



The Mourner

By wwwolf

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So, a quick heads up and a bit of a warning to any readers who dare to venture this far. This is the final book in *The Hunters* series. If you haven't read the previous books I highly recommend you do.

For those of you who have stuck with me this long, thank-you. I mean it. This book is effectively a full length epilogue to the series. The main thrust of the story ended with *The Prodigions*, but this gives us closure. Well, a form of closure.

To those who want the series to have a happy, upbeat, fairytale ending, I can't stress enough: stop reading now. *The Mourner* is aptly named.

For those of you who are brave enough to continue on, I hope you enjoy and I hope this is a fitting send off to my first and most enduring cast of characters. May you all find what it is you've been hunting for.

Chapter 1: The Lion In Winter



And with that the great mayor Thomas James Taggert brought together the warring fractions of V-town to form a single cohesive government. It was a titan's task, one that not a single of us could ever achieve, but *he* did. It was through his action, and his action alone, that V-town is still here today."

It was finally with that the prof paused to take a glance down at his notes. Gods, this was as bad as when I was back in collage... no, worse. This old man, a dog of some breed, was quite possibility the only person I've ever met in my life who could talk not only while breathing out, but also in.

And I've spent the last gods know how many years dealing with politicians.

Politicians!

I'd just about been able to convince myself that the bugger was done talking when he started up again.

He'd already been at it for over forty minutes. At this rate there wasn't going to be any time left at the end of the period for *me* to talk.

Perhaps I should just count my blessings.

I was sitting up on a spacious stage in one of the nicest halls of V-town University. I was supposed to be here to give a lecture about the structure of the government and the history of the city. I was one of the few people in the city in a position to actually be able to talk about such things, having a degree in history and being a former mayor, but I was getting a feeling I wasn't so much as going to get a word in edgewise here.

I wouldn't have minded so much but the dog just wouldn't stop talking about *me*.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not that shy. You have to get used to this kind of stuff once you've been mayor. Or a top bounty hunter. Or a governmental figurehead, which is all I am now. People like to have someone to worship, and I seem to have gotten myself up stuck up on that pedestal.

What I couldn't stand was what the dog was going on about. I was sitting just behind where the

man stood at his podium, lecturing out over the heads of what had to be a good three-hundred students.

Don't get me wrong, I've noting against a little embellishment here and there, but I do have a bit of a problem with outright lies.

"...it was Thomas James Taggert that restored order after the race riots. He and his party had just returned from their quest to the source of the Cataclysm. Returning to V-town, they took the reins of power form the weakened police department and reformed the government. Mr. Taggert directed all the new government's policies and he alone reformed the scattered and abhorrent laws of the previous administration into the solid groundwork for what we have today. He was the one to singlehandedly save the human population of V-town."

I could feel a growl tickling at the back of my throat. Trying to keep my fur lying flat, I looked out into the crowd before me. With the spotlights shining down I could hardly make out their faces, but from what I could see they were lapping this up, believing every word.

"... and it was Thomas James Taggert that discovered the plots of Brian Ferguson to unbalance the government of V-town," the dog continued. "He was the one to..."

That was when I stood up.

I like to think of myself as a pretty calm guy. Like I said, I've dealt with politicians, but even I have my limits.

"Thanks, Prof," I growled out between clenched teeth as I stepped up to the podium, pressing the other man aside. The dog didn't want to step down, but I've got years of experience bounty hunting. I know how to make someone move.

I didn't give the dog a chance to wheeze out another word as I took over the spotlight. There was no microphone here. The only way to get a message out to all the hungry young faces watching me was to practically yell at the top of my lungs.

Gods but I hate public speaking. I just wish I hadn't so much experience at it.

"Morning, folks," I said, pulling a grin to my lips. I'd learned long ago to dispense with any formality. It just didn't work for me. I'm not exactly *folksy* but it helps if I speak as I truly am. "I'll try to keep this short. Your prof already ate up most of our time and I'm sure most of you aren't exactly looking forward to hearing an old wolf like me natter on for the rest of the day."

There were a couple of polite chuckles. From the back of the room someone shouted 'Speech, speech!'

I could hear the dog behind me 'hurmph' as he sent out a withering glare.

"First thing I want to say, folks," I continued, falling into my overly practiced speech voice, "Is that you can completely ignore everything your prof just said." For just a second the room was dead silent, then a cheer rang out. "Yeah, don't quote me on your test, but everything he said was wrong. Sorry, man," I said, glancing back at the man with a shrug. "It's true."

"Anyway," I continued, "It's wrong for a single reason. The past he told you, and the past other folks told him, is too neat, too clean." I let out a long breath. "He says I journeyed to Edmonton to find the source of the Cataclysm. That much is true. But I went with Rebecca, English, and Jon. If I'd gone alone I wouldn't have made it any farther than Squamish. He says I returned and rebuild V-town. Well... I returned. It wasn't *me* that rebuild V-town. It was *us*. Well, not perhaps you guys, you likely weren't born yet. It was all of us who were left in the city. Me, my friends, the police, every single man and woman in the city. We all worked together during the reconstruction to pull things back from the brink. Sure I was in the middle of it, but I wasn't the only one working. I don't deserve any more credit than the rest of the people involved. Bugger, you want someone to put on a pedestal? Try Commissioner Sayer. Without him V-town would be nothing more than rubble."

Narrowing my eyes, I tried to peer out once again into the dark crowd that sat before me. The spotlight trained upon the podium made it hard to see anything beyond my nose. It was only by raising

a hand to shade my brow that I could cut through the bright yellow light. I knew it looked bad. No professional speaker would ever do something like that.

A smile touched my lips when I made out a familiar form sitting in the front row. Unlike many of the other students he wasn't hunched over a book taking notes.

I winked at Ging.

My son smiled and winked back.

"You need to remember folks," I continued, picking back up and looking out over the audience again, "That anything of this magnitude doesn't just happen due to a single person. Sure the right guy in the wrong place can make all the difference, we've all seen that, but that's not the way things like the rebuilding works. It takes hundreds, thousands, of people pulling together in the same direction to make it happen. Sure there has to be *someone* at the top to get everyone going the in same way, but they're only a focal point, not the source of the energy. Anyone who tries to tell you that a *single* man is responsible, a *great man* they used to call it back in my day, is trying to sell you something. We all have to work together."

I let out a long sigh and leaned forward on the podium.

"That's what you need to be careful about, folks. I've seen it. That was one of the many problems that got the city in the way it was before. People thinking – and people being encouraged to think – that a single person can be *all that*. That's not a healthy way to operate. I'm not a a god." I paused a chuckled. Thankfully, there was some light laughter from the crowd to go along with it. "I may have not done a half bad job at what I turned my hand to, but that was more by sheer chance than anything else. Even when there is a single person who's driving a major project, it's not a good thing to have."

I thought back to Sayer and shivered. If we hadn't had Jon to step in and take over the police force when the old dog died we'd have been in a bummer of a sorry spot. And none of us had actually been all that sure Jon was going to be able to do the job back then.

"Anyway, folks," I said, forcing my ears up and a smile to my lips, "I'd best keep this short. You've all heard me speak before and I'm sure I'm just as boring as your prof." I took my hands off the podium and stepped back. Here was the best part about not needing a microphone, I could get in a parting shot. "Just remember to vote in the next election, eh? We need voters, and more than that educated voters. And you," I grinned, "Are for better or worse the best we've got."

I'd gotten my time good. I was just sitting down and the prof was clearing his throat when the class bell rang.

Heh. It's been a long time since I'd attended school, but I've *never* seen a lecture hall clear out this fast. In no more than sixty seconds there were only three people left in the room. Me, the prof, and Ging.

Stepping down from the stage, I was happy to note that someone had turned on the overhead lights. I could see where I was walking now.

Ging was still sitting in his seat at the front of the hall. He had a textbook open before him and was reading away. If I didn't miss my mark, I'm pretty sure he'd been reading it the entire class. How he'd managed with the light so low I hadn't a clue.

It wasn't as though he'd really needed to pay close attention as his dad lectured. He'd already heard every tale I had to tell long ago. I'd used them as bedtime stories when he and Liz had been young.

"So how'd I do?" I asked, slipping into a desk next to him. I was pleased to note I still fit.

He carefully dog-eared a page in his book and slipped it into his bag before looking up.

"Not bad, Dad, but I've heard you do better. You really aren't that good at ad-libbing. I'm not

sure why you always insist on going up without a script.”

Ging had grown into a young man almost without me noticing. He was a wolf like me, with a rich brown coat that matched his mother's hair. But unlike me he didn't have a white patch on his belly. The only cream fur he had was just under his muzzle.

Ging was an intellectual, even more than I, but there was something in his voice that reminded me of my father. The boy had spend too much time around his great uncle Gowan, alpha of the hunters. His voice was deeper than one would expect. It carried a calm, smoky quality.

“Well I thought he did fine. It's not often he gets a chance to speak to his own son's class.”

I glanced up and smiled. I'd recognize that new voice anywhere.

“Hey, Babe,” I said, reaching out a hand. A moment later I had Rebecca snug against me. I reached out to kiss her on the forehead. “I thought you were still out exploring that campus.”

She rolled her eyes. “It's not that big, Wolfy. It only took a half hour to walk all the way around it. I got back just before you started talking.” She grinned and reached up to tickle my nose. “At least you're better at public speaking than you used to be. Do you remember when you were courting the vote for your first election?”

I sneezed.

“Yeah, Babe. That was back when I was still searching for the human vote.”

Rebecca herself was human. One of the few in V-town. The Cataclysm a hundred odd years ago had wiped out most of the humans, replacing them with wolves, cats, and all forms of mythological creatures.

And then the purges instigated by the previous administration hadn't helped much either...

“Shall we, Babe?” I asked as I took her arm. She smiled and leaned into my side.

From behind us I heard a grown.

I rolled my eyes. I could hear Ging get to his feet and stuff the last of his things in his book bag. He had about the same reaction to watching his parents cuddle as I had when I was his age.

Too bad. I was old now and I could afford to put him through a little bit of embarrassment.

“So what do you have now, dear?” Rebecca asked as we made our way towards the lecture hall door.

He didn't even have to pause to think. “Law class,” he said. “This was history. Next I have my law class over in the Sayer building.”

I ground my teeth slightly. I wasn't sure who'd decided to name one of the new university building after the late police commissioner, but I wasn't a huge fan of it.

Don't get me wrong, Sayer had been a smart man, dangerously smart, he'd been the one to force me into becoming mayor, but naming a place of higher learning after him just didn't strike me as the greatest idea.

I let out a sigh. “That's way on the other side of the university, isn't it?” I asked. Ging nodded. “Well, I guess that means we won't have any time to catch up them. You'll need to hoof it if you want to make it there in time.”

He grinned. That was something Ging had inherited from me. He might be a wolf, but yet there was still somehow one of his grins looked friendly. Not many wolves could pull off showing their teeth in a friendly manner.

“Yeah, I guess I'd better get going.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “I'm sure you're so sad to leave your embarrassing parents behind.”

He was long used to the teasing. Throwing his book bag over his shoulder, he reached forward to give Rebecca a hug, right out here in the middle of the university courtyard.

“Love you, Mom. I'll see you this weekend?” he said, his face buried in her hair.

She wrapped her arms around him like only a mother can. “You'd better.”

A moment later they were done. He stood there, looking at me.

“Well, see you latter, Dad...” he said.

I lunged forward and caught him in a tackle hug. No a single one of the hundreds of people milling about around us even raised an eyebrow.

Ging was too big to lift off the ground now like when he was a pup, but I still held him tight.

“See you soon, son.” I had to crack a smile. The left was left unsaid.

I could feel him press his face against my shoulder.

“I know, Dad. I'll try to live up to the example you set, even if it's not all that true,” he whispered.

A moment later Ging was gone. He'd melted into the the milling crowd of a hundred different species that flowed through the university.

Walking hand in hand with Rebecca, we crossed the courtyard and climbed the steps to a smaller building on the outskirts of the campus.

I'd noticed a piece of paper when we'd arrived here this morning. It had all the different lectures listed. There was one name I'd recognized.

I could hear his voice as we walked down the polished wooden floor of the hallway. And that in itself was odd. The man I knew would never run late.

Poking my nose around the open doorway, I could see why he was still talking.

My lecture hall had been fairly full, but this one was packed – standing room only. The center of attention was a single dog on stage, dressed in a dark blue uniform. Like me, he had no need for a microphone when he spoke.

Jon was answering questions being posed to him from the audience. Half of those in the room were civilians, the other half looked to be police cadets.

“Sir,” someone said, who looked to be a police dog in training, “Is it true that ten years ago the police force was completely staffed by canines, particularly those of a German Sheppard line?”

A frown pulled at Jon's lips when he responded. He himself was a Sheppard.

“Yes, that is correct.” he said. His voice still had the perfect, razor sharp diction of a formal police officer. “I can not speak exactly as to why that was, but it was the decision of my predecessors to closely limit the intake of the V-town police force to a few specific families. I am happy to say that is no longer the case. The force is still *prominently* of those lines, but we are slowly diversifying to include a greater cross-section of the city's population.”

Creeping our way into the room, Rebecca and I took spots against the back wall. It was the only place with room for us.

I grinned as I watched Jon. We were all getting older now, but he hardly seemed to change. Pushing forty-five, the dog looked as pressed and perfect as the day I'd met him, perhaps better.

Definitely better when I think back to the getup he'd been wearing when he'd gone undercover back then.

Jon was the picture-perfect image of a police officer. I can say that for a fact as I know he's been used as a model for no small number of reconstituting posters. Still in super-human condition, the only concession he'd made to his slowly advancing age was a pair of thin, wire frame glasses that perched atop his mussel.

To be honest, I wasn't sure if he needed them or if they were just there to make him look dapper. The gods knew he didn't need any help with *that*.

We waited for a couple of minutes as the questions went on. For not the first time I wondered if Jon would have made a better mayor then me. I was just a wolf. The moment I stepped down from the

podium I was just another canine. Jon, he was the Police Commissioner. He looked, acted, and sounded like the Police Commissioner every moment of every day. You could strip him of his uniform and cover him in mud and he'd still be in charge.

Bugger, you could turn him into a human and he'd still be in charge. I'd seen *that*.

At long last one of the TAs had to step up to the stage and call a close to the lecture. They'd already run out of time a while ago and people were going to need this space soon.

To say it was a little different than my own speech would be an understatement.

At long last the seats were clear and it was only the three of us left in the hall, Jon, Rebecca, and I. Jon was bent over a briefcase, filing away his paperwork.

It was only then I noticed that he didn't have any of his attendant police dogs. That was something that just didn't happen. The force was obsessive about protecting their Commissioner. If he didn't have a guard or two he always at least had an aid standing at his shoulder.

The hall was empty and quiet enough I could hear my claws click on the floor as I walked up to the stage.

"Hey, Jon," I said as I walked up the steps. "I wasn't expecting to see you here today."

He flicked an ear in acknowledgment as he snapped the briefcase shut. A moment later he straightened and turned to me.

