud in the sky and the air was still.

"Think I'm so crazy now?" I elbowed him in the ribs as I drew a cloth from my backpack to tie about my face.

I stepped across the threshold again, my makeshift filter helped little, but it did cut the edge from the stench. A few steps forward and I could see bluntly what caused it.

The trees were bleeding. Wait... what?

It was true. Taking a step forward, I could see the trees at the edge of the highway were leaking red sap, it was blood.

I retreated back across the threshold. Turning around, the trees were restored to normal. Not only did the sweet scent of pine waft through the air, but the forest ahead of me hadn't the slightest hint of red.

I stepped back and forth over the line a few times; there was nothing to see, one instant the world was normal, the next it was something out of a Jr. High horror story. Rebeca and English joined me a moment later, I could hear Rebeca gasp as she saw the difference.

We fell back across the line, trying to get our bearings before we continued.

"Matt told me this might happen."

"What? Fleshy trees? Gods, mate, you could have let us know. When did he talk to you, anyway?"

I looked down at the road beneath us. "Before you woke. I thought he was crazy. The closer we get to Edmonton the worse it becomes – like ripples in a pond."

Rebeca's voice cut in. "So, it might be true? We really could be getting closer to the cause of the Cataclysm? It's like rings around an earthquake. The nearer we get, the stronger they become?"

I shrugged, that was the best explanation I'd heard yet. "Okay. Do we keep going?"

English wrapped a bandanna tighter over his nose. "We've come this close, mate. Might as well go the distance."

Before we pressed forward again, I took a moment to measure the border of the zone. It was almost imperceptible, but I could find just the slightest curve to the edge. I had to put my nose to the ground, snuffing forward again and again, I almost puked three times. Matt's word was true. From what I could tell, the range could be huge enough to encircle the city, Edmonton as its center.

I took a deep breath as we pushed forward. This time we were prepared, all of us held stones that we threw ahead, watching for any effect upon them. We walked quickly, with any luck we might just find an end to this 'world' – we had no better word for it – before English and I passed out from olfactory overload.

It did change soon after, but not for the better. The blood was gone, but the trees began to scream. It wasn't the high pitched drone that the ghosts had trailed, but the agonized voices of a million, all raised in protest to something I could never imagine. We began to run.

It must have been twenty minutes of full out sprinting before the voices suddenly fell away, it was then I realized that we'd been forgetting to send the stones ahead. We stopped for moment, all three of us panting. English and I had our tongues lolling out, Rebeca seemed as though she would have done the same if she could. That's when I noticed that the sky was green.

It wasn't as obvious as the stench of the first world, nor the screams of the second, but it was disconcerting. We continued on with a shrug, perhaps we had passed through the worst of it. Ten minutes later we were back under a blue sky, but now we had a dozen feet of snow around us.

We pulled what clothing we had left from our packs and continued on, Rebeca was the only one who seemed to be able to adapt. My winter coat had long since been shed, and we'd torn English's snowsuit to pieces long ago.

The size of the different worlds appeared to be near random, but they did seem to slowly grow shorter as we pushed through them. That night was an odd one, we spent it on a tropical island.

Compared to the worlds we had passed through, this was paradise. We'd appeared in the surf on one end of the deserted island, and the exit was a five minute wade in the other direction.

This wasn't the first time I'd been able to watch the sun sink into the sea, but it was the first that

I'd been able to do it spending my time up against a palm tree.

I noticed English off in the waves, standing with his back to me, up to his knees in the warm surf. He wasn't moving, just standing there as he looked off into the sunset.

"You okay, buddy?" I laid a hand on his shoulder as I walked up behind him, for a moment he didn't seem to notice me. It wasn't until I pulled even with him that I saw the smile that split his face.

"It's been two days, Tommy." He didn't whisper it, but he might as well have with the sound of the waves around us. The warm water of the ocean – not sure which, we could be anywhere – lapped at our legs.

"Two days since I've thought of *her*." The ragged edge in his voice left no mystery as to who, exactly, *she* might be. "I didn't even notice it until now, until I realized just how beautiful this sunset is. It reminds me of the sunsets in Porbander, Tommy. I spent a summer there... just surviving, after I crossed into India. Now, now I can remember the important things. And people." He sat down with a splash, even then the waves never made it any higher than his chest. "Sometimes I wonder why I kept walking. I could have stayed there you know, I could have settled down."

I glanced behind me for a moment. Rebeca was sitting on the beach, watching, but with no interest of coming any closer.

