

The Explorers



C. J. J. 10-

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Chapter 13: A Cold and Chilly Night

There wasn't much more we could accomplish that night. Ornthi still wasn't talking to me, and Jon wouldn't go much further than superficial information – even after I'd relayed him our story. He didn't exactly sound convinced.

The darkness was complete now, we all huddled close to the fire. Rebeca had dressed English up in one of the stranger outfits I'd yet to see. Apparently, he was still big for a human, even after having lost a few hundred pounds in the transformation. A bright orange construction vest and a pair of gray sweat pants were the only things that fit him. They did luck out on the footwear though, a set of hiking boots were now wrapped around his feet. He was having as much trouble walking as I. None of us were brave enough to leave the halo of light shed off by the fire.

Then I heard it. A wolf's howl.

It should have been familiar, it should have been comforting, but it sent a shard of ice straight through me. I pulled Rebeca closer as we all peered out into the darkness.

"Tommy?" I could hear Rebeca's whisper against my ear, "What's going on?"

"Uh, Babe? You remember those native wolves I told you about? I think they've come back for a look-see. And they might not like what's happened to their alpha."

"Alpha?" She didn't have a chance to inquire further, the first of the wolves stepped through the trees.

This was wrong – wolves don't do this. If a man walks into the territory of a wolf, the wolf walks out. Period, that's it. At worst, the wolf might investigate the human and ignore him. Not this.

Twenty feet away, I could see them. The alpha pair and the betas following, advancing on the three of us, closing in a semi-circle. The firelight danced off their eyes and barred teeth.

I stood up, still unsteady on my feet, pushing Rebeca behind me. A few tottering steps and I was face to face with the alpha male. The one I'd caused to piss himself in fear not two nights before. He wasn't submissive now.

For a split second he just looked at me, confusion on his face. Then he huffed a breath, smelling me. His face morphed to fury the instant he had my scent.

Could it be they still knew who I was? Or was I nothing but a monster, an abomination to them now? I tried to reach into my mind, find that place that made their faces, their actions, transparent to me, made them my own. It was gone – nothing left. The alpha was as impenetrable to me as a stone gargoyle, not even the voice that had whispered into my ear was there anymore.

Then he lunged. The wolf shot forward for me, teeth snapping at my throat.

He would have had me too, if Rebeca and English hadn't drawn me back.

It was Rebeca who forced them to give ground. She was as unsteady on her feet as either English or I, but a flaming branch pulled from the fire pushed the wolves a step towards the trees.

"Go! Go! Away!" Her voice was raising to a hiss that I'd never heard from her before. She whipped the flame before their noses, dizzying and confusing them as they tried to adjust to the unknown that faced the pack.

A moment later they turned and fled, but not far. I could still make out their eyes amongst the trees, still see their shapes flitting in the shadows.

There wasn't much we could do that night. What little sleep we got was in shifts, at least one of us awake at all times to keep my extended family at bay. And of what little sleep we got, it provided even less rest.

It was my turn as sunrise crept upon us. I could still see them in the trees. They had stayed all night, circling, looking for any weakness. Fifteen minutes before dawn, they left. The alpha urinated on the edge of camp before disappearing. Marking his territory.

Breakfast was a meager affair. As if we didn't have enough problems, there was no food to be had. I certainly couldn't hunt like this, and asking Rebeca to try would just be a disaster.

All three of us took turns on the radio that morning, talking to Jon. Ornthi wouldn't even acknowledge our existence.

I left English to scream at the dog, it seemed to relieve some of his stress. I hesitantly pulled out my journal.

I paused for a moment, waiting for the scent of the leather to come to me, waiting for it to bring back memories. It didn't happen. At first I couldn't smell the leather at all – and not just because of my broken nose. It was like my sense of smell was so dull as to be all but useless.

I frowned, opening the book anyway. Thankfully, the words were easy to read now, none of the problems I'd had a few nights ago. It wasn't for a few minutes that I began to shiver.