"Tommy." For just a moment the perfect neutral face of a V-town police dog looked back at me before it split in, what was for him, a wide smile. "I'm here every other week as part of the new justice course."

Rebecca was behind me a moment later. "When did that start?" she asked.

Jon shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. It was one of Pine's initiatives since I promoted him to head of public outreach."

I grinned. I remember Pine, he'd been my personal *atache* after Jon has taken over the police force. He'd stayed that way during my entire run as mayor. The dog had even stayed with me for a number of years after I'd stepped down. It had only been a couple of seasons ago I'd finally convinced the man my workload was light enough today that I didn't need him full-time.

Jon had been more than happy to have Pine's experience available to him again.

"Looks like you're popular," I said as we turned to walk back outside.

He shrugged. "It would appear. But you must remember that the justice course is one of the most popular at the moment, and attendance to the Force's lectures is mandatory. People's interest in building a respectable society in many cases stems to their new found knowledge of exactly what can happen when they let their vigilance slip for even a moment. I think it safe to say that none of us want a return to the time before the rebuilding."

I shook my head as we stepped out into the fresh air. That was something we could *all* agree on.

We were little more than a dozen paces down the graveled path that stretched across patchy grass when a shadow fell in front of me. Looking up, I recognized the the dog that stood in the middle of the path, his arms crossed. It was the prof who'd been giving the dry, endless introduction to my speech.

"Mr. Taggert." He gave me a disapproving glare. Most of the people I've encountered have a different tone of voice they used when they're giving a dry lecture as opposed to when they're speaking normally. This guy didn't.

"What can I do for you, Professor..." I had to rack my brain for a moment, "Inman?"

He let out a 'hrumph' and leveled me with a fresh glare.

I'd hate to have to tell him this, but his glare was strictly second rate. I'm sure it's more than sufficient for when he's cowering students, but I'm not a student any more. And I've been in enough

life or death situations that a simple look of disproveal doesn't mean much to me anymore.

"You're speech back in the hall was most... unprofessional," he said.

I cocked my head.

"Okay, I'm sorry for interrupting you back there," I said, trying to step around him, "But we were running out of time in the period."

He shifted to block my way again.

"That is not what I'm referring to, Mr. Taggert," he replied. "You were most unprofessional. You directly contradicted much of what I said in my lecture. If the students make us of the... information you provided them they will likely fail their exams."

I stopped trying to get around him and turned to look at the man. He was dressed in a conservative grey suit. It wasn't as good as the one's Smith used to make, but it was decent enough. He must be making a pretty good salary for a university professor.

I leveled him with a glare in return. "What were you expecting me to do? *You* were the one who asked Ging to get me to come in and talk. *You* were the one who make errors during your lecture."

Canines like us can't blush or go red, our fur prevents that, but I could see from the set of the man's ears and tail he was *not* happy.

"Mr. Taggert," he said between clenched teeth, "I can assure you *I* did not make any mistakes in my lecture. May I remind you that I am the university's premier expert in the modern history of V-town and it's government? I've spent over a decade of my life researching."

The prof looked like was about ready to snap at me. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

"You're the expert?" I asked, glancing back at Rebecca and Jon. "Do you even know who you're talking to? *We're* the people who lived through it. I'm the one you were talking about for the gods' sakes!"

The 'hurphed' again and for just a moment lowered his eyes.

"That's not withstanding. I've done more research than anyone else." Reaching out, I set a hand on the man's shoulder. He shrugged it off. "It doesn't matter what you *did* Mr. Taggert," he said. "What matters is what history records."

I narrowed my eyes.

"That sounds like something the previous administration would have said." It took every ounce of willpower I had to get the words out without a growl.

A moment later the bell rang for the next period. The prof turned and walked away without another word. I couldn't help but wonder what stories he was going to tell his students now.

Out of the university district, we walked the relatively short distance to a very familiar upscale part of town. None of us lived here, but we all knew these roads by heart.

A particular restaurant was located here, and we'd dinned there more times than we could remember.

"Mate!"

We'd hardly gotten so much as within the wrought iron gates of Cafe Bristol before the voice boomed out. It wasn't as loud as it had been in the past, but there was still more than enough force behind it to shove all other conversation aside.

I smiled as we stepped up to our customary table.

"English," I said.

The lion was sitting in his normal place, in front of an endless platter of food. Like the rest of us he was older than we'd been twenty years ago. Unlike the rest of us though he was well into his sixties or beyond – No one was quite sure. I think he'd stopped bothering to count his age some time ago.

I had the rare strand of grey fur here and there, and Jon had his reading glasses. English was well beyond that. His coat had been a perfect gold as long as I'd know him, now it was shot through with silver, especially on his face.

"Lass, Dog," he said, nodding to Rebecca and Jon. "How goes it this fine day?"

I took a seat across from his at the table, picking off some meat. Rebecca and Jon joined me.

We didn't really need to talk. The four of us spent so much time together, meeting practically every day, that words didn't mean much anymore.

I glanced up at the lion. He was wavering back and forth slightly, a large hand was resting on the table to still him.

"You alright, buddy?" I asked. "You look a ill."

He waved a hand at me and snorted. "Don't mind me, Mate. I've been feeling a bit off since I got up this morning. I think I must have pulled something last night with the shella. At my age you have to be a bit more careful to get a proper warm up before exercise, eh?"

I was just about to roll my eyes when something went very, very wrong.

The wavering that had taken English stopped suddenly. He was still as stone.

I never did figure out exactly what he was starting to say, but his voice suddenly slurred.

The lion raised his face to look me in the eyes. There was something there I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

I saw fear.

A moment later one of his golden eyes dilated. One eyes was wide and black while the other was nothing but a pinprick.

I never figured out what it was I said either. The words died on my lips.

All the sounds around us died away. All that I heard was the sound of a single chair sliding back over the rough concrete beneath us.

A moment later Jon was beside English. The lion didn't even seem to realize he was there.

I'd never heard Jon swear before.

No more than thirty seconds later all of Cafe Bristol was overrun with police dogs. Where they'd all come from I hadn't the slightest. They formed a protective shell around Jon and I until Jon snapped at them and directed them at English.

A moment later they had the lion's still huge body hefted into the air and were running full tilt down the road. I knew what lay that way, V-town General Hospital.

Looking across the suddenly empty table, I looked at Rebecca. She looked as frightened as I felt.

A heartbeat later we were both on our feet and chasing after the lion and dogs.

Chapter 2: A Young, Foolish, Wolf



We'd gotten to the hospital just over four hours ago.

I wasn't used to this. Every other time something like this had happened it had almost always been *me* under the knife. I was used to being on one on the cusp of death, not English.

I would rather it was I in there. Wherever *there* was.

The last I'd seen of English was around lunch time. Now it was almost five in the evening. I knew every square inch of this waiting room inside and out, upside down, and backwards.

When the doctor came into to talk to us I just about cried in joy that *something* was happening. Though after a moment I decided I'd best wait to hear what the news was before I began smiling.

The doctor was a rabbit, quick and nervous. His jittery motions weren't helping me any.

"Mr. Taggart?" he asked.

I stood up. Rebecca and Jon stayed where they were.

"Yes," I said.

The doc nodded and glanced down at a paper in his hands. "Mr. Jones doesn't appear to have any next of kin in the city. His living will states that you are to take control of his assets."

I swallowed hard.

"Living will?"

He nodded. There was something in the man's voice, in his motions. He wasn't enjoying what he was doing but at the same time I could tell he'd done this dozens of times before.

"That's correct, Mr. Taggart. Your friend has just experienced a major stroke."

And the world stopped.

There was no sound, no motion. The world simply ceased to be.

English? Stroke?

"Is... is he okay?" I asked, forcing out the words.

The doc didn't even flinch. "It was a major disruption of blood. That is why we are enacting his living will." He paused for a long moment. "I don't believe it will be long before he dies."

It was two in the morning now.

The hospital staff hadn't exactly wanted us in here so soon, but we'd given them little choice. There isn't much they can do to keep out the former mayor and the current Police Commissioner when we want in.

I hadn't quite been sure what to expect when we'd stepped into English's room. What we'd gotten wasn't much.

English was laying on a too-small hospital bed in a private room. No real surprise there, every bed in this place was too small for his bulk.

He'd been sleeping, eyes closed. When we'd first entered I couldn't have even told you there was anything wrong. Everything was calm and peaceful.

And that, in the end, was what had tipped me off.

English hadn't exactly had an easy life. I'd spent enough time with the man to know he *always* slept with one eye open and both ears twitching.

We'd walked in and he hadn't so much as flinched. That wasn't the English I knew.

"Will he... will he wake up?" I'd asked the nurse. She'd just shrugged and said something noncommittal.

At first all three of us had clustered around the bed. The room suddenly felt small with so many bodies in here.

Then Jon had been called off by some police work. He'd promised to be back.

Then Rebecca had to leave. She had to meet with Ging and Liz, tell them what happened. English was like an uncle to them.

We'd hugged. Rebecca said she'd be back soon.

And I was here all alone.

I flicked on the room light when the sun went down. I just couldn't stand the darkness.

Dragging up a chair next to English, I sat at his bedside, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Not even his tail twitched. If not for his breathing I would have thought him already dead.

"Don't leave me, buddy. I need you." The words hardly make it past my lips. They were little more than a whisper.

From the hallway behind me I could hear the day-to-day sounds of the hospital going on as it always does.

I'm not sure when, but at some point I'd fallen asleep. When I next woke up my head was laying on my arms as I slumped against the side of English's bed.

A moment later I realized what had woke me.

"Such a young, foolish, wolf." I could hardly make out the words over the sound of air moving in the room, but they were there.

In no more than a heartbeat I was awake.

"English! Can you hear me? Are you okay?" My own voice was barely any stronger than his. I was afraid that if I spoke too loudly the moment might shatter and he'd be gone again.

"Such a young, foolish, wolf," he repeated. His voice was stronger now, if only by the slightest measure. A moment later his great golden eyes opened a crack. He was still with me, if only held by the thinnest of threads.

"What have I told you about waiting at a hospital, Mate?" he asked, his voice slurred. "Crying at a partner's bedside doesn't do anyone any good. You should be out stuffing yourself on venison and chocolate. Sitting in here and crying is just getting both of us down."

The shadow of a smile touched by face, no matter how hard I tried to fight it back.

"I know, buddy, I know."

A moment later one of his hands began to tremble. It only just barely rose into the air, but it was far enough to grab my arm.

"Thank you for everything, Tommy. Thank you... brother."

I looked at him. I was just about to ask him what he'd said when he appeared to gain a touch more strength. His voice rose a hair and his eyes opened wider.

And he began to speak.

"Gods, Tommy, do you remember just how long ago it was we first met? It's been decades but I still remember the day. Funny that. It wasn't anything special at the time, it was just another Tuesday."

"I still remember that hunt. Huston and I were chasing down a human. That was back when they still made up most of the docket – though we didn't know why yet. We were chasing him down the street, another runner, when he turned and socked Huston flat on the nose."

"That tiger was a piece of work. I'd been keeping an eye on him for the better part of a year before I brought him on as my partner. The kid was a killer, vicious and mean. But there was something more to it. He was in it for more than it looked. I was never able to fully understand it, but he was in the business for the money. He made a point of making it look like something else, but he was there for the payday and nothing more."

"And that was the problem. I'd been watching Huston for a year and teamed up with him three months before. He was just about everything I wanted in a partner. Strong, fast. A little trouble with following orders but he knew he'd make more money by doing what I told him. And every day I watched him fall further and further into Vanderhoom's pocket."

"Huston wanted money. He knew I was his meal ticket, but he also knew that Vanderhoom was his multiplier. I could make him money today, the lizard could make him money tomorrow. It didn't matter what I did, every day the kid became less of my partner and more of Vanderhoom's property."

A sound worked its way up from the lion's lips. At some point it might have been a laugh, but by the time it reached my ears it was nothing of the sort.

"By the time I met you, Tommy, I was already well on my way to looking for a new partner. Not that Huston knew – he didn't take it well when he got the news. When I saw you, Mate... well, it wasn't exactly love at first sight."

"My first thought when I saw you, Tommy, was that Strom Front was going to have another lawsuit on its hands. I saw you laying spread out on the ground clutching your nose and spurting blood all over the concrete. I was expecting to have to turn back and bribe you with a few bills to keep you from coming after us."

"That might have been the first of my mistakes. I was thinking about you instead of the hunt like I should have been. When I caught my quarry he'd found a weapon, some scrap metal. He reminded me why I should keep my mind in the here and now as quick as you please."

"Then you were there again. You were the last thing I was expecting to pass my way after I saw you laid out. You walked past us, hardly a speck of blood on you. I almost thought you had a twin brother."

"That, Tommy, was when I had a stroke of genius. Or at least I thought I did."

"It was obvious you had regeneration – the best I'd ever seen – and you were young. You were perfect."

"You know most of the story from there on out. I'll admit it didn't go quite the way I expected." His lips pulled up ever so slightly to form a lopsided smile. Only one half of his face was moving.

"My plan, Mate, was to treat you like my own little mushroom garden. Keep you in the dark

and feed you dung as they say. I didn't do too badly at first. But you were a fast learner.”

“Though I will admit I did get a bit of a surprise when I heard you were the son of the great hunter Griss. I won't admit the memory of getting him to join Storm Front didn't pass my mind. Griss and Gowan are the best fighters I've seen in my very long, very experienced life. It had still cut me to the quick when they'd refused to join Storm Front so many years ago. The thought of you, the scion to the Taggart house, under my sway didn't hurt much.”

“For just a couple of days I thought I was back on top of the world. Gods, Tommy, I was so shortsighted then. I knew Storm Front was no longer mine. I *knew* there was something wrong. A lot of things, but I didn't care. I had my hunts, I had my money. I didn't worry about anything other than making it from day to day. For that I needed a contract, a partner, and someone to give me a cheque. Now I had all three. The fact the Vanderhoom was pulling strings, catching me in a cat's cradle, didn't even cross my mind. I doubt I would have cared much if I'd ever even bothered to open my eyes.”

“You never saw the conversation when I told Huston to bugger off. He came to my office one night, storming up to my office door like he owned the place. He was still young and dumb, he likely thought he did.”

“The stupid cat slammed his fist down on my desk and demanded to know what I'd done. He just received a letter that he'd been reassigned. He wasn't mad that he wasn't with *me*. I knew that cat well enough. He was mad that being with anyone but me he wouldn't make as much money.”

“Tommy, I didn't even feel a shred of remorse. The kid hadn't done anything wrong. He danced on Vanderhoom's string, sure, but so did I. I dropped him because I thought I could make more money, have more control, with you. I dumped the kid so fast it made his head spin and I didn't even tell him why, didn't even give him a chance. The kid was pissed, and he had every reason to be.”

“But, Mate, that's done now. We both know what side Huston cashed his chips in with. He was in Vanderhoom's pocket when I curbed him, and he was in all the way when he died.”