"Why, English, why did you want to stay, what did you have in India?" I settled down next to him, the waves brushed my face.

"It's not what I had, mate, it's what I could have had. I could have had a family." He didn't speak for a long time, just stared out into the sun as it discolored to the hue of a mandarin orange. "Her name was Jasmin, and she almost smelt like it too." His words had come so suddenly that I wasn't sure he'd said them at all.

"Who?"

"She was wonderful, mate, almost perfect. The daughter of the local mayor, back then my tastes were higher class, I still thought I deserved it. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, a tiger."

He must have noticed my shocked expression for a moment, he threw some water in my face to knock me out of it. "Not like Huston, mate," He laughed, "Not at all. She was slender and sleek, moved like a serpent. Gods, mate, she was a single step from a goddess." He pulled a wet hand across his face, I wasn't sure if there was more water on it before or after he was done. "I never did know what she saw in me. I was still little more than a cub, my mane hadn't even finished growing in yet. I was a pauper, mate, not a penny to my name, just a wild story about being the son of some foreign king! She still came to me, I was sitting alone on the crowded street. Perhaps it was simply because I'm a lion, and we're rare there, but she came to me when we first met. She gently pulled me to my feet, pulled me right from the gutter and took me to tea. Good Indian tea you understand, none of that week tinted water they hoist on tourists."

"I didn't even have a place to go home to when we'd finished talking," he continued. "We spoke of everything, the city, the country, life, everything. It was that very night she took me home to her parents, found me a place to sleep. I'd been little more than a highway man back then, little more than a footpad who would take whatever I could threaten or steal to fill my belly. Her father introduced me to people who taught me how to be a bounty hunter, to provide something rather than take it away."

He fell silent again, so long this time that I wondered if he'd forgotten that I was there. I prodded him on, "So, then what?"

If he'd heard me, he didn't show it. "Those nights with her, gods, I can still remember them sharp as a blade. She was so warm, so soft. I'd been her first, and she, mine. The scent of her, and her namesake, wafting about me, it was intoxicating. I never should have left."

"I never knew if it was her, or her father, but that all changed in a single day, a single night, a single dinner." He cupped a handful of water, almost bringing it to his lips before it slipped away between his fingers. "Her family was still British enough from the colony days that they sat down to an old European style meal. That's when it happened. He asked me when I was to request his daughter's hand in marriage. You don't know what it's like, mate. I'd never even thought such a thing before. My father had been a warlord, he owned the land, and all those who lived upon it, including the women. He didn't marry, not like you might think, he took. He took everything. His wives were whoever he wanted at that moment in time, I'd never thought anything different. Gods, mate, I'd never even thought of such a thing as committing to a single woman – even a goddess such as this."

"At first I thought he must be joking, I waved him off with a laugh and went back to rendering my meat, but he insisted. Next, I became indignant. That was the wrong move. I dismissed him off handedly, and, by extension, her. I thought the anger in his eyes was one thing, the fury in hers struck me to my soul."

"She turned on me, mate, I hadn't even the time or mind to put down the food in my hands. She screamed, stormed around me as she raged about what we meant to each other. I couldn't understand. I hadn't even the slightest to compare her to. The only love I'd ever felt in my life was that my mother had shown me. I loved Jasmine, I know it... now, but back then I thought no more to her than I would a particularly gorgeous wash woman. I suppose, in some ways, that's what she was to me. I thought I was still a prince, that I was still destined for commanding the world, and that everyone was only there to lead to me to it."

"Her father yelled, she screamed, but her mother remained silent and only watched me. It wasn't until her father began to talk about 'my duty' that I could stand it no longer. Up until then I could still have seen it all as some sort of joke. The moment he spoke of duty I threw my food down and chair back. I told them things I'd never told anyone before, who my father was and what I'd done to him. In retrospect, I doubt they cared. My father was a nobody. He had been, in reality, little richer than a mere peasant, but to me he was still a king. And I was still a prince. I would not be treated in such a manner."

"I walked out on them, right then and there, no more words. They wanted something from me, and I was only interested in receiving." His fingers danced across the water before him in a spider like pattern, whipping the surface into eddies and swirls. "Jasmin was at my side again, her lightest touch on my shoulder as she begged me to stop, to turn around. Do you know something, mate? I'd never heard her beg before. I'd never seen her so much as grovel at anyone's feet, not even her father's. She was strong, mate, perhaps the strongest woman I've ever met." He brushed a quick glance to the shore behind us. "Perhaps."