The words were there, and I understood them, of that there was no question, but that was all. I still had the memories, but they were all wrong. Every entry I read brought up a moment from my childhood, from my life, but they were distorted. It was like looking at a black and white photograph of a sunset. Sure, it was there, but all the feeling was gone, all of the majesty that made it what it truly was.

I read the stories I had written about the time I'd spent with my father, even my first hunt. They played out in my mind like a theater production, everything perfectly in focus – but I was nothing more than an observer.

I slammed the book shut and pushed it to the very bottom of my pack.

Jon still wouldn't call me by name. But after talking to Rebeca and English, he did seem a little

more apt to accept our explanation, no matter how freakish it may be. The problem was that it was Ornthi we really needed.

"Are you sure there's no way, Jon? Can't we get Renfrew involved or something?" I was back on the radio with him.

"I'm sorry, sir. I've been trying to tell you, he can't – literally. It's in his programing. He can not render assistance to anyone who is not a member of the Canadian government – and your voice print doesn't match. As far as he's concerned, you're not Tommy Taggert... no matter what you say."

"I'm just not saying it right?"

"That would be it, sir."

I sighed and threw the radio to the ground.

"Good afternoon. Could you help me?" I almost jumped out of my skin when I heard that voice. Looking through the trees, I could just make out a silhouette, black and wolverine. For a moment I almost thought it was my uncle, but it was too large. And flecked with shots of white.

"Amstys?" I was almost afraid to say that name. Oh gods, had Al-Sedexterous sent him after us? As we currently stood, we hadn't a chance.

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

He stepped forward, for the first time I saw him without an engorged nose. He towered over my small human body like an eclipse of the sun.

"What's going on, mate?" Rebeca and English rounded one of the shipping containers.

Amstys surveyed the three of us, his face a perfect mask. "As I said, good morning. I am searching for someone. Would you be able to help me?"

Behind me, I could hear English try and growl, but it came out as more of a coughing fit. Rebeca didn't have that problem. If Amstys noticed, it didn't show.

"I'm looking for a young wolf named Tommy. Last I heard, he was headed here in the company of a lion and a human. Have you seen them?" He stood at easy attention, not a single aggressive twitch of his whiskers.

"Why are you here, Amstys? Did she send you? Did Al-Sedexterous send you to finish us off?" I was just short of burying my head in my hands and letting him kill me.

His eyes widened, a look of horror spreading across his face as he took a step back. "No! No, please, you don't understand." He held his hands out as though I had outright assaulted him. "She's dead, the devil is dead." He paused for a moment, sucking in a breath, "Al-Sedexterous is dead. We killed her."

"What!?" I sprang to my feet, grabbing a double fistful of his fur. Could it be true?

"When Tommy attacked her," Amstys reached up feebly, trying to dislodge me from his chest, "She was wounded – damaged her head, her... scent."

Rebeca took a step forward, laying a hand on my shoulder and easing me to the ground. "And you killed her?"

"We all did." A smile tried to break out on his face, but it had to match off against a snarl and a grimace. "She couldn't control us any more, and we killed her."

I almost toppled over backwards before Rebeca caught me. English didn't have that benefit, a cloud of dust rose around where he fell. "Gods, mate. She's dead? Gods..."

"Then, why are you here, Amstys? If she didn't send you, why did you come?"

"I'm..." He paused for a moment, fingers reaching out to grasp the air. "I'm looking for young master Tommy." He shrugged, averting his eyes to the ground. "After she died, we razed the preserve. Not a building stands. There's nothing left there for us, so those who could returned to their homes, their families."

"You live up here? I thought you said you were from Brooks."

"I'm not. I am..." He paused again, the look on his face drew out, becoming more painful. "There's nothing left for me back there... it's gone, long gone. I was the longest serving in her preserve, I don't have anything to return to. I'm here looking for the young master, I haven't anywhere else to go. I don't even remember a single person from before *her*."

I was tempted to reach out, to comfort him, but this was the same man who had led me, smiling, into slavery. In the end, there was nothing else I could do. I couldn't turn him away.

"Well, Amstys, you've found us." I reached out to him, extending my hand. "And what did I tell you about calling me 'young master'?"