English paused for a moment. I couldn't see it, but I'd swear a tear ran down his cheek.

“And it's my fault, Tommy. Huston wasn't a perfect kid, but he wasn't *that* bad. If I'd been a bit smarter, a bit smoother, he might still be alive today.”

“But we all know the moment my great and grand plan fell to little more than shreds in the wind. It was the infernal Joyce James. That... that *human*.” English's mouth twisted, both sides of it. “When he took upon himself what he thought to be *my* image... that was more than I could stand.”

“You know my story by now, Tommy. You know it better than anyone living or dead, possibly better than even myself. I'm here to be far away from those like me. To be far away from my family, my father.”

“But it simply wasn't enough. I thought that being alone, adrift in a sea of people I'd be able to control myself. We both saw that wasn't the case.”

“And then you came to me, Tommy. I thought you were the same as all the others. I thought you were there for nothing more than the money. But you came to me after I ran from you. You tracked me down and...” he chuckled softly, this time it really was a laugh, “You broke into my home. No one has *ever* done that before. If it had been anyone but you, on any day but that, I would have torn them limb from limb,”

“You saved me, Tommy. You brought me back to life. You weren't there when I'd first come to. In a way neither was I. I... I wasn't sure I was going to survive it, Mate. I was close, I was so close to ending my time on this world right there. I... I was afraid. I'd seen my father in the costume of Joyce James and it looked just like me. When I'd last seen my father I'd still been a young man. But then... when Joyce dressed himself up... I saw in my own figure that I was his spitting image.”

“Do you know what that's like, Tommy? No, of course you don't. You've never woken up one day to realize that you've grown into the very thing you hate, the very thing you've spent your life

running away from.”

He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. For a moment panic welled inside me. For just a heartbeat I thought he was dead. Then he opened his golden eyes again and looked me straight in the face.

“That was when I realized I needed you, Tommy, and no one else. You... you're not like the others. You never cared that I had money, never even noticed I had power. You were my friend, nothing more. And that was what I was in dire need of.”

“I didn't need a lackey, I could pay for them, I didn't need a partner, they were a dime a dozen. What I needed was a friend. Someone I could sit in a hospital waiting room for and worry over. And someone who would do the same for me.”

Ever so weakly he raised an arm to gesture at the room around us.

“This, Tommy. How many people in the world do you think would do this for me? It's two in the morning and you're here, by my side, asking nothing in return. That was what I needed.”

“We all laugh at the word *humanization* but there really is no better for it. I needed *you* Tommy, I needed you to humanize me.”

He fell silent again, eyes clouding over.

“I'm proud of you, Tommy. You've done things I can only dream of.” I cocked my head and he smiled. “Sure we've moved mountains together, and I've done my own fair share, but you've had a life, I've only had a story.”

“You've managed something I can only dream of, Tommy. You had parents who loved you, supported you. You've had friends beyond number who've been there when you needed it. Tommy, you have the Lass. She'll be there until your dying day, I guarantee you that. And you've had a family. That's something I simply couldn't ever do.”

“Don't get me wrong, Tommy. The squirting out kids part isn't it. Anyone can have kids. We all know there's far too many people in the world who shouldn't. That's not it. You have a *family*. That's far harder. The Lass, Gingivere, and Elizabeth. You've brought them together into something greater than any one of them. You've created a bond that wasn't there before.”

I set a hand on one of the lion's massive paws. It took everything I had not to pull back. His flesh was cool and motionless.

“You've got it wrong, buddy,” I said. “It's not Rebecca, Ging, and Liz. It's the five of us. You're in there too. The kids see almost as much of you as they do me. You're as much as part of my family as anyone else. The gods know they love you.”

His lips pulled up into a soft smile. Now I could see tears slowly sliding down his cheeks.

“Thanks, Mate. It may not sound like much, but that means something to an old man like me. I may not make it out of this world alive, but it's nice to know that I will leave *something* behind.”

I smiled. The action hurt.

“You don't need to worry about that, English. I don't think the world will forget about you for a long, long time. They're aren't many lions around here to take your place.”

At that he closed his eyes. A smile returned to his lips, one that looked far easier and more peaceful now.

“I never did tell you much of my homeland did I, Tommy?”

I didn't say anything. The silence of the room around us was deafening. Even with how close I was to the cat there were somethings he simply didn't talk about.

“I haven't been back there since the day I killed my father, Tommy. Gods, it's been so long I can hardly even remember.”

“The sky was blue,” he said, pausing for a moment to chuckle. “Just as it is here, and everywhere else you might wish to travel, but it's a particular shade that sits in my memory that I

haven't seen since.”

“It's not that the sky was different, it was that the world beneath it was so far removed to the world here as to seem alien.”

“Here in V-town, Tommy, the trees a deep and lush, the world is a thousand shades of green. There's water everywhere you might hope to look and the winters are soft – at least by the standards that you see in this part of the world.”

“Back home the land is red. Not with blood, but with *soul*. The very earth beneath your feet is a deep russet that you've never seen anywhere else. It sets of the same skies we have in a way you could never imagine. The winds never stop there. It's not like the sea breeze we have here. The wind is dry and content, it brings scents to you from a hundred kilometers away, mixed with the dust and the very sky itself.”

“It doesn't rain there Tommy. Not for months at a time. They say that once, long before the Cataclysm, there had been great farms around my home. That's not the way anymore. The rains are long gone save for a short time each year when they beat down on us, mixing the red earth to a blood that sticks to your feet and bogs you in the endless plains of mud.”

“That was where I was born.” The lion's voice grew rougher, fading. “That was where I first opened my eyes and saw the world around me. Gods, Tommy, that was where I grew up. I can still remember my first hunt out on those plains. I can still remember chasing down a wildebeest, my father following along in my wake.”

“Hunting might be woman's work back home, but we all had to bloody ourselves at least one. That was my first time. My father and I went out one day when I was little more than a kit. He hardly hunted himself, but it was him or my mother and there was no way mother could ever teach me to kill.”

He paused for a long moment, his eyes turning to meet my own.

“You could say it was the exact opposite of your first time, Tommy. My father was still strong then. He was always a hard man, a cruel one, but he loved me. We set out at the first rays of the sun, left searching the empty and desolate plains of my father's kingdom for my prey.”

“My father may have been no hunter, but fate smiled on us that day. It was hardly more than three hours before we found the herd.”

“They were all clustered about one of the few watering holes in the territory. There's normally a peace of sorts around the water holes – even between the beast and the creatures such as us.”

“It's bad game to hunt at the watering holes. Bad for us all. We all need to drink, and scaring they prey animals away from the water would cause them to bypass our territory completely. Even we were smart enough to know that it was better to manage our herds and keep them coming back than have a quick meal.”

“The hot African sun was directly overhead when we were ready to start the hunt proper.”

“Normally no one hunts during the heat of the day, but this was a special exception. My father wanted to make sure he saw me make my kill. He wanted to make sure there were no mistakes.”

“And... and, Tommy, that was what I did.”

“You may not think me the greatest hunter of game,” he said, chuckling. I couldn't help but agree. I could still remember how poor English had failed in the wilds around V-town when I first met him. “But in my homeland I was in my own. I may not have been experienced, may have been young and small, but I was in no way timid or unwilling.”

“I... I don't remember the hunt itself. It may sound like a cop out, but it's true. I remember my father pointing out a wildebeest, I remember him whispering in my ear, and I remember him lifting his hand from my shoulder. Then... then I remember little. There were sounds, Tommy, scents. I remember images, vague and fleeting as I rushed forward, my young legs pumping and the breath coming hot in my lungs.”

“And then there was the taste of blood in my mouth. I'd done it, Tommy. I'd made my kill. On my first try, with my father watching.”

“I was a man. I'd taken my rightful place on the blood red plains of the Serengeti.”

The lion paused for a long moment there, his eyes staring unfocused at the painted white ceiling of the hospital room.

“Tommy...” his voice was strained when he spoke again. One of his hands raised to take mine. His fingers were weak, but he held on to me for dear life.

“Tommy... I want to go back.”

I couldn't speak.

“Tommy... please tell me you'll take me back. I've been gone for too long. I... I need to go back to my home.” The tears that had graced the lion's cheeks before returned without restraint. He was crying.

“I had to leave, the gods know I did, but I need to go back. You have your family, Tommy. You have Rebecca and your kids. You have your cousins and uncle. All I have are my memories. I need to go home, Tommy. Please, please tell me you'll take me home.”

He took a shallow, shuttering, breath. “I need to rest next to my mother. And... and I need to see my father again.”

There was no sound in the room save our breathing. The lion's breath was slow and labored. It was all he could do to keep his eyes focused on me.

Reaching out with my free hand, I set it on his massive paw.

“I'll do it.” My voice was soft. “If that's what you want, I'll take you home, English.”

A smile pulled at his lips again, but they barely twitched.

“Thank you. And my name is Michael.”

His eyes closed shortly thereafter. For a moment I was just short of panicking, but his slow, steady breathing was all the reassurance I needed.

Soon I was falling asleep myself. Leaning back up against his bed, I did the best to make myself comfortable. One way or another, I wasn't leaving here without him.

The sun was bright when I woke up the next morning, streaming through the windows of the hospital room.

For just a moment I didn't know where I was. All the panic came back. Every time I'd been in the hospital something was wrong.

Looking down at English, I remembered.

The lion was laying still and composed on the bed before me. His eyes were closed and his brow was unworried. His mane had long gone grey, but it still spread out majestically about him. His fur was immaculate and his bearing regal.

He looked like a king. He was composed and perfect.

And he was dead.

I sat there for a moment after the realization came to me. I'd seen lots of people die... but not like this. Memories of my father's death, not so unlike this, came to mind.

Reaching out, I touched a fingertip to his nose. It was cold and dry. He was long gone.

I let out a long breath and stood up. Tears were welling at the edges of my eyes, but I just couldn't seem to get them out. He'd been alive and well not twenty-four hours ago. The thought that he could be gone was still fighting to penetrate my mind.

I walked out into the hallway to go find a nurse.

Rebecca and the kids arrived about an hour later. Both Ging and Liz were well into their twenties, but they bawled like babies when I told them English was gone.

I could only envy them. I wanted to do the same.

I was getting ready to pack up and head home with the three of them when a man in a suit stepped into the hospital room.

English's body was long gone, taken by some orderlies. We were just packing up what few belongings had found their way here.

"Mr. Tommy Taggart?" the man asked. I glanced up at him before nodding. He was a human.

"Yes?" My voice was dry.

He looked like he wanted to extend his hand but thought better of it.

"My name is Nick Black of Black, Allan, and Associates. Mr. Jones retained us to enact his final wishes upon his death."

I blinked.

"A bit quick aren't you? He's only been dead for an hour."

The man coughed and looked away.

"Yes... well... I don't normally do these types of things in person either. Mr. Jones was our premiere client. He spared no expense in ensuring that we fulfilled his wishes. And..." he coughed again, "We also hold a blanket contract with Storm Front. It's in our best interests to ensure Mr. Jones is treated with all due dignity."

I let out a long sigh.

"Alright," I said, "Let's get this over with."

I'll give Black props where he deserves it. He knows what he's doing.

Not only had he snagged English's body before it could disappear into the gods know what bureaucracy of the hospital, he'd also brought a copy of English's will.

I didn't even bother trying to read it. The language on the paper was enough to put any government contract I'd ever had to deal with to shame. Long story short: Storm Front was being handed over to its hunters. The company was turning from a sole-proprietorship to a co-op. Apparently English had been planning it for years. Beyond that, some of the lion's assets were going to charity, some were going to people he's had dalliances with over the years, and the bulk was going straight to me.

I just rubbed my forehead.

Chasing off the lawyer, and sending Ging and Liz off with Rebecca, I went to do the one thing I could right off the bat.

There was a single piece of English's will that was plain enough for even me to understand, and it dovetailed nicely into my promise to him. He'd asked to be cremated.

Not so surprisingly, the hospital had a crematorium in its basement. Thankfully not a place I'd ever had to visit before.

The staff here were efficient. English's body arrived before I did. They were just getting the furnace ready when I stepped into the front room.

A rabbit sitting at the desk looked up at me with a start.

"Uh, hello?" she said.

I fought to pin a smile on my face as I stepped up to the desk.

“I'm guessing you don't get many people here,” I said.

She shook her head and grinned.

“No, most folks aren't in a state of mind to be down here so soon. Normally we have the departed ashes sent to them.” She glanced down at her paperwork. “I'm guessing you're here for the lion?”

I nodded.

She shrugged. “Fine by me, but you'll have to wait. The cremation process isn't all that fast.”

I took a seat in a chair next to the wall and looked over her shoulder. I could just make out the furnace behind her. There was only one body sitting ready to go. English was laying on a slab, still as stone and buck naked.

A moment later they fed him into the fire.

I couldn't see him burn, but I had no doubt it was business as usual.

He had been my best friend, but now he was dead, the same as anyone else.

Chapter 3: Trying To Hard



It's amazing how quick news travels, especially when it's bad.

You'd think it would take a little while for folks to find out that English is dead, but by the time I got back to apartment I'd been stopped no less than five times in the street – by people I've never even met – to receive their condolences.

I suppose the fact I'm carrying the lion's ashes attached to a heavy strap over my shoulder might have something to do with it.

It had taken English's body a while to burn down – he's bigger than most of the people they deal with. That had given me more than enough time to walk across the street to a nearby shop situated exactly for the purpose. It was there I'd bought a leather strap and carrying case. I had to search for a while to find an extra large one. Even then the lion's remains filled it to the brim.

And weighed a bloody ton.

Considering how – relatively – small they'd been able to reduce the lion's body, he still kept much of his weight.

Stepping out of the elevator, I took the short walk down the hallway to the apartment. I knew right off the bat there had to be a bunch of people there – the door was open. We never leave the door open.

Poking my head around the frame, I wasn't exactly looking forward to a crush of people. Thankfully, it wasn't too bad.

Rebecca was there, so were Ging and Liz. That was about it.

“Hey, everyone,” I sad lamely as I stepped in. I didn't even get more than a couple of feet before Rebecca was at my side.

“How are you holding up, Wolfy?” she asked.

I worked up a tired grin. To be honest, it wasn't all that fake. At least the worst of it was over. He was dead. The end of the line. At least now we could start to move on.

“Getting along, Babe,” I said. “How about you three?”

Rebecca didn't say anything, she just motioned behind her.

Ging and Liz were sitting at the counter. Ging had his arm over his sister's shoulder. She was crying.

I pulled off English's ashes and set them gently down on the floor. I was afraid they'd break any table I put them on.

“Hey, Elizabeth,” I said, stepping forward.

Liz was a human, like her mother. She got more than that, she inherited just about everything from her mom. Eyes, skin, her slender but strong build. The only thing I seemed to add to the equation was her brown hair.

“How are you holding up?” I asked, taking a seat next to her. Ging gratefully stood up. I caught a quick glimpse of his face. He didn't look much better than her, but he wasn't crying. Not just now.

“I just can't believe he's gone,” Liz said.