"It was amazing, mate, it was the first time I'd felt like a man, like a king." He paused for a moment and shivered, as if the warm water around us was a million miles away. "It felt good. I felt in control. I knew she would come with me, mate, I knew she would follow me wherever I went... I knew."

"I was at the front door, I never even stopped, never even slowed down as I crossed the threshold. I could feel her falling behind as I left, I didn't turn around as I spoke to her, 'You're coming with me.' It was all I said, I'd never spoken to her like that. I doubt anyone had."

"I could just make out her voice behind me. All she said was, 'Don't you care?' I didn't say a word."

One of his hands reached behind him, rubbing a shoulder blade. His claws dug beneath the fur, raising welts. "And that was my parting gift from her, the last I ever knew of her, a slash down the back. Heh, I'll bet I still have the scars."

"English?" I scooted myself forward a half step in the surf, just enough to make out his face clearly in the failing light. "What did Al-Sedexterous look like to you, what did you see in her face?"

He paused for a long moment, I almost thought he wasn't going to answer. I could just make out his lower lip beginning to tremble. "It was her, Tommy, I swear to the gods, it was her, come to save me."

I left him out there, I left the lion beached in the surf as I made my way back to shore. Rebeca waited for me.

"You've been a while, Wolfy." She held out a towel as I stepped closer. I didn't bother with it, a quick shake threw the water from me. By now she knew me well enough to half expect it, not even squeaking as she held the towel up for cover – perhaps that's why she had it in the first place.

I fell into the sand beside her. "It's been a long day, Babe."

She giggled and tossed a few flecks of sand at me, it made my nose itch. "That's an understatement, Wolfy. Am I the only one who's a little surprised we managed to find a slice of paradise in the middle of the plains?"

"Hey, Babe, I've been walking side by side with paradise ever since leaving V-town." I threw my arm out across her chest. She giggled again and tried to squirm free, only managing to dig herself deeper into the sand.

"Anyway, Wolfy," She paused for a moment to catch her breath, giving up on her escape, now holding my arm close like a blanket. "What were you two manly men talking about out there? Seems the two of you have been having a lot of heart-to-hearts ever since we broke him free."

I sat for a moment, staring up at the faultless blue sky above us as it slowly faded to a fractured black, "It... her... what he saw back there."

She sucked on her teeth for a moment before continuing, "I guess that's not something I want to ask about, is it?"

"Not really, Babe." A thousand ways to answer her scattered through my mind, like loose papers fleeing before a stiff wind. "All you need to know is that we saw what we wanted, needed, to in order to fall for her. And I saw you... with a few improvements, mind you."

She cuffed me across the face as she pulled from my grasp and settled across my chest, sitting on me with her arms on either side. "And what improvements were those, Wolfy?" She lowered her head slowly towards me.

"What else, Babe," I pushed the blasphemous image of the beast from my mind, "Just more of you." I curled my neck forward at met her half way in a kiss.

We woke the next morning, the island was as perfect as it had been when we fell asleep. It almost physically hurt to leave.

We stood in the water, up to our waists, packs hoisted above our shoulders to keep them dry. I

threw a stone through the barrier to the next zone. It was an odd sight, we were standing in the ocean, and I could see it stretch on before us to the horizon. But when I threw the stone, it fell to the ground, not two meters before me, without a ripple. I could see the stone, and I could see the water, but they just didn't seem to connect. Even the path of the stone's descent was untouched, it fell through the tide just as the air. So far, so good, it looked safe enough.

I took a deep breath and stepped through. I could almost feel it pop around me as English and Rebeca followed.

My lungs began to burn, it felt like fire tracing its way through my body – I almost fell back to the water before pulling a cloth forward to cover my face. By now my eyes were streaming, too.

I pried my eyes open against the stinging particles in the air, they rasped against my face like sandpaper. Beside me, I could see that Rebeca and English had been forced to do the same, though Rebeca had bound her entire head and hands. Not that her mask had much of an effect on her vision. The air – I'll call it that, though it hardly deserved the name – was so thick and brackish brown that I couldn't see more than two strides in any direction.

Reaching out, I took both of their hands before we began dashing forward, we'd learned yesterday that sometimes the only way through a zone was as fast as you could run.

We never would have made it if not for the highway. No matter how straight of line we thought we made we always seem to keep finding the edges of it. First the left, then the right, always seeming to zig-zag out way forward from one shoulder of the highway to the other.