He looked at me, eyes narrowing. "I think not." He said it in such a simple and definite off hand manner that I was, for a moment, reminded of English's fux-noble airs and accent.

"What? Amstys, it's me, Tommy." I looked down at my strange body. "Okay. It's not that easy to explain, but I'm the same guy you lead from the mountains, the same guy who sent you back to the preserve when we went hunting."

He looked at me again, coming in so close that I couldn't help but shiver as his bulk threw me in shadow. He huffed in a deep breath, cleanly, through a healthy nose, and blew it back out with a growl.

"You are not the young master." His hand shot out lightning quick, lifting me off the ground by my clothing. I could hear the seams begin to pop. "You will tell me where he is. Now."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw English leap towards us, but between his reduced mass, missing fangs, and unsteady feet, he was no match for Amstys. The wolf sent him crumpling to the ground with the single swipe of a paw. A moment later Rebeca joined him in the dirt, she did little better, though her new claws did leave a set of bloody slashes on the wolf's bicep.

"Now. Tell me where he is." For the first time in my life, I felt sheer terror as I looked up onto the alien maw of the beast the towered over me. I was helpless, he held me clear off the ground without even so much as a wasted breath. I could feel his free hand begin to close around my neck.

"Wait!" My pleas were met with nothing more than a growl. "I... my... my name isn't Tommy. It's Taggart. I came with Tommy from V-town, on the coast. I'm to meet him here." The grip on my throat slacked slightly. "This is... uh... Michael and 'Becca." I tried to gesture to the bodies still laying on the ground.

"Why should I trust you?" I could hear his voice relaxing, and, more importantly, I could feel the ground under my toes again.

"How would I know so much about you if he hadn't told me?" Amstys' hands came away from my jacket, I could breathe again. Now came the risky part of my quickly fabricated lie – as if the last bit hadn't been. "He knew you'd be coming," The surprise was obvious in the wolf's eyes. "And he needs you to help us."

"No." His voice was unequivocal. "I'm here to find the young master, not help you. And," His eyes narrowed again, "Why shouldn't I just pull his location from your very flesh?"

I backed away, almost tripping over English's prone body. "Because I'm the only one who knows how to find him. If you kill me, you'll never get him." I paused for breath, "And he's not just

going to show up... we need to signal him."

Amstys just shook his head, raising one hand to his brow. "Fine, little human, what labors have I to do?"

With Amstys joining us, we had some muscle again. The first thing I had to do was get English and Rebeca back up and running, he had been none too gentle with them. It wasn't until I was tending their wounds that I realized that my own broken nose was still bleeding. Bugger! I'd lost my regeneration.

Together, we walked back to the computer room. Amstys was none too pleased to follow us so deeply into the ground, but he did little more than grumble as we made it down.

The room itself was still unbearably hot, as if a dozen ovens had been left open. The nap of the earth had insulated the room. It was cooling, but slowly. It would take days for the room to return to its original temperature.

I checked the batteries, careful not to touch the dastardly counsel that had changed us. They all showed a half charge or less.

"Well, buddy," I turned and looked at the former lion who stood nervous in the doorway, "I'm open to suggestions."

Despite the suffocating heat, he shivered, "Do as you will, mate. You're the alpha, remember? I just want to be me again." For a moment he paused, looking down at his hands. "Though, it's not like I have fond memories of any lions I've ever known..." He turned and began walking the long journey up to the surface, leaving me alone with Amstys.

"Come on, big guy. We need to get these batteries up to the surface again, and the only tunnel left is hardly big enough to crawl through."

The sun was setting when Amstys had finally dragged the last of the batteries to the surface, their solar panels catching the dying glimmers of the setting sun.

He came back with fresh meat soon after, I never thought I would be so happy to see game again. Even the single night we had gone hungry left a pit in my gut that seemed to consume me. The moment he walked towards us with a pair of jackrabbits, I could have told you I'd be able to eat a whole elk.