Her face was puffy and tear stained, but her voice was strong. *She* was strong. Where Ging had gone the intellectual route Liz had always been the stronger of the two. She was the one to climb mountains – literally.

“We'd just practiced shooting two days ago,” she said. “He promised me we were going to meet at the gym today. He was going to help me... help me with my climbing.” She lost her voice for a moment. Never once had she turned to face me.

I let out a long sigh.

English had all but been an uncle to them. Likely closer. The lion had been here practically since the day they were born. There very near hadn't been a time he hadn't been part of their lives. English never had children. Ging and Liz had been the closest he'd ever come and he'd doted over them exactly the way you'd expect. And it had been Liz he'd been the closest too, though he'd loved them both.

“It's never easy,” I said softly, whispering in her ear. “We all know that. He lived a good long life.” I closed my eyes for a moment. “I doubt he would have wanted to go any other way. It was quick, and he was able to at least make it as painless as he could. He didn't want to leave you, darling, but everyone has to go sometime.”

That had been this morning.

If there's one way to motivate people to move like their tails are on fire it's to use two words.

Those words are 'open bar'.

We'd gotten the letter at about three in the afternoon. It had come from an official Storm Front messenger, complete with red windbreaker and everything. Apparently English had left orders at the office for when he died. And they'd be buggered if they didn't follow them.

The entire company was going to be shutdown for the evening. They'd rented the largest bar in the city and they were going to be making good use of it. English was going to have the biggest wake in the history of V-town.

Included with the invitation from Storm Front was a sealed envelope. I took it from the messenger without a word but didn't open it until everyone was out of the apartment.

I knew who it was from. There was no signature on the envelope, but the all but illegible scrawl 'To Tommy Taggart' was obvious.

Sitting down on a stool at the kitchen counter, I slipped a chipped black claw under the flap of the envelope and pulled. A moment later it was free and a small puff of air hit my face.

It was faint, but I could smell English's scent.

Carefully, making sure not to nick it with my claws, I pulled the letter free. It was written in the same all but illegible handwriting.

Tommy,

The fact your reading this means I'm dead. Well... bugger.

I guess the only good news is that you *are* reading this. That means that I'm dead, but you're still alive.

I'm going to keep this short – dead men shouldn't drag on. I love you, Tommy. I have for years. You're the best friend I've ever had.

Only one more thing. I'm a greedy bugger. I've done my best to keep it from you, but we both know it's true. I just want to tell you that... well, I want you to ignore whatever my last requests were. I spent months thinking out my will, going over every possibility and eventuality. Same with this letter. I don't want our friendship to be ruined by some gods damned plea I made with my last breath. I'm strong, Tommy, and that's the way I want you to remember me.

I'm sorry I couldn't be with you longer,

Michel Jones

English

I sat there for a long moment after reading the letter.

In someways that was the English I knew. He was strong and self sufficient, wanting his own way. But I couldn't imagine ignoring my friend's final request.

Taking a deep breath, I folded the letter back up and slid it into the envelope. I'd read it again when I got back from Africa.

The Storm Front wake was later that evening. How they'd gotten it together so quickly I'd never know.

The invitation hadn't said what kind of occasion it was, so I came as I was, fur out. Rebecca had declined the offer to join me. She'd said that I was part of Storm Front, not her, despite the fact she'd been listed on the invitation.

The wake was scheduled at the single largest hotel in V-town. It was a new building, called the Sea Side. It had been built only a few years ago to help keep up with the ever growing number of merchants, not to mention those who were coming for more information on the Cataclysm, or a change.

Stepping through the wide front doors, I got in line at the front desk to ask where the party was. I'd only been there for a few moments when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Tommy? Is that you?"

I turned to see a familiar white feline face. The fact Graham had managed to sneak up on me only went to show just how out of it I was.

I smiled as I reached out a hand to the cat. He took it in it one remaining arm.

"Graham, I didn't even know you were still working. I thought you'd retired."

He gave me a scowl as he led me from the line and down a spacious hallway.

"I'm not *that* rich, Tommy. I'm not like you. Not all of us can afford to retire when the whim hits us."

I took a closer look at my old friend. I couldn't even remember when the last time I saw him was. To be honest, he wasn't looking all that well. I think he's a little older than me, and it shows.

Graham was a snow leopard, that meant he'd been white from the day he was born, but yet somehow he was still going grey.

“Anyway, man,” he said, leading me on, “You’re early. Not many of us are here yet. Mostly just those of us who knew E.”

I grinned when I heard that. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard someone call English ‘E’. He hadn’t gone by that in years.

One more turn and we came to a large wooden door. A pack next to it read ‘The Sandpiper Room’ and beneath it was a handwritten paper ‘Reserved for Storm Front’.

Pushing open the door, we were in one of the larger rooms I’ve ever seen. The ceiling wasn’t high, but the room seemed to stretch out forever. There had to be space enough in here for hundreds of people.

“Graham,” I asked, “How many people are working at SF these days?”

He didn’t even have to think. “Over four-hundred now. And they’ll be more at the wake. This place will be crowded, but it’s the largest room they have.”

He hadn’t been lying.

I pitched in a hand to help get everything set up. Slowly, people were trickling in.

One thing I noticed was that there wasn’t a single image of English anywhere to be seen. I asked about it, but apparently that was by his request. The wake was here for the living, not he, the dead.

It was at about six o’clock that the trickle of people changed to a torrent. The SF building must have closed, because they all arrived en-mass. In little more than ten minutes the room changed from quiet and sparsely populated to jam packed full.

I was suddenly glad there wasn’t just one, but *four* bars set up here. One against each wall.

There was one thing that really hit me though. I hardly recognized *anyone*.

You wouldn’t think it would mean so much to me, but it hit me hard. When the room had been nearly empty I’d known most of the folks. They were SF long timers, folks that English and I had dealt with time and time again. But now there was a flood of red and yellow windbreakers, and most of the people wearing them were half my age.

There were a few speeches now and then, but generally speaking the wake was more of a general party than anything else.

I found myself a quiet little table off in the corner of the room and nursed a green glass of the gods knew what. I’m not much for alcohol, but this seemed like as good a time to drink as any.

“Is this seat taken?”

I glanced up. It took me a long moment to recognize the form in front of me.

“Jon?”

He hardly looked like the Police Commissioner. If I hadn’t known the dog so well I wouldn’t have recognized him at all. This had to be the first time in years I’ve seen him out of uniform.

“Hello, Tommy,” he said, nodding to me. “Is this seat taken?”

I shook my head.

He sat down and twisted to look at the clash of milling bodies behind him. Someone had turned up a jukebox and cleared a space in the middle of the room as a dance floor.

Unless I miss my mark it was playing a song by Rush. English would have loved it.

“What are you doing here, Jon?” I asked. “And where’s your entourage?”

He grinned slightly.

“I feel I’m here for likely the same reason you are, Tommy. English was among my closest of friends. And besides, I received an invitation.” He glanced around the room for a moment. “And as for the force...” a grimace crossed his face. “I told them exactly where they should go when they attempted to insist on coming with me. There is a reason, Tommy, that I am out of uniform. I may be

the Police Commissioner, but I am still a man.” He grinned.

I chuckled and took a sip of my drink. It burnt all the way down.

I'd already had a chance to talk to most of the Storm Front folks who I remembered. They'd all been here when I first arrived. Any missing were already long gone, like Brown.

Jon and I simply sat at our table as the night wore on. Every so often someone would break away from the crowd and walk over to express their condolences. More than often I hadn't the slightest who they were.

It was round about eleven-thirty that things began to get a little out of control.

I'm not sure how much cash English had put aside for the open bars, but it didn't seem to be in danger of running out. Everyone in the room seemed to be floating on at least their fifth drink and things were getting sloppy.

“Should we be leaving, Tommy?” Jon asked, taking a sip of whatever it was that was in his glass.

I looked out over the crowd.

“I think I'd better stay,” I said. “This is English's wake after all. I'm just as responsible as anyone else to make sure it stays civil.”

I was just about to get up for a refill on my drink when I heard a scream.

It was short and piercing, and definitely female.

And not a single one of the hundred bounty hunters in the room seemed to take notice.

I hardly had time to take two steps before Jon was by my side. He may look like just another dog on the street, but he moved like a police officer.

Pushing through the press of bodies in the direction the scream had come from, it took us only moments to reach it.

Up against one wall a group of three hunters, cats by the look of them, had a woman pressed into a corner. From the look of it the three men were bounty hunters and I'd bet money the woman was a receptionist or office worker of some sort.

Her wide eyes caught us as we shoved through the crowd towards her, faster now. She didn't say anything, but it was plain as day she needed help.

One of the hunters reached towards her, his hand raising to cup her chin. She pulled back as far as she could.

“Hey, boys,” I said, finally coming in close enough to be heard over the music. “I'm thinking you've had enough party here. It's best you be finding your way home.” I kept my tone light, my ears up.

One of the cats, a panther, turned towards me, keeping himself between us and the woman. He was young, likely hardly twenty, and I'd bet you a wad of bills that he didn't have a clue who either of us were.

“Mind your own business, old man,” he said, a growl to his words. I'm sure he meant to make it sound intimidating, but I've been around bounty hunters for far too long for something like that to make me even twitch an ear.

Taking a breath, I fell into an easy stance, getting ready for whatever may come. I could feel Jon doing the same behind me.

“I'll ask one more time, boys,” I said, letting a shadow of a growl slip into my voice, “Let the lady go.” This was English's wake and I'd be buggered if I let something like this happen.

The panther laughed.

A moment later something moved in my peripheral vision. One of the other cats leapt forward.

I didn't even have time to make of who it was.

The cat was, thankfully, not all that big, but he was fast.

He leapt soundlessly at me, flying through the air.

But he was young and inexperienced. He came at me teeth leading, taking no prisoners.

I simply raised one hand. My fist connected squarely with his wide, flat nose. Bracing with my feet, I held my arm just stiff enough to force his path of flight away for me. It was still more than enough to stun him.

He was only lucky I hit him with my fist and not my claws.

The second cat, on the panther's other side, looked like a tiger. He entered the fray a moment later.

And Jon took him out with a single perfect strike to the neck like he was little more than a training dummy. In a heartbeat the kid was laying on the ground mewling like a kit.

I turned back towards the panther who still stood before me. He wasn't nearly so cocky now.

"Who... who in all the gods' names are you?" he studded.

I raised one lip, letting the lighting shine off my canines.

"English's best friends. Former Mayor Taggart and Police Commissioner Oaks. Any other questions?"

He looked like he'd just swallowed his own barbed tongue for a moment before backing away.

"Ah... no, sir," he finally got out. "I'll just be on my way..."

Before he could make it three steps a pair of shadows materialized out of the crowd. They weren't wearing uniforms, but I'd recognize them anywhere. They were police officers, a dog and an otter, and the badges that hung on chains around their necks proved it.

"We'll take it from here, sirs," one of them said as the other stepped up to the woman still cowering in the corner.

A few minutes later Jon and I were outside the hotel, strolling down the road, back into the city.

"I'm taking it you knew they were there all along?" I asked, rubbing my side. The battle may have been quick, but it took a lot out of me.

He shrugged. "Not really. I asked for no police escort tonight, but it doesn't surprise me that there were other members of the force that received invitations. Pine, for example. I know he was invited. It was just a shame he wasn't able to make it."

I snorted as we continued on. At least I'd been able to drop my police guard years ago when I'd stopped being mayor. Jon hadn't been so lucky.

"Are you alright, Tommy?" Jon asked.

I glanced over to him. His face was in shadow, but I could see the concern in his eyes.

"Alright enough. Why?"

He set a hand on my shoulder, bringing us to a stop.

"You're clutching your side," he said. "And you've been favoring it all night. What's wrong?"

I blinked and looked down. Well what do you know?

It was only when he drew my attention to it that I realized he was right. My left hand was holding my gut so tight I could almost feel my claws digging in. And somewhere beneath it I could feel a tingeing sensation.

The feeling wasn't new, now that I thought about it, but it was growing.

"I'm not sure, Jon," I said. Suddenly it was getting hard to breathe. "I'm... I'm sure I'm fine."

Pulling him along, I set off again, but didn't get more than a few steps before my pace faltered.

"I think... I think I need to sit down," I said between ragged pants. The tingeing sensation in my side was growing worse.

And now I realized why I hadn't noticed it before. I normally just ignored this feeling offhand. It was the feeling I got when my regeneration was doing something.

"Tommy?" I heard Jon say, but his voice suddenly seemed far away.

There was a dull thud as I fell to the hard paving stones. The just seemed to leap up to meet me.

I'm not too sure that happened next. I could hear Jon say something, but it was as if it came over a kilometer of cotton fuzz.

Then there was a piercing whistle. That I did hear.

I'm not sure how long it was after that – I had no way of telling time save for the growing pain in my side, but I felt the earth shake.

That was a new one... the last time I'd ever felt something like that was when... English had driven us around in his jeep.

Forcing my eyes open, I was able to make out flashing lights coming this way. And now that I bothered to notice, there was a new set of pain, this time through my ears. The sound of a wailing siren.

Heh. I'd bet dollars to donuts that was the sound of the one and only ambulance in V-town coming this way. It was one of the first motor vehicles to be produced in V-town in a century.

I remembered being at it's ribbon cutting ceremony.

I remember the feeling of motion, and people shouting around me.

Less shouting than arguing really. People were yelling back and forth about what could be wrong with me and what drugs they could use.

The motion was more interesting than the gobbledygook of their voices. I could feel each and every paving stone and rut beneath us as we rocketed across the city. At least I had no doubt on where we were going. V-town General.

I groaned and laid back. I'd just gotten out of that gods forsaken place after looking after English. I had no desire to go back.

Too bad my lips were too numb for me to ask them to just drop me off at home.

I blacked out for a little bit there. Not sure how long.

I must be at General by now, on account of the room not moving. Now don't get me wrong, it was still *spinning*, just not *moving*.

"Doctor, are you sure we shouldn't wait for an expert?" someone was saying. "He has the greatest regeneration of anyone in the entire city. His records show it plays havoc with most procedures."

The sound that came wasn't exactly a snort, but it was close enough.

"You can see what's happening as well as I can! We can't wait at the speed that's growing!"

Letting out a groan, I raised my head.

I think I must have surprised just about everyone, they all jumped back when I opened my mouth.

I meant to say 'What's going on?' but it came out sounding more like a squirrel drowning in a vat of strawberry pudding.

"He's awake!" someone shouted from off over my shoulder.

"Then up the anesthetic!" someone else yelled back.

A few seconds later I was enveloped by a cottony blanket of blackness.

I came to again and immediately wished I hadn't. The remaining anesthetic was dulling most of

the pain in my body, but I could still feel myself split open. There was a hole in me. It ran down the left side of my abdomen and was large enough for someone to stick their hand through.

And that was *exactly* what was happening.

That part of me was, thankfully, numb, but I could still feel it happening, even if it was only in a second hand kind of way.

And it was *not* pleasant.