While I doubt it could have been more than a few kilometers, it felt like walk took hours. Perhaps it did. More than once we stumbled across the corroded remains of vehicles on the road. Huge, strange designs that we had to skirt around, lest we risk cutting ourselves on the sharp metal that still seemed to stay gleaming despite the grit that beat down on it.

At long last we made it to the far end of the world. Somehow we could tell now, a glimmer or a hum at the wall? Who knows. All I knew for certain was that we were there. I almost didn't even bother to throw a stone through first.

I lost my balance as soon as I stepped through, I should have watched that stone – it sank.

The ground fell out from under me the moment I slipped through the barrier, I tumbled into the cold blue surf of the North Atlantic. At least, that's what it felt like. Behind me, I heard two more bodies follow. One major difference this time from the island? There was no sea bed a few feet down. Peering between my toes, I could see nothing but inky blackness beneath me. For all I knew we could be treading water over the Marianas Trench.

Rebeca came up beside me a moment later. She'd worked on a boat, she could swim. English, on the other hand, couldn't. I felt his massive paw wrap around my leg, dragging me under as he clawed his way towards the surface.

I had a moment of déjà vu from a time not so long ago. The advantage this round was I had Rebeca to help spread the load.

The cold waters chilled through my coat as we set out, only hoping that we hadn't gotten turned around in the intervening moments.

We started out strong, but the temperatures and the water logged packs on our backs soon sapped our strength so that we were doing little more than barely treading water after but a few moments.

The world seemed to be nothing but shades of blue and green. The sky above us was an

unbroken robbin's egg, and the water below painted in a living turquoise. Or it would be living, if a single thing moved down there. For all I knew, we were the only things that survived in the landless world.

English was a spark of gold in the water, and Rebeca's skin glistened ivory. I could feel my limbs turning to lead beneath me, so now it was the lion holding me to the surface.

"Don't you die on me, mate." His voice was horse, own face barely breaking the waves.

My head fell beneath the tide for a moment, the cold water chilling my lungs, feeling as though a black ulcer had grown in my chest.

"English," I tried to gasp enough breath to speak, "Go. Go, I'll... I'll catch up. Get Rebeca out of here." We both knew it was a lie, the moment he let go of me I would sink like a waterlogged stone.

"Not... this... time... mate." He hauled me above the surface again, and somehow dragged the lot of us forward through the waves. The water was a foam of bubbles around him. His eyes were nearly rolled back in his head, blood and frothed saliva flowing freely from his lips. Out of the corner of my vision I could just see Rebeca, her face was a mess, hair plaster down over her, but she reached a hand out to me.

A moment later I felt... something. A texture in the water around me changing, I could feel its pressure pushing down on my back. I would have sworn to the gods that I could hear something, but the water in my ears seemed to reflect nothing but my own frantic heartbeat.

I turned my head and saw it. It took a few seconds to register in my ailing brain. For a moment I thought the green of the ocean consumed the blue of the sky. I wasn't that far from the truth, it was about to consume us – whole.

A wave, no, not just a wave, a tsunami, sat behind us. Not more than a few seconds away, it grinned with a toothless smile that came down in a liquid embrace, pushing us under like so much flotsam.

The world disappeared in a whirl of black. All I knew was that I still held English and Rebeca. That was my world.

Fingers of darkness reached out to grab hold of my mind, I could only resist them for so long. My lungs, they were an almost forgotten afterthought as they burned in my chest. They seemed so petty, so pedestrian as they sobbed for air. Air was nothing but a memory.

Then... we were flying, truly flying.

One moment we were being pushed forward by the soulless water, the next it was gone. The fresh air of the oceanless prairies opened up around us. And we were twenty feet off the ground, airborne.

I wrapped myself around Rebeca as the ground swelled up beneath us. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see English tuck and roll as he came down, wet fur leaving a trail where he slid.

I had only an instant until we made landfall right beside him. Rebeca was in my arms, her soaked clothing making her slippery, but I refused to let her escape even an inch from my embrace.

The hard asphalt struck me above the left shoulder blade, I felt something snap deep within my body. It didn't matter. We rolled a good twenty meters across the ragged ground, welts and cuts springing up across me. All I heard from Rebeca was a single gasp as the breath was knocked from her when we first hit.

I could only just force my eyes open when we came to a stop. Before me stretched out a blue sky, beneath it were the cracked and weathered spires of a city. Edmonton