Then, once he dropped one in my waiting hands, I stared at it dumbly. Every memory I had shouted at me to dig in, to rip through its pelt and choke down the sweet meat, but a new voice whispering in my ear was disgusted at the very idea.

I glanced over at Rebeca, who held the second rabbit, she looked the same.

"Uh, Babe? I'll help you cook yours, if you'll help me with mine."

Amstys came back again, with another two rabbits. One he tossed to English, the other he kept for himself. He tore into his own, no preamble, just the sickening sound of ripping meat and crunching bones.

We sat around the fire, even English reluctantly agreed to let Rebeca cook his meal.

"So, Amstys," I tried to spark a conversation with him, he just stared out into the shadows, "How did you get here, anyway? Didn't you have to pass through the worlds too? That's a long way to

come for one man."

He shrugged, barely, almost imperceptibly. "I'll go where I need to. Though," He shifted to look at me, "There were many strange things on the way here... a stench, a desert. I fell asleep on a tropical island one night, only to awaken in the middle of the road the next day. Not a single oddity has barred my way since. Until you three."

"Would that have been the night before last?"

"Yes. Why?"

I backed away from him, Rebeca and English had perked up behind me. "Nothing, nothing."

Later that night I heard the wolves again, the real ones. They screamed into the cold wind, I could feel myself shivering as I curled closer to Rebeca.

Amstys was the next to howl, he never left camp as he did. The wolves were silent from then on.

The next morning came gray and overcast. Just our luck, I'd bet the batteries had hardly charged. I wasn't far off, many of them showed a reading that barely broke seventy percent.

I rooted around in my pack one more time to find the radio, maybe I had some chance of getting Ornithi to talk to me today.

"Jon? Jon, are you there?"

His voice snapped on, as though he'd been waiting by the radio.

"Hello, sir, are you there?"

"It's me, Jon. Just me." I settled down on a log by the campfire, ready for another long session of trying to prove to him who I was.

"Fine." He paused for a moment, "I don't care who you are, you need to know this. Griss Taggart, Tommy's father, is ill."

"What!?" I froze. "What happened?"

"He's fine, right now." I could hear Jon's voice, hollow in my ears, as he tried to calm me, but it was nothing more than academic, ice water flowed through my veins. "But he's had a heart attack, Max got the transmitter up for a few hours yesterday. Griss is alright for the moment, but they don't have the proper equipment to treat him, holed up in police headquarters as they are."

I dropped the radio to the ground as I ran to where Amstys sat. Behind me, I could just make out Jon's voice, "Tommy? Tommy, are you there?"

"Now, Amstys, we've got to get these down there now!" I tried to lift one of the batteries, but my weak human muscles couldn't even budge it.

"Tommy, what's wrong?" Rebeca came up behind me, English wasn't far off.

"We're going back to V-town. Now. My Dad just had a heart attack."

"Oh gods..." Her fingers came up to touch her lips.

"Faster, you blasted fur baring varmint," English was suddenly behind Amstys, spurring him on, "Move it!"

It couldn't have taken more than a few hours, but it felt like years before the last of the batteries were back in the sweltering hole and hooked up.

I stood before the green screen again, typing the same letters as before. My fingers shook and sweat ran down me as I hit the keys. I wasn't sure if it was because of what I was about to invoke, or what I was afraid to find afterwards. That was assuming we survived the process a second time. And that it didn't reduce us to amoeba.

My finger slammed home on the Enter key, I didn't even bother to look back at any of the three who stood behind me.

The screen read:

...beginning factor

Estimated time to completion – 00:15:42

"So, this will signal the young master to come?" Amstys' voice growled out from the darkness. Wait... ah, heck.

I turned, his eyes widened in surprise as I ran towards him, "Run! Run, you stupid wolf!"

"What...?" The confusion was obvious in his voice.

"Get out of here. Run, unless you want to end up looking like us!"