I tried to speak, tried to move, tried to do anything to let them know I was here, but I couldn't seem to do anything more than breathe.

A moment later I felt something shift inside of me and the doctor pulled out his hand. Out came a double fist full of what I could only call *mass*. It was white, spongy, and looked angry as the gods after an all night bender.

I couldn't make out what they were saying around me. I didn't need to. I already knew what it was. Cancer.

Thankfully, I was out like a light soon after. I'm guessing the trauma of having a good five pounds removed from my gut was enough to let the anesthetic kick back in.

When I next opened my eyes I was in a clean white hospital bed.

No, no, *no*.

I don't think it's an understatement to say I leapt out of it like my tail was on fire. This may not be the same room English had died in but it looked way too close for comfort.

Landing on the floor with a thunk, I think I bruised my rear.

I say *think because* I was a little preoccupied pulling and tearing will all the strength I had at the bandage wrapped over my gut.

They make these bloody bandages to last these days. It took me a good three minutes of frantic ripping to get past it to where it ended and I began.

And I breathed a sigh of relief.

I still had a bad feeling I knew what was going on here, but at least I seemed to still be in once piece.

The big 'ol hole that had been ripped in my gut was already long gone. The cut was healed up by my regeneration and most of the fur was back. I could see where it had been, but that was only because I know how my body works.

Pressing tentatively with my claws, a stab of pain came up once I put a little pressure on the spot.

Getting up, I looked around. Well, there was one good sign. I was in a normal hospital room, a nice one, but a normal one. I'd be more frightened if I woke up in the negative pressure room again.

Taking a deep breath, I walked up to the door, checking each part of my body to make sure everything was back in order.

My gut was still stiff where they'd made the hole, but other than that I at least seemed to be okay. Then again, that's what I'd thought ten minutes before I'd collapsed.

Through the door and out into the hallway, for a moment I was at ka loss on which way to go. A moment later I heard a familiar sound.

Too familiar. I'd heard it only days ago, when English had died.

It was Ging and Beth crying. I could also hear something else... and someone talking.

Walking towards the voices, I stopped just around the corner to a small waiting room. I could make out everything now. And I knew what the other sound was. I hadn't heard it in a long time.

It was Rebecca. She was crying too.

"He's resting comfortably now," a voice said. It was a man. He sounded young, too young.

“We removed the malignant mass, and got everything we could find, but with his regeneration it's only a matter of time. I'm sure you've already been told. Cancer is by far the most common way for individuals with regeneration to die. And Mr. Taggart's regeneration is unusually potent. If I'd been asked I wouldn't have expected him to live past twenty-five.”

There was a pause, then Rebecca's voice came. When she spoke she was strong and stable. I could almost convince myself I hadn't heard her crying a moment ago.

“Thank you, doctor. What can we do for him? I'm not willing to give up without a fight.”

I forced a easy grin to my lips and stepped around the corner. If I put a little effort into it I could walk without any pain.

“Neither will I, Babe,” I said.

In about three seconds I had three different folks trying to tackle me to the ground. It took everything I had to keep on my feet.

“Dad!”

“Wolfy, how do you feel?”

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Mr. Taggart! You really should be out of bed so soon!”

I brushed them all gently away and looked at the doc.

“Okay,” I said, “Let's get this over with. I know I'm in trouble. You tell me just how much.”

About four hours later I was back at home and, as they say, resting comfortably.

It was as I'd expected. My regeneration had just taken a turn for the worse. It had latched onto a cancerous growth and was regenerating it in the same way it would the rest of me.

That wasn't good news.

I was already well overdue for it, but that hardly makes it any easier.

“You okay, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked as I slipped into bed next to her that night.

“Yeah, Babe, I'll be fine,” I lied.

I woke up a few hours later. There wasn't a shred of light anywhere to be seen. Rebecca was sound asleep when I slipped out of bed and into the bathroom.

I had to shade my eyes when I flipped on the light. I wasn't here for a piss, there was something else I needed to do.

Sitting down in the toilet lid, I lifted a knife I'd grabbed from my old hunting equipment. It wasn't large, but it was sharp.

I flicked on the fan before I started, there was no reason to leave the scent of blood.

Taking a deep breath, I plunged the knife into my gut, right on the near invisible line left from where the doctors had cut.

My incision wasn't nearly as big. I didn't need to hunt around the same way they had.

Reaching my fingers inside, I had to bite back a howl of pain.

It was there. It felt like a grain of sand or a bit of grissel.

The cancer was already starting to grow back.

Taking a deep breath, I bit down on my tongue and pulled. Something inside of me ripped and the gods forsaken thing came free.

When I next came to I was laying face down on the bathroom floor, my hand still clutching... it. My side was already mostly healed. All that was left now was a deep, wordless ache.

Chapter 4: The World Will Go On Without Me



Well, I knew all those world maps I used to have in bedroom when I was a pup would come in handy *someday*. It took a few decades, but now's the time.

English had never really said much about where he was born, most of what I know comes from a night years and years ago, not long after I first met him.

And now that I'm on a deadline I'd best get moving. I promised the cat I'd get his ashes back home. When I'd made that promise I'd expected that I'd have my sweet time to fulfill it. I'd expected I'd be able to put it off as long as I wanted and take the trip in style.

Yeah. Not so much now.

He was from Kenya. That much I remember. Shifting through my papers, I pulled out the only map I had of Africa. It was from before the Cataclysm. Most of the countries listed on it weren't around anymore.

Heaving a deep sigh, I began running my finger back and forth over the faded and worn paper, being careful not to rip it. Okay, DR Congo, whatever in all the gods' names that was, Angola, South Africa... Wait. Was that a country named 'South Africa'?

Well, at least the name was descriptive.

It took me a few more moments to find Kenya. I did heave a slight sigh of relief. Africa was still just about as far away as you can get, but at least Kenya was on the east side. It should be fairly easy to get to by boat.

Now, Kenya wasn't exactly a small place...

I remembered the name Lake Elemetia. Not much else, but that name was unique. Sadly, my map wasn't detailed enough to list most of the lake names. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be the many in the county. All I could say for certain was that the big lake to the north was Lake Turkana. That wasn't what I was looking for.

The only other lakes I could see of note were in the west-central. They were unnamed, but hopefully one of them was what I needed. I could always get a better map once I get to the country.

Now all I needed was a bloody way to get there.

Spinning on my stool, I turned to look at English's ashes. They were still in their leather carrying case, through now they were sitting on a low table in the corner. Somehow it actually felt peaceful to have the lion with me still, if only in spirit.

I heaved a sigh. I'd still to tell Rebecca or the kids about this. They were out right now. This could make for an interesting dinner.

I'd pulled one of my old hiking backpacks from the back of the closet and was starting to fill it when Rebecca came home.

"Wolfy?" she called.

"In here, Babe," I replied with a sigh. Well, better sooner than latter.

"What are you doing, Tommy?" she asked as she stepped into the bedroom. I had our drawers ransacked and the pack laying on the bed, half filled.

I turned towards her and did my best to keep my ears from laying flat.

"I'm sorry, Babe," I said stepping up and taking her hands. "I made English a promise just before he died. I'm taking his ashes to Kenya."

She rolled her eyes.

"That's not what I mean, Wolfy. We all figured that out when you started pulling out your old maps. I mean what are you *doing*? That's obviously not a big enough backpack. Here," she reached back out into the hall and pulled a pair of brand new packs in. "I just picked these up along with some supplies."

My mouth just about fell open.

"What? Babe, you can't be serious! There's no way you're coming with me!"

She leveled me with a glare that I was long familiar with.

"Tommy, if you think for even a moment there's anyway you're going to the other side of the world without me, and facing the gods know what, you're out of your fuzzy little mind." She set one hand on her hip and gave me a half smile. "I might have let you two boys go if English was in his prime, but he's in no shape to look after you now. Besides," she said with a laugh, "You've still never given me that honeymoon you promised so long ago. This of this as a raincheque with interest."

Dinner that night was a more somber affair that I was used to. It was a Saturday. That might not sound like much, but English almost always come over to eat with us on Saturdays. It was the same day he spent with Ging on the seaside and with Liz up in the Rockies.

As it was the boxes of takeout spread across the table seemed meager. I'd almost over ordered, being so used to having to account for the lion's mammoth apatite.

"So when are you leaving?" Ging asked.

I had to blink. I hadn't told them yet.

"Am I *that* transparent?" I asked, putting down my takeout box.

The young wolf looked at me over the lip of his own box, he had his mussel deep into the take out, eating like me. Only Rebecca and Liz used silverware.

"Dad," It was Liz talking now, "We all knew it was going to happen. You might have not noticed, but we all knew English was getting older. Look at all the work he did with his will. He had everything planned out..." She had to pause for a moment and take a deep breath. I could see the tears at the edges of her eyes.

You'd never believe it with the way she's been bawling over the last few days, but Liz was normally the strongest person I knew. She'd broken her arm a couple of years ago while mountain climbing and splinted it herself. Then she'd walked the ten kilometers back to V-town, leading an

expedition none the less, to get it patched up at the hospital. I'd taken the news about that misadventure worse than *she* had.

But there's a big difference between breaking your arm and losing one of the most important people in your life.

"I've never been to Africa before," she continued. "Sounds like it..."

"No." I stopped her dead right there. With a thunk I put my carton down on the table. "You are *not* coming with us, Liz." Just for good measure to glare at Ging too. "And neither are you."

An 'I told you so' glance passed between them. Of the two Ging seemed relieved.

"But Mom's going with you!" Liz continued. It wasn't often she tried the little girl angle any more. She must *really* want this.

I shook my head. "No. And that's final. Your mom has her ways of coming, but the two of you are staying here."

I was rather surprised the argument stopped there. It's not often I have to put on my 'fatherly' voice, but when I do it tends to go over badly.

The next morning I buckled down and did something I wasn't looking forward to. I went to City Hall.

I haven't been mayor for years, but I still end up there almost every week. Bugger, I still get official dispatch boxes from the government all the *bloody* time.

Officially I was still the City Administer, but even that title was out of date now. These days I'm little more than a consultant. One of the biggest tasks I'd worked at over the last decade was to slowly chip away at my own authority.

I guess I wasn't so different from English in that respect. Like him I was slowly trying to worm my way out of the machinery, knowing that someday I wouldn't be here. Well, that day was going to come sooner than I expected. There was no way I'd be able to lend a hand running the government when I was on the other side of the planet.

City Hall was a nice, if somewhat plain building, designed more for its usability than its ascetics. I should know, I'd led its construction back during the rebuilding.

Up the front steps, I was happy to note there were no protesters darkening the plaza. Other than the occasional dust up over some minor matter or other we hadn't have any protesters in... gods, I can't even remember the last time we had something seriously go wrong with the government.

Heh. I smiled. Well, I guess I'd managed to get *something* right.

Through the lobby, I didn't even stop to check in at the reception desk. The ladies there just waved at me and smiled.

I still can't get over how odd it feels to be here again. These halls had been my home for far, far too many years. Most of them weren't spent as mayor, but close enough. The sound of my claws clicking on the floor brought back a flood of memories.

Up to the second floor, then onto the third, it wasn't long before I was standing outside the mayor's office.

And this was an annoyance.

I made a point of not coming around here much anymore. Perhaps I'd tried too hard.

The mayor's office had a new receptionist – separate from main reception they had downstairs – and she didn't know my face.

Now don't get me wrong, my name is well enough know around here, but not my face. I've always made a point of just being 'that wolf'. Only problem was now I was 'that wolf' with a few extra years and some grey fur tacked on.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the mayor is quite busy. Unless you have an appointment I simply can't let

you in.”

The receptionist was a deer, a young one, likely not older than Liz. I doubted she'd even been alive for the reconstruction.

“Listen,” I said, searching vainly for her name somewhere, “Lady, I'm Tommy Taggart. The mayor will be more than willing to see me.”

Yeah, I should have made an appointment, but I'd never *needed* one before.

She didn't say much, but I could see from her eyes a telltale 'yeah, right' expression.

Taking a deep breath, I turned from her desk. I'm sure she thought she'd won, but I had another trick up my sleeve.

That particular office had never been mine, but I've spent more than enough time in there to know the acoustics inside out.

And if memory serves the perfect place to stand was just about... here.

Still a good ten feet from the mayor's office door, I was just off center of the antechamber.

I grinned for just a moment.

“Black! Get your cottony tail out here!”

I don't have the lug capacity that English was famous for, but I can still vocalize well enough when I need to. Hey, all those public speaking classes had to accomplish *something*.

It was about ten seconds later the office doors flew open. Once again I was face to face with the current mayor, Edward Black. The man was a sheep.

“Tommy!” he said, coming towards me with an extended hand like this was just another social call. “How are you?”

A moment later he had we led into the office, closing the doors behind him with a quick glance at the now sheepish receptionist.

And the second the doors closed the sheep seemed to change into a completely different man.

Now don't get me wrong, Ed is a nice enough guy. I didn't vote for him in the last election, but I don't have anything against him. It's just that I learned *real* quick after he took office that his stage persona is far and removed from who he really is.

Ed is a politician through and through. When he's up on stage he's in his element, shaking hands and kissing babies – that's what he does best. The man is, however, ill suited for is actually making decisions and running the government.

I guess in some ways you could call us night and day. I'd never been all that good on the campaign trail but seemed okay in the big chair.

Ed had been smooth and all smiles out in the hallway, but now he was shaking like a leaf in the autumn wind. From the man's expression alone it looked like he was about ready to have a heart attack.

“By the gods am I glad you're here, Tommy,” he said, lifting a cup of something I was sure wasn't water off his desk.

I took a seat across from him.

“Ed,” I said, trying to put on the calmest voice I could, “I'm not here for pleasantries...”

I didn't even get time to finish before the man's eyes went large.

“Oh gods. There's another riot isn't there? There's people pressed up against the front of the building. Protesters looking for my blood...”

I snorted and reached a hand across the desk to put a hand across the man's wagging mouth.

“Nothing like that, Ed. Calm down.” A moment later I let go and he began rubbing his bruised nose.

“Then what is it? I'm sure I'm not going to like this.”

“I'm going away,” I said. “On a long trip, short notice. Not sure when I'll be back.”

I will give it to him, Ed wasn't dumb. He didn't even ask why, he knew well enough.

"But what about us, Tommy? We need you! You can't just leave us!"

I heaved out a sigh and sat back.

"Ed, it's been decades since I was mayor. Years since I was really City Administrator. Gods, one of these days I'm going to die, you know. You've got to get used to the idea of running the place without me." I raised an eyebrow. "What about Max? Have you ever sat down with him? He was mayor for a good long time, longer than I was. Why don't you ask him for help?"

The sheep managed to somehow turn his nose up.

"Mayor Maxwell? You've got to be kidding. He's a member of the Open party. I couldn't possibly ask him for assistance! Can you imagine what that would do to my image come the next election?"

Is it wrong that I had to fight back the urge to leap across the desk and strangle the man?

"Ed," I said, trying to keep the growl out of my voice, "You do remember that I was the *founder* of the Open party, right? I chose Max as my successor."

He looked away for just a moment, abashed.

"Yeah, but you don't count," he said. "You're different. You got us through the reconstruction. It's not a sign of weakness to defer to you. Every mayor since has done it."

I sighed and set my forehead on the desk. This was going to take a while.

Four hours later and we were still going at it. So far I'd talked to just about *every* minister and department head in City Hall, and I don't think I'd be wrong to assume that runners had been sent out to get the heads from other buildings.

"Just... just do what you've been doing all along! What you think is right!" My throat was rough and my patience run ragged. I hadn't had to do this much talking in years.

"I'd just feel better if we went over the emergency plans once more," the man said. He was the head of the power department.

"No," I said.

He looked up at me. "Pardon?"

"No," I repeated. "We're not going over the plan again. *I* didn't write it. Gods, I don't even know the first thing about electrical generation. All I did last time was to rubber stamp it. *You're* the expert here, you and Ed. The two of you are the ones who should be doing this. I won't be here."

"But... but... but..."

I stood up and stretched backwards to work the kinks from my spine. I couldn't reach quite as far as I used to, and a stitch in the left side of my gut reminded me why I was here.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back towards the men and woman assembled in the office. This had to be the majority of the senior government.

A smile worked its way to my lips unbidden.

"Folks," I said, "You can do this. I know it. Come on, look at who you're replacing here, and old washed out wolf. If I could pick up the pieces after what happened I'm sure as anything know that a bunch of experts like you can do this."

"Bugger," I continued, "I hardly had anything more than rubble when I rebuilt the government, but *we* did it. That's a *we* not an *I*. That's what's going to make the difference here, folks. I don't care what stories they're spinning about me these days, but it was us all working together that got the city back on it's feet."

"You can't be in this for yourself. You need to do what's best for the largest number of people. It was greed and hubris that nearly destroyed the city. Don't let it happen again."

Have I mentioned that I'm no good at public speaking?

After a rousing little speech like that – and I frankly think it's one of my better off the cuff efforts – you'd expect some applause, or at least some 'yes we can' smiling faces.

All I got was a few nervous coughs and some unsteady shuffling.

Turning, I walked out of the office without another word. Well, it was sink or swim for them now. I wish them the best of luck, but this dog's day has come and gone.

Walking towards the front doors to City Hall, it quickly became obvious that news I was here had spread – along with the fact I likely wouldn't be coming back.

Every ten feet I was stopped by someone new, only half of which I recognized. They all shook my hand, thanked me for all the help I'd given them, and wished me the best of luck.

And all of a sudden I was starting to feel like a bit of a cad.

It took me over an hour to make the the couple hundred meters to the front door. By the time I finally stepped out it felt more like I'd just won an election then told them I was bugging off.

A deep breath and I was out into the clear air again. I looked around the plaza in front of City Hall. It didn't have an official name, but everyone called it Reconstruction Plaza these days.

They'd tried to call it Taggart Place, but I'd put the kibosh on that none too quickly.

Turning to head home, I make it about two blocks before I felt something. One doesn't survive half a lifetime as a bounty hunter without picking up some lifelong instincts. I was being followed.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed me nothing of note beyond the ever present churn of bodies.

I picked up my pace and ducked around a corner. Thankfully I knew this district well enough there was no way I could bet lost around here.

A couple more ducks and dives and my fear that I was being followed was quickly proven true. I still had yet to see who it was that tailed me, but they were buggers to shake.

The footfalls were light, their motions professional. I hadn't the slightest who was chasing me, but they were good at it.

Okay, time to think.

Pausing behind a dumpster, I knelt down. There was no way I was going to be able to lose them like this. I had to get smarter. If I hung here out of sight they should overshoot me. That would give me a chance to dart off in another directions.

I could still hear the footsteps coming my way. Wait... there was only one set. Hadn't there been two sets before?

I had only a heartbeat to realize I'd just been had when a hand fell over my shoulder, pinning me in place. Good thing too, otherwise I likely would have leapt halfway to the moon.

There was a long pause as I turned my head.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh.

I'd just been caught by two of V-town's finest.

The V-town police, under Jon's guidance, had if anything only improved over the years. I hadn't the slightest why these two were out after me, but I didn't feel any shame in having been one upped by them.

Of the two, one of them was the standard German Sheppard that were so common to the service – he almost looked like Jon's younger brother. The other was a bit of a surprise. I can't remember the last time I've seen a black footed ferret with a badge.

“What can I for you gents?” I asked after catching my breath.

And that alone was a little frightening. Even getting older I should have been able to shake off a scare like that in a couple seconds. As it was it took me almost two minutes until my breathing was back to normal, and the stitch in my side reminded me why.

"We apologize for startling you, sir," the dog said. His words were as crisp as one would expect, but I could see in his eyes they were more than just words. He'd likely thought he'd almost given me a heart attack. "We've been tasked to escort you to Police HQ. The Commissioner would like an audience with you."

I laughed and rolled my eyes. It's been a long time since I was last picked up off the street by the cops.

"And I assume this *escort* means you'll drag me there by my whiskers if I refuse?" I said, standing up and dusting myself off.

Both of their eyes widened like I'd just threatened their mothers.

"No... no, sir," the ferret said. His words weren't quite as crisp as the dogs. "We've simply been sent to extend an invitation. We meant to meet you at City Hall but you were already leaving. You can of course decline."

This time I out and out giggled. Okay, it's not the manliest thing to do, but I have a bad habit of it. I was just so used to being dragged from place to place by people who just *had* to speak to me that it seemed odd to be treated with some respect.

Shaking my head, I started off in the direction of Police HQ. The two cops fell in to formation around me without a word.

"Well might as well get it over now," I said, "Or Jon will never let me hear the end of it."

Police HQ was the same red brick three-story structure that's been as long as I can remember. Only difference now was that they'd remodeled the front reception. It used to be whitewashed walls and hard wooden benches and little else. It's still pretty utilitarian, but at least now you can see effort had been taken to decorate it and soften it a little bit for those people who have trouble enough to need to come here in the first place.

For better or worse HQ was nearly my second home. I still don't know the complete internal layout, but I was well enough known here that I didn't even have to wave at the dogs manning the counters, they just waved me through.

A dozen or so twists and turns and we were at the Commissioner's office. Once again I was waved through without so much as a twitch of the ear.

Unlike at City Hall they tend to keep staff around for a while here. Or, more to the point, the police department is something you're born into in V-town. And it tends to be something you're in for life.

Stepping through the last door into Jon's office, the dog was exactly where I expected him. The years have run on, but Jon seemed to be all but immovable. Other than his reading glasses, he could have been the exact same man who'd taken over just days after Sayer's death.

Only, save one thing. Years ago there had been nothing but paper on this desk. Now there was a computer off on the corner, its screen flashing status reports every few seconds. Jon's eyes never moved from the paper before him, but I had no doubt he read each and every one of those screens.

I felt a grin slip to my lips as I settled into my normal chair across him. I'd picked his chair myself, it only made sense with how many hours I'd spent here.

"How goes it, Jon?" I said. "Long time no see."

He looked up at me, setting his papers down. There was a scowl to his lips. Call me perverse, but that only made me smile wider.

"You're not doing it, Tommy," he said.

I cocked my head.

“What?”

His scowl etched deeper.

“You're not going to Africa...” he said before I cut him off.

I snorted. “What? You think you're going to stop me? Everyone already knows I'm going, and there's no bloody way you're going to stop me from fulfilling English's last wish.”

The flutter of a smile crossed the old dog's lips. “If you'd let me finish, Tommy. What I was going to say was that there's no way I'm going to let you go without me.”

I just about face palmed.

“What? No. Absolutely not. I spent *years* working my way out of the machinery here and they still won't blow their noses without asking me first. You're my friend, Jon,” I said, reaching across the desk I set my hand on his, “But if you were to leave the police would fall apart.”

The scowl returned in full force.

“Tommy, you might not see it, but we've made great strides here at the force. You yourself were picked up by a... non-traditional officer. I'm sure the force could survive for a few months without me.”

I let out a long sigh.

“Jon, I love you like a brother. Bugger, English was your friend too, but no. This is my millstone to bear.”

The argument stayed civil enough – this is Jon we're talking about here – but it went rapidly downhill from there.

I was more than happy when I stepped out from HQ an hour later, this time free of police escort.

A warm breeze ruffled my fur as I set off down the street. I closed my eyes and enjoyed it.

Gods, I have to stop being so stupid.

I got about two steps before running flat into what felt like a brick wall.

Landing flat on my tail in the middle of the street, I looked up.

And up, and up.

“Master.” The voice still sounded like it came from the bottom of a well, but now he said the title with a grin.

“Amstys.”

Reaching down, the massive grey and black – now with some extra grey – wolf helped be back to my feet.

“What are you doing here, Amstys?” I asked, starting off down the street again.

He cocked his head, as if that was a silly question.

“I'm coming with you.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “You not just talking about a still down the street are you?”

And with that I delved into yet *another* argument, almost word for word the same I'd had with Jon, how there was no *bloody* way he was coming with me.

“So, is that it, Babe?” I asked, hefting the pack onto my shoulders.

She shrugged. “As well as anyone can figure, Wolfy. It's the best supplies money can buy. You do realize that neither of us have ever been further than Edmonton, right?”

I grinned. It had taken us two weeks to get this far. We had a fairly small window to catch passage to Japan. There were lots of ships going back and forth these days, but it was harder to find someone willing to take passengers on short notice.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the one last thing I needed. English's ashes. Gods but they

were heavy. The pack on my back already weighed me down and the ashes almost felt like they were going to drive me through the floor.

Stumbling, I nearly fell over backwards.

“Tommy!” A moment later Rebecca was at my side, steadying me. “Are you okay? Is it the...”

Lifting a finger to her lips, I warded away the word.

“No, Babe,” I said. “I’m just not used to so much kit, eh?”

Chapter 5: Brand Name



I'd had this vague image of departing from V-town in style, perhaps on one of the few cruise ships we still had afloat, or failing that a nice manly cutter.

Yeah, reality can never live up to my imagination.

The *Sojourn* was about seventy years old, a big bulk carrier. We'd be forced to pick it as it was the only ship heading where we needed without a month's wait.

There was no great and grand parting ceremony. We'd gotten that all out of the way over the last couple of weeks. The only people who walked with us to the dock were Ging and Liz. Thankfully, neither were crying.

"So you promise to make it back, Dad?" Ging asked as I gave him one last hug.

I smiled lopsidedly. "I'll make it back in one piece or I'll die trying."

For just a moment he froze, then he forced a smile. In so many ways he looked exactly as I had at his age. Even that perpetually confused expression I'd never realized I had until I'd looked back at my old photos.

Up the gangplank, it was quickly apparent this was no pleasure cruise. The *Sojourn* was freaking *huge*. The thing had to be the better part of a kilometer long. It came from Japan loaded down with electronics and finished goods, then loaded up with raw materials in V-town like timber and metals.

Reopening the old mines in the Rockies had been one of the best things the government had done to encourage trade. That had been Max's idea.

Next was a brief meeting with the captain, a komoto dragon. He spoke passable enough english, just enough to make it known that he doesn't care much for passengers. The extent of our tour was a list of places not to go. After that he showed us the door to our cabin and walked off down the hallway, feet stomping.

Opening the door to the cabin, the hinges made a scream worthy of the greatest horror production. Inside was a small, near unfurnished room. Gods, they didn't even have the good taste to provide us with a double bed. Off in one corner of the room were two bunk beds, hanging on chains off the wall.

There was a small porthole window in one wall and a sink on the other. With the two of us in here there was only just enough room to keep it from feeling crowded.

Only problem: There were three of us.

I just about threw English's ashes at him where he sat on the bottom bunk. He wasn't smiling, but there was an obvious sense of satisfaction on his face.

"Amstys."

I didn't even bother to phrase it as a question.

"Young master," he said, head bowed. "I'm glad to see you made it."

Rebecca shoved me to one side to peer past.

"What's he doing here?" she asked.

I snorted. "Taking up my bed, by the look of it." I paused for a moment before quickly closing the door behind me. "You didn't pay for your passage, did you?" I asked.

The big wolf cocked his head. "Pay? I simply lent a hand while they were loading their cargo. They were happy for an extra set of hands. You know I've been working the docks for years, Tommy. Capitan Ito knows me well. He didn't even ask when I walked up the gangplank carrying the ship's supplies."

I shook my head.

I'll say this flat out, I don't feel the slightest guilt in making Amstys sleep on the floor.

Feeding the big wolf was a problem as we couldn't exactly take a stowaway to the galley with us, but we made it work.

But other than the adventure in keeping a six foot, three-hundred pound monster of a wolf hidden, we didn't have much to do.

Relaxing ocean voyage my fuzzy butt-end.

The first day was full enough getting everything unpacked and sorted out, not to mention the novelty of sailing through Active Pass, then getting to watch Vancouver Island fade in the distance. Hey, Rebecca even got to point out Salt Spring Island in the distance.

The second day wasn't bad either. I enjoyed a few hours of calm. I even got a chance to write a couple lines in my journal, something that had saved my sanity once but had long been neglected.

The third day, however, was *boring*.

"Gods, Babe," I said, sitting on the hard deck plating outside at the aft of the ship, "How do they put of with it?"

She smiled. "Everyone else has jobs, Wolfy. Told you we should have waited for the cruise ship. Just imagine how much fun you could have playing shufflepuck."

I snorted. "Okay, good point. I'll take a boring and empty freighter any day over a whole ship full of people trying to strike up a conversation with me, thinking I still have power in the government."

"Do you want to go for another walk around the ship?" she asked.

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like there's much to see, Babe. And besides, they always seem to get pissy whenever we wander about." I paused for a moment and cocked my head. "I've heard them say they have other passengers, but I haven't seen a single one, have you?"

She shook her head. "Not a soul. Other than our room I haven't even seen anywhere *for*

another passenger unless they're sleeping down in the engine room.”

Yep, this trip was quickly getting on my nerves, and we'd yet to even make it past the first leg.

And worse yet, there *was* something we could be doing to pass the time, the only problem was that it was just short of impossible to get privacy back in our berth with Amstys loitering about and I just couldn't get in the mood out here.

“Thank the gods,” was all I could say when the first hint of landfall appeared over the horizon.

It had taken us the better part of a month to get across the Pacific, and I'm pretty sure even Amstys, the most patient wolf I've ever met, was more than thoroughly sick of us.

Rebecca and I were standing near the bow of the ship, as close as they'd let us get, watching the islands grow ever closer.

And... wow.

Okay, I know Japan hadn't fallen as far during that Cataclysm. Not only had I English's and Max's stories of it, but also the technology they traded us.

But... wow.

The islands were hardly in sight yet and I could tell you they were night and day from V-town. Suddenly my little city was starting to feel very bush-league.

What land I could see was covered from shore to shore with high rise towers, and not the dilapidated kind we have back in V-town. I'd say that everything they had looked pre-Cataclysm, but it looked *better*.