There was no question that he hadn't the slightest what was going on. But to escape the crazy people, if nothing else, he turned tail and disappeared up the stairs.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

We sat in silence and watched the clock tick down. The room was like an oven and getting worse, I could feel the sweat roll down my back. I would have taken my clothes off, but they seemed to be deflecting at least a little of the hot air that was being pushed out by the boxes around us. Every so often I reached up to try and wipe away some of Rebeca's shed hair from my face. I'd never had problems like this when I'd had a fur coat, but now it was driving me crazy. The more I swiped at it, the more there seemed to be. In the end, I just gave up and returned to watching the screen slowly count down.

We weren't long past the ten minute mark on the count down when I smelt something. Even my dull human nose couldn't help but make out the sharp, bitter, almost burning smell that hadn't been there a few seconds ago.

I stood up, despite the heat that made my head spin, and took a couple of steps forward. Now a sound accompanied the stench, a hissing, a bubbling. I played my flashlight beam out in front of me, into the darkness, it was obvious where the disturbance was coming from.

The casing on one of the batteries was bulged out grotesquely, I could hardly even make out its original shape.

"Uh, folks, I don't think this is good..." I took a step closer. Now I could see a dozen more batteries, all the same.

The hissing grew louder, I could see a bubble forming in the metal of the closest battery. Layer by layer, millimeter by millimeter, as if in slow motion, I watched the safety cladding peel back. One moment only a single drop of acid leaked forth, next it spewed forth like the turgid rush like a sewer outlet.

"Yow!" The smell alone was enough to make me retreat. I scrambled, climbing back and away,

up onto one of the racks of computers that surrounded me.

English and Rebeca had just enough warning to escape up on another aisle of computers before the acid took over their position. One of the flashlights had been left behind in the rush. It bubbled, the dying beam flickering as the housing dissolved into the tide of acid. There was a small pop, and the light went out for a final time. The entire flashlight was gone in under a minute.

I could just see the screen from where I lay atop the computers across the aisle. The countdown read eight minutes.

"Are you okay?" I yelled it through the din of fans around us, my voice was lost like chaff in the wind. I was relieved when I saw a thumbs up from English. Rebeca lay next to him, they were both belly down on the top of another cabinet of computers.

"And all we have to do is wait." Speaking the words hurt. I could feel the temperature continuing to rise, the smell of the acid thick in the air.

Two more minutes passed, we heard twice as many batteries split open with the hiss of bursting seals. The acid that had already spilled was beginning to eat into the concrete floor, I could see the fumes raising up as I played my dim flashlight beam over the surface.

I'd just sat back to wait again when I heard a change in the omnipresent hum around us. Three banks over, a row of lights went out, an aisle of computers falling silent. Turing my flashlight, I could see the acid had begun to eat away at them, they listed to one side as their bracketing melted.

`warning: nodes off-line (error: connection lost) cluster at 75%`

My heart quicken as I read the screen. The timer had jumped back up, it was in the seven minute range again.

My own aisle had begun to sag. It was at least a two meter jump to try and make it to the next one, the bank that held the screen. It would have been nothing in the days before my transformation, even with the pool of acid growing beneath me. But with my human legs? I wasn't so sure.

I didn't have much of a choice now. I could feel the platform beginning to sway under my feet. Oh smeg. I was tilting away from the other aisle, widening the gap between us.

I backed up to the far edge, inadvertently giving weight to the ever growing void. Then I ran.

I had to clutch the flashlight in my dull human teeth. It was pointed out to the side, beam waving wildly across the room. There was hardly enough space to make my dash, barely enough room to even so much as get two strides on what was left of my platform before I was in the void.

Beneath me I could see the bubbling sea of acid, just visible in the wan light. Its green surface was marred by streaks of yellow and brown, former things that I didn't want to think about.

I didn't make the jump.

My face slammed into the hard metal side of the computer cabinet, grinding shards of bone even deeper into my already shattered nose. My fingers scrambled for the ledge, but the haze of pain was blinding, robbing me of the split seconds I had to find it. Then I began to fall.

The drop wasn't far, less than a meter. I could feel the rubber soles of my running shoes splash into the acid beneath me, smell the repugnant odor as they began to melt. I had no doubt that my socks and soft feet were soon to follow.