“I can't help but worry about Molly,” Rebecca whispered into my ear as we watched the land grow so agonizingly slowly larger.

I shrugged. “Not much we can do now, Babe. Amstys said he talked to her about it. They're not rich, but she should be well off enough to look after herself and the pups for a few months.” At that my voice turned hard. “And that's what it'll be. That flea-bitten mongrel will be heading back on the first ship I can find. He's *not* coming with us.”

She just laughed.

“If you say so, Wolfy. He's done a pretty good job so far.”

At long last we made dock. I can't tell you the joy of having solid ground under my feet again, even if it did leave me off balance. I was so used to having the floor roll that the earth left me staggering.

Down the gangplank, Rebecca and I were alone. We had to leave Amstys in the cabin to find his own way ashore. We'd gotten this far without him being discovered, I wasn't about to tip our hand now.

Now comes the best part of any international trip. Customs.

Well, one thing I knew we had for sure was our passports. There is one good thing about being the much beloved former mayor, when I walked into the passport office they'd *jumped* to be of service. A process that should have taken over a week for Rebecca and I was done in a day. A not only that but we had the darnded things triple endorsed and all but dipped in gold.

And it looks like we're getting the proactive treatment here. Waiting for us at the bottom of the gangplank was a group of a good dozen men of different species. They were all wearing business suites.

Oh bugger. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

“Mr. and Mrs. Taggart?” the one in the lead asked. His english was near perfect.

I cocked my head as I came to stop before him.

“How do you know my name?”

The man just smiled and bowed. I instinctively bowed back, having sat through *way* too many trade meetings.

“We were expecting you, Mr. Taggert. One of our envoy ships brought news that you would be arriving. We are only sorry we can not provide a greater reception on such short notice.”

I let out a long sigh. “Sorry, folks. I’m not sure what you’re expecting, but I’m here on private business. Nothing to do with V-town.”

The smile on the man’s face didn’t budge. I could tell you right away he didn’t believe me.

“Of course, as you say, Mr. Taggert. We are but here to humbly welcome you to our country, as you have done to so many of us.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Great, thanks...”

I was cut off before I could even finish.

“Please, Mr. Taggert, let us take you to our hotel, it is the least we can do.”

Now a growl slipped into my voice. Japanese hospitality is renowned, but it always comes with strings attached.

“I told you, I’m here as a private citizen.”

They were just about to say something in return when I felt a shadow fall over me.

“You heard the... Mr. Taggert. They are here privately. And with me.”

I almost laughed when the group’s heads all started tilting up in unison. And up, and up. Amstys was standing behind us with his hands on our shoulders.

I don’t quite remember what they said after that – it was mostly in Japanese which I can only catch one word in five on a good day – but they sure cleared out fast. I guess they’ve never seen a wolf the size of Amstys before.

And by the expressions on their faces he’d put the fear of the gods into them without even lifting a lip.

After that customs was a straight forward affair. I was glad Amstys had been smart enough to get a passport of his own. Molly must have helped him with that.

Stepping out of the customs house we were on the street soon after, and I’m in danger of repeating myself here, *wow*.

On a whole new level, *wow*.

In V-town we were lucky to have a dozen neon lights in total, here they were spread about like florescent candy. And with night approaching they were coming on like the gods’ own lollipops.

On the buildings behind them were massive, multi story animated signs. My jaw would be on the floor now if I hadn’t had to work with computers over the last few years. As it was it was only hanging around my knees.

Though I was speechless for rather different reason.

Half the signs around us featured a particular mascot. It was a young and virile lion. His face may be stretched and deformed by a hundred different artists, but I’d know him anywhere.

English’s grin adorned everything from state of the art cars to bottles of shaving cream.

My initial plan upon getting out on the street had been to track down to hotel for the night, but that was now secondary. Neither Rebecca or Amstys complained when I began searching out the source of the advertisements.

Not that it was hard. Each and every one of the smiling Englishs had the name ‘Gifu Corporation’ down at the bottom, and in english text, too.

Like I've said, my Japanese is piss poor, Rebecca's is worse, and Amstys' nonexistent. That made doing *anything* around here more trouble than it should be.

Thankfully, we did meet a street vendor that spoke our language. All I had to do was buy dinner from him and he was more than willing to direct us to Gifu.

Though the cheeky little lopsided smile on his lips made me think he saw us as nothing more than misguided tourists.

The Gifu tower was... well, have I used the word 'wow' too many times already? Add it a half dozen more.

The building had to be a good thirty stories tall and nothing but gleaming, spotless glass. It was lit a blazing red by the setting sun. I may have been a mayor, but I felt suddenly well out of my league.

Walking up the wide boulevard to the front door, my ears twitched. Turning my head, I glanced around.

"Amstys," I whispered, "Do you hear anything?"

The wolf looked down at me with a confused expression. "No, young master. Should I? Everything here is so..."

I shook my head and set a hand on his forearm. "Nah, it's just me."

Up to the front doors, I was glad to see they weren't locked yet, but a closer examination suggested this place *never* closed. It looked like it ran twenty-four seven.

Into the reception, it was like we'd just stepped back three-hundred years into the past. The room was rustically wood paneled and the light was indirect. There were no flashing neon advertisements to be seen here.

At a low desk in the center of the room sat a woman in a deep red kimono. She had a painted white face. Oddly, it actually looked good on her fox features.

I'd practiced my Japanese in my head the entire walk here. I think I had it at least passably right, if nowhere near perfect.

Stepping up to the woman, I bowed slightly at her. She seemed a little taken aback at my formality. Oh well, that's what I get for only mingling with people during trade agreements.

"*A pleasant evening to you, most honorable woman.*" I forced my lips to make the alien sounds. It left my throat aching almost instantly. And not only that, but I could pick out a dozen mistakes I'd already made.

She blinked a couple of times and bowed back to me. When she spoke her words were slow and carefully formed. It was obvious she knew I was a forger.

"*And a good evening to you, most honored gentleman. What may I humbly do for you?*"

I grinned. Well, at least I'd gotten past the first hurdle.

The next problem, however, was to prove far more annoying. That was mostly because I didn't *know* what I wanted.

I tried to ask her about the lion themed advertising outside. At first she thought I wanted to buy a product.

Coming for a different angle, I at least got though that it was the *advertisements* I was interested in and not the things they were selling. At least that got us a little bit closer. She called one of the marketing managers down.

It was then, when I had another person down here that I finally came up with a bright idea.

It took a little routing around in our packs, but at long last we were able to dig up a half dozen photos of me and English mugging for the camera, arms over each other's shoulders.

Well, *that* got them off and running.

I hadn't been expecting quite that reaction, but it was like kicking a bee hive. Suddenly we were hustled out of reception and into an elevator. I'm not sure how far up they took us, but it was enough to make my ears pop.

Out of the lift, we were led to a richly – and by the gods to I mean *richly* – appointed meeting room and left to our own devices.

But not before they took every photo of English we had.

That was about forty-five minutes ago.

“So, Wolfy,” Rebecca said, gazing out the window, half mesmerized by the lights so far below, “Do we have a plan here?”

I rolled my eyes. “When do we *ever* have a plan, Babe?”

It was only after being sequestered in here that I realized how hagged we looked. I was used to dealing with people as a member of the government. That meant being freshly groomed and slipped into one of Smith's world famous suits.

But right now I was little more than fur out, and I hadn't had a good brushing since we'd stepped on the *Sojourn*. I'd groomed enough dead hair out of pelt over the last half hour to almost make a whole new wolf.

I was on a chair, Rebecca standing next to the windows, and Amstys was sitting on the floor, half hidden by the conference table, when the hallway door opened.

It wasn't as though he had a name tag around his neck, but I knew he had to be the head of the Gifu family the moment he stepped through the door. He was wearing what was perhaps the only equal I've ever seen to one of Smith's suits.

And, thank any and all gods that might be looking down at us, he spoke english – if fractured.

“I am Eiji Gifu,” he said, his voice surprisingly smooth.

I stood up. “I am Tommy Taggart.”

I began bowing and bonked my head into his outstretched hand.

We stopped dead for a moment, before both breaking out into laughter.

“Please, Mr. Tagger, let us do things *your* way. You do outnumber me,” he said. His face was still deadpan, but there was at least a touch of humor to his voice.

“Thank you, Mr. Gifu. That will make things much easier,” I said, taking a seat the table. He took one across from me.

“Now,” he said, pulling out the photos of English and I, “It would appear we have business to discuss.”

The conversation was civil enough, but Eiji wasn't happy to see us. The fact we were connected to English meant we were dirty in his eyes.

Mostly because he and his father had tried to murder the lion and thought him gone for decades.

“So,” I said, finally broaching the issue I'd come here for, “I'd like to inform you that Michael Jones is dead.”

For the span of five heartbeats not a sound could be heard in the room.

I honestly expected the man to smile. I expected him to be happy that this little lose end had been cleared up. Rather he scowled.

I couldn't translate the words he said, but I think their meaning was more or less universal.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

He turned back to me, almost as if he'd forgotten we were here.

“We just invested in a multi billion yen advertising campaign with his image. We'll have to

scrap the whole thing when news gets out.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“It's bad luck to use the face of the recently dead. It will suggest bad connotations for our product.”

I let out a sigh. Well, it was all I could really have expected anyway.

“That's all you care about?” I asked. “That's it's going to cost you money? You didn't seem to care about using his face when you *tried to murder him!*”

The man pulled back as if he'd been slapped. It was clear he wasn't used to being talked to in this way

“I'm sure I don't...”

“Save it,” I said. “English was my best friend. He told me all about the *other world*.”

I didn't think it was possible for a man to go white behind his fur coat, but I could see him pale clear as day.

“You... you mustn't speak of such. It would ruin the whole company if...”

I waved him away. “I don't give a spent hair over you and your company. English is dead. And he died of natural causes. That's all that matters to me now. If you need to take him off your advertisements, all the better for me.”

I was about to break into an angry tirade about the way they'd treated him when there was a soft knock at the door.

Eiji held up a hand, silencing me.

He called something that I'm pretty sure translated to 'Come in.'

A moment later a stunning woman clad in a kimono stepped into the room. I'm not quite sure what she said, but I did pick up the word 'disturbance'.

Eiji turned to me.

“Mr. Taggart, it would appear your associate has been causing trouble with my building security.”

I cocked my head and looked around. Everyone was here, me, Rebecca, and Amstys.

“I don't have any associates with me,” I said.

Exactly three minutes later I heard the soft click of claws on the carpeted hallway outside the room. Two sets were so soft as to almost not be there at all. The third was measured and precise.

I raised a hand to my forehead. I know who it was before they even rounded the corner. Although, I will admit to my surprise I'd never seen him in the body hugging black spandex uniform before. They must have made it custom for him, it even had a pocket for his reading glasses.

Jon stood at attention before me, between two dragons who must be the Gifu security staff. Both guards wore odd, fireman like hats.

The dog didn't say anything, he simply bowed his head ever so slightly.

I could have strangled him.

“He is not with you?” Eiji asked.

I sighed. “Yes, yes, he's with me. But he's not acting on my orders.”

Eiji grinned ever so slightly. “Ah. I've had experience with such things as well. There are no others about, I trust?”

I glanced at Jon. He shook his head.

We were just getting ready to leave, Jon included. So far we'd yet to make much headway with Eiji. He was willing to strip English's face from his company, but he wasn't happy about it. He kept

muttering that he had nothing to replace it with.

The sun was well down and I was so tired I was starting to see double.

“Come on, folks,” I said. “Let’s get going.”

Rebecca and I stood up, and Jon took a position at my side. Eiji waved us out with the flick of a hand, not caring.

Then Amstys stood. He’d been mostly hidden behind the table. When he stood up to his full height his ears brushed the ceiling.

And Eiji’s mouth fell open.

I cocked my head. “Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No. No,” he said, stuttering. “Please, let my staff help you find a place to sleep for the night.”

He never took his eyes off Amstys as we walked from the room.

Even the budget Japanese hotels are nice, and if you tell me this place is budget then I have a bridge to sell you.

The Gifu staff had been good to their word. They’d suggested this place for us, just a couple of blocks from their tower. I had a feeling they’d called ahead and paid for no small portion of our room.

And yes, *room*, as in singular. I didn’t quite feel safe enough to spread out our forces.

Letting the pack from my back with a heavy thunk, I carefully reached up to pull English’s ashes from my shoulder.

“Jon,” I said, never turning to the dog, “Start talking. Now.”

With anyone else there would have been the slightest curve to his lips, either up or down. With Jon there was nothing – just a ruler perfect line. I could just have well been talking to a mannequin.

“It was decided, Mr. Taggert,” he said in police dog perfect pitch, “That as a former mayor of V-town you are automatically extended the protection of the force whenever you leave the city. Furthermore, it was decided that the officer most familiar with you should be selected to accompany you as you are known to be a... difficult charge.” He blinked once. “Furthermore, it had already been noted that you would decline any escort provided to you. It was decided that the officer in question should accompany you in secret.” Now there was just the faintest ghost of a smile to his lips. “The *Sojourn* was more than happy to take on one additional passenger in order to avoid a surprise inspection that came upon them just hours before they were scheduled to leave port.”

I sat down on the low mattress the passed as a bed here.

“And when you say ‘decided’ I can safely assume that you made up your mind and the rest of the force jumped to it?”

At the he scowled slightly. “Not quite, Tommy,” he said, his perfect posture slipping slightly. “The force was not... encouraging of my sudden leave of absence. In fact much of the force, and all of the public at large, are not aware of my departure.”

I rolled my eyes.

“And just how hard did you have to fight with Pine to keep him from coming along?”

At that the dogs mask slipped entirely. Not only did he smile, but his tail wagged ever so slightly. Something I’m not sure I’d ever seen before.

“Just short of coming to blows,” he said, finding a seat of his own. “You wouldn’t believe what I had to offer him to keep the man from pulling a trick like what I did years ago.”

I laughed. Back when we’d gone to Edmonton, Jon had accompanied us. He’d only been able to pull it off by threatening to quit the service entirely if not permitted to go.

Reaching out, I grabbed a hold of Rebecca and laid back on the soft mattress. This was the first time in a month I’d actually had a real bed. And by the gods were we going to make use of it tonight.

To sleep.

The next morning came sooner than I would have liked.

Thankfully Gifu Corp. must have us well in their hands. No one came to disturb us, and when I opened the front door there was a breakfast waiting.

And, thank all the gods, a western style one. No rice to be seen.

At ten o'clock we were just finishing up and reloading our packs when a knock came at the door.

I couldn't tell you who it was from that knock, but I could tell you they were used to getting what they wanted.

"Come in," I shouted from where I sat on the floor. "It's open."

There was a slight pause, then a nonplussed Eiji stepped in.

"Mr. Taggert," he said.

I took one look at him and decided he'd been up all night. His carefully combed fur was dull and his ears were drooping, but there was still a smile to his lips.

I nodded at him, doing the best I could to bow as I was sitting on the floor.

"What can I do for you, Eiji? We were just getting ready to head out. We still have a long way to go."