The rubber didn't last long, only seconds, but it did give me enough time to scramble in the

darkness and leap upwards. The better part of the soles were left in the puddle behind me, I heard them tare free.

For half a heartbeat I couldn't feel anything but smooth metal under my fingers. Then, just barely, I hooked my fingernails over the ledge on the top of the cabinet. The sharp machined edge cut my fingers to the bone, I could feel the blood gush free, making my grip slippery and precarious, but I had it.

I hung there for a moment, my toes only inches above the long gone shoes that disappeared into the acid. The fumes raising up were making me see bright colors and swirls in the dark, but I slowly forced myself up all the same.

The feel of acid drops burning into my feet and legs set them afire. I did my best to ignore the pain as they ate into my pink flesh.

I lay there, panting, on the top of the cabinets. Safe... for now.

Beneath me, the screen read three minutes.

The aisle I had been sitting on was long gone now. Not only was it fully toppled over, but half dissolved. The only thing that seemed to be saving my own computers was that they were mounted on some different kind of rack. One that, thankfully, didn't appear to be affected by the acid that churned below.

Looking down, I could see the screen. It was counting down from sixty.

For a moment I was afraid that nothing was going to happen, then I felt a familiar vibration building in my bones. Glancing down, I could see the edges of my hands beginning to blur.

I looked over at Rebeca and English, a smile alight on my face despite the pain that clawed at me. It had begun.

With all the computers that had been destroyed, the hum, and the blistering heat, had died down to a manageable background roar.

"Can you feel it?" I held up my hand.

The frown on Rebeca's face nearly stopped my heart dead.

"Tommy, nothing's happening over here."

What? I crawled down my aisle, closer to her and English. It was only a few feet before I felt the vibration die away, then the sickening sensation of nothing at all.

"The power! We've lost too much power! You need to get closer!"

Gods. With so much ruined equipment, I doubt we'd be able to do this again. They needed to get over here.

English whispered in Rebeca's ear, something I couldn't hear, a moment later she was airborne. She'd pulled back for all the run she could get, but her jump was even further than mine had been, at least three meters. I could just see English in the shadows, pushing her forward as she took flight.

Then she was in my arms, only having just made the leap. I pulled her back into the swirling vortex of the field, not letting her go until I knew she was within range of whatever we were about to call down upon ourselves.

"English, come on! We don't have time!" I'd stolen a look at the clock as I scrambled back, it read thirty seconds now.

"I can't make it, Tommy." His accent was faltering again as he looked down into the swirling

pool beneath us, "I can't make the jump."

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life like this, English? We can't do it again!" Despite the dying sounds of the fans around us I was still screaming at him, yelling at the top of my lungs, "Do you want to be human?"

He looked at me, eyes unblinking. "It's the better half of my heritage."

"And what? Forget what your mother raised you to be? You're the only lion in North America, and you've brought more honor to that post than anyone else I could ever imagine. Is that what you want to be, just another human? Or do you want to at least try and undo the evils your father did?" My voice started as a scream, but ended as a whisper, tempered as it was under his unblinking gaze.

The counter was reading under twenty seconds now.

I looked back up, and English was airborne. He'd gotten more speed than I ever could have ever imagined, but it wasn't enough to make it to the cabinet.

I caught his outstretched fingers as he reached forward, his weight was so great as to unbalance me, almost pulling me from my perch.

He had to tuck his feet up he was so close to the acid. I held his weight by a single outstretched hand.

And I couldn't pull him up.

It took everything I had just to keep him from slipping, there was nothing I could do to pull him to safety, to get us into the field. And the counter ticked down.

"Drop me, Tommy." He tried to slip his hand free.

"Not happening, English." I pulled, but all I accomplished was to feel the muscles in my shoulder tear.

"What would you boys do without me?" Rebeca appeared at my side, grabbing English's other outstretched hand. With the sickening feeling of ripping flesh, we pulled him up, the three of us skidding backwards into the ever narrowing field of vibrations.

Estimated time to completion — 00:00:04

This time there really was nothing to do but wait.