He cat blinked once. "Oh, yes. I'm am sorry for detaining you. Let me come to the point. I'd... I'd like to thank you for bringing news that we are now free of that infernal lion."

I stopped dead.

"What did you just say?" My voice was cool as ice.

He took half a step back and raised his hands.

"So sorry, no offense intended. It is not what it seems. Gifu has spent so much money, so many years, investing in the image of your friend that we have practically become inseparable from it. And you know, are among the few who know, why that has been a shame pressed to my soul for so many years. My father... and I, did a most dishonorable thing when we had him... sent away. There have been many times we as a company have tried to distance ourselves from his image, but it simply has never to be. Now with his death becoming public with have an honorable way to... how would you say, put his image to rest."

I shrugged. Well, it was for the best I suppose.

"Works for me," I said. "What are you going to replace him with?"

At that the cat beamed.

"Gifu Corp. has long been associated with a... nontraditional image. The image of your friend was seen as unique, distinct, and strong. I believe we have found a suitable replacement model."

I didn't much care for the way he was looking at us.

"You're not talking about *me* are you?"

The cat laughed so hard he nearly choked.

"Ah, most certainly not, Mr. Taggert. I was referring to uh, physical strength."

Turning, I looked at Amstys. The huge black and grey wolf was completely ignoring us, toying with something from one of our packs. He was sitting on the floor but yet he still towered over us.

"You can't be serious," I said.

The wolf started slightly.

"Were you talking to me?" Amstys asked.

The stay in Japan had taken a bit longer than I'd expected, over a week, but we finally had everything sorted out. Amstys had out and out cried when we'd parted, leaving him in the capable care

of the V-town envoy.

It had taken the big wolf a long time to finally understand what he was being offered, but he more than jumped at it once he saw what the pay out was.

I made sure to agent him under our envoy, with explicit instructions to look after him. And in two months send the wolf back to V-town. In that time he should have made enough to last him the rest of his life.

And now we were back on another gods forsaken boat.

Well, at least this time we could see our destination. The Chinese mainland wasn't that far off. It was only too bad we couldn't find a ship to take us straight to Africa.

Chapter 6: Narrow Passes and Sheer Cliffs



Pulling out a map, my gut still tightened when I looked at how far we still had to go.

“Gods, English,” I said, turning to the leather pouch that sat in the corner of the small room, “You better count your blessings you were my best friend. I wouldn't have gone even *this* far for anyone else.”

As usual, the ashes didn't have much to say.

That was just one of the thousands of things that was so hard to get used to. The old lion had been a part of my life for so long I still kept catching myself seeing him out of the corner of my eye, expecting to hear a quick quip or sardonic comment when I least expected it.

“I'm going insane, aren't I?” I mused. “I'm talking to a man's ashes. Gods, I'm already insane, I'm toting them half way across the gods forsaken world!”

We'd gotten a bit smarter this time. The voyage from V-town to Japan had worn on everyone's nerves. This time we got three different cabins. Sure Rebecca and I spent most of our time together, but there is a limit on just how *together* even a couple can take.

Our first voyage had taken us from Japan to a little island town by the name a Jeju. From there we hardly touched land before setting off again, this time to China proper. Next was Shanghai. It should have been impressive, but after the neon lights of Japan the crowded streets of China weren't quite as awe inspiring.

Back on another ship, now we were going south-west. Along to coast to Taiwan, then to Sanya, we were almost to our destination. Up head was our last stop by boat for some time, Qinzhou.

Landing in China, we were able to slip past the worst of the formalities. We'd spent enough time around here that, while still foreign, we didn't look that out of place. Humans were an oddity everywhere, but there were dogs and wolves the planet over.

The streets in China were near the polar opposite from Japan. This place was closer to V-town

in it's level of technology. And that's not a totally good thing.

Dirt streets and collapsing buildings, it was like V-town *before* we'd began pulling it all back together.

And there was one major problem here. None of us spoke the language. I could speak precious little Japanese, but absolutely none of the Chinese people were using here. Well, at least I could still pick out the occasional written character.

Jon, ever the one present of mind, had brought with him a small phrasebook. We were making use of it now, haggling with a street vendor over some kind of meat on a stick.

Yeah, I'll definitely qualify it as *some kind*. I *really* didn't want to ask what it was. If I did then I could just as well guarantee Jon would refuse to eat it. And likely Rebecca and I for that matter.

We weren't exactly here for pleasure, but that didn't stop us from taking in the sights and smells of the market while our food cooked.

You think those stories of Asian street markets are fairy tales? Yeah, think again, I'm smack dab in the middle of one, and it's busier and more frantic than anything V-town could put up.

I was just reaching for my meal when the sound of a crash came from up the street. Like clockwork Jon, Rebecca, and I turned in unison.

It took a moment to make it out through the milling throng of people, but someone or something was coming this way.

Uh... I don't think I've ever met an elephant before. And by the looks of it that was about to change.

Old habits die hard, I can tell a chase when I see one. The elephant was running flat out down the middle of the street and a dozen men were racing after him.

Huh. I hadn't even known elephants *could* run.

Still more than a dozen meters from us, the beast of a man was clearing people left and right. And right in front of him was a old woman pushing a pram.

I would have rolled my eyes if I had time.

Not even bothering to drop the pack from my back, I leapt forward. I didn't need to look over my shoulder, I knew Jon and Rebecca were with me.

I took the elephant, Jon the woman, and Rebecca dragged the pram away.

It felt like I was no more than a mouse as I landed on the elephant's back. I didn't do much, but I did slow him a measure, and I was able to use my weight to edge him off course, giving Jon the Rebecca just enough time to get clear.

Well, perhaps I was able to do a touch more than that. Job finished, I was ready to leap clear. The only problem was that we were going down.

My extra weight must have set the elephant off balance. He was struggling for all he was worth, but he were headed towards the ground.

"Oh bugger," was about all I was able to get out before we hit the dirt with a thud heavy enough to wake the dead.

Thankfully I wasn't on the bottom. Well, mostly.

Save for my tail – that now feels like it's on fire in case anyone's interested – I was more or less free.

"Tommy!" I moment later Rebecca was at my side, joined shortly thereafter by Jon. The dog was standing guard, doing his best to keep the traffic moving and people away while Rebecca tended to me.

"Are you alright?" she asked, pulling the pack gently from my shoulders.

I worked up a grin.

"Heh, yeah, Babe. You always had a thing for guys with docked tails, right?" I let out a groan

as the behemoth behind me shifted.

A handful of heartbeats and a new type of shout entered the mix. I couldn't make out a single word they were saying but I knew the sound of bounty hunters when I hear them.

And good ones by the sound of it.

They came from the same direction as the elephant had. And I had a feeling they'd seen everything.

Shifting, I tried to pull myself free from the weight that pinned me, but it was no good. I couldn't do much more than breathe without fire shooting up my back. Some days it really is the pits to have a long protrusion sticking out of your backside *that's directly connected to your spine*.

I couldn't quite see what was happening up front, but someone stepped up to talk to Jon. A big someone by the looks of it. A moment later the dog shifted and I was able to make out a tiger.

He was speaking to Jon, but the dog was simply making 'I don't know' gestures.

Even I could hear when the cat switched to english.

"You brought him down, yeah? The three of you?"

Jon shrugged. "That would appear to be correct."

The cat grinned showing each and every one of his teeth.

"Let's get the weight off your friend, yeah? Good hunt. Good hunt."

Well, the cat was good to his word. A moment later he and a group of mixed comrades stepped forward and started prodding the elephant with long spears.

For his own part the elephant still seemed stunned, surprised to find himself laying on the ground. Thankfully our new friends were careful to make sure he rolled the right way to get up without crushing me.

The stitch in my side was acting up again, but thankfully my regeneration was taking care of my tail. Once the elephant got off I was happy to see the damage wasn't that bad. It had been pinned rather than crushed.

Though I was more than a bit concerned to note it didn't heal nearly as fast as I would have expected.

"Good hunt, good hunt my friends, yeah?" the tiger said. They'd already led the elephant away, but a good half dozen of the bounty hunters were still loitering around. I didn't care much for the way they looked at us.

It made me think of the way a house cat looks at a mouse.

"You not from around here, are you?" he asked while staring at my tail. My regeneration wasn't running at anything near normal speed but he was still enthralled watching it.

"No," I said, rubbing my backside. "We're from far to the east."

He twisted his ears. "You're not from Japan, yeah?"

I glanced at Jon and Rebecca. I *really* didn't want to tell this man too much.

"No," I said. "We're from further than that."

He seemed to shrug it away. "But you're a bounty hunter. I can see it in the way the three of you move."

Jon stiffened when he was called that. Jon was one thing and one thing only, and that was a police officer.

I stood up, leaning on Rebecca. My balance was still off with my tail not working properly.

"Long ago," I said offhandedly. "Right now we're just travelers. Just passing through."

I knew I'd made a mistake the moment the words left my mouth. The cat's eyes lit up like it was payday.

“Yeah? Yeah! You're bounty hunters! You can't hunt here! You need to be part of the guild. I help you with that. Hu help you.”

I didn't care for the way he said *help*.

A moment later the other bounty hunters who'd been loitering about began closing in.

Well, there was at least one upshot to this mess, our new *friends* were taking us northwest to Nanning, the general direction we wanted to go anyway.

I kept doing my best to reason with Hu, but it was obvious the tiger didn't want to hear. I'd bet my last whisker he got a commission for pressing new bounty hunters into the guild and we, the three of us, were likely a good payoff for him.

The hike was hard, but not unusually so. It did at least give us a few days to take in China. This was the longest we'd spent off a ship since leaving V-town. And bugger was this place green. I was used to the verdant mountains of British Columbia, but this was bordering on silly.

In any event we made it to Nanning in our own good time.

The place was a good sized city. Nothing to be compared to what there was in Japan, and even a fair bit smaller than V-town, but a good sized place none the less.

The guild house sat at the outskirts. This must be just a regional branch as it didn't look like much.

“So this is it?” I asked. The question was more rhetorical than anything else.

“Yeah,” Hu said in response as he pushed us forward.

Well, this was getting really annoying, *really* fast. It seemed Hu was the only person around here who spoke english, and he'd buggered off as soon as he'd gotten his payout. That left the three of us alone with a good dozen of what I could only assume were the high mukky-mucks of the Chinese bounty hunters.

And they were about as pissed as I was that we couldn't get a word between us.

I did my best to mime my way into telling them we were just passing through. Even Jon pulled out his phrase books and tried as best he could.

Yeah, this was not going well.

It was about an hour before they finally lost their temper. They called in some clerks who arrived with pots of ink and papers. The only problem was that the contracts – and I'm sure that's what they were – were written in, unsurprisingly, Chinese.

“No,” I said, crossing my arms before me. I think that action was pretty much universal.

They said something, but I didn't catch it. A moment later someone stepped up behind me, grabbing me by the shoulders. I could hear Jon and Rebecca struggling as well.

“Get off!” Twisting, I was constrained by the heavy pack on my back. Under normal circumstances I'd be free of the man in seconds, he's wasn't that good, but as it was I was all but immobile.

There was a loud barking sound from the men presiding over us. The clerks walked up and dipped my forefinger into the pot of ink. Setting the paper down on a table, they pressed me forward. I'm guessing a fingerprint was their equivalent of a signature.

I let a grin slip to my face.

They hadn't caught it, but I'd snuck away last last night and cleared the cancer from my body. I felt better today than I had in weeks.

“Not going to happen, you buggers,” I growled. Taking a quick glance over my shoulder, I

made eye contact with Jon and Rebecca. Jon was stoic as ever, but Rebecca looked as ready to get out of here as I did.

Not to mention I didn't care for the way her guards were holding her.

Snapping up my arm I made a quick and unexpected, if not terribly hard, contact with my guard's nose.

There was a grunt from behind and the arms around me loosened slightly. I took it for all it was worth and fought my other, ink smeared, hand free. It also went back. I had better aim now that I knew where his head was.

The black ink that they'd intend to sign me up with now now splattered across the guard's face. Following that up by stomping my foot down on his was enough for me to break free.

I'd like to say it was as clean as that, but anyone who's ever had to fight in a crowd knows it never works that way.

Thankfully, this may be a bounty hunter's guild hall, but there seemed to be precious few actual bounty hunters *around*.

One of the clerks rushed forward to try and help the guard restrain me. I spun and he got the heavy metal frame of my pack to his face. Next I looked he was down on the floor, dazed.

I'd thought I did rather good there, but when I turned to Jon and Rebecca I realized just how out of practice I was.

Jon's guard was laying neatly on the floor, hogtied up with a rope I didn't even know he'd had. There wasn't a bruise on the man's body.

Rebecca? Well, she'd gone for the quick and efficient approach. Her guard was perhaps the largest of the three – a watter buffalo or something like that. It worked well for her. It meant the guy's crotch had been at perfect striking height for her fist. The man – and he had my sympathies – was laying in the fetal position, clutching his balls.

Regrouping at the back of the room, I took a moment to case our surroundings.

Well, this was no Storm Front. The room was simple wood, and not all that large. The three administrators who we'd tried to talk to me were still standing up on a low stage on the far side. They were yelling their heads off now, calling for help. And, by the sound of heavy footfalls, that help wasn't going to be long in coming.

“Did you catch the layout on the way in?” I asked Jon.

The dog nodded. A single, curt, motion. “Of course.”

And with that we were gone. Out into the hallway, we hardly got ten steps before encountering the first wave of reenforcement coming our way.

Well, I had this one.

Raising my arms, I began shouting incoherently in something I hope vaguely sounded Chinese. I waved and pointed back towards the room we'd just come from.

Chalk one up for overacting, it worked.

Running full speed back the way we came, we made it to the front doors. Each group of bounty hunters we passed were easier to fool than the last. They all seemed to expect us to stand and fight rather than run.

I grinned. Resting a hand on the heavy leather pouch at my hip, I could only guess what English would have done at a moment like this.

Out into the fresh air, it was only a matter of seconds before we were down the street. Too bad it wasn't fast enough. From behind me I could see the guild had managed to get it's act together. Bounty hunters were streaming from the doors of the guild house like hornets, all coming our way.

And I don't think my little charade was going to work a second time.

Just... just how far have we gone?

It's been over two weeks. Two weeks of running nonstop, hightailing it through an alien and mountainous country with a team of bloodthirsty, professional bounty hunters at our heels.

"Does anyone have a clue where we are?" I asked as I set my bruised and strained butt end down on a worn thin bedroll.

Jon glanced up from where he was tending the fire with a bird – hopefully edible – roasting over it.

"Somewhere to the south of Dimapur," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Great. Now anyone mind telling me where in all the gods' names Dimapur is?"

"To the west of where we were last time you asked," Rebecca said with a chuckle.

You know, we should all be on edge and frightened, having been on the run for our very lives for the better part of a month, but it just seemed like another day after what we'd all been through together.

Thankfully the pheasant – or whatever the local equivalent is – was good enough to get us back on our feet again the next day.

You might think we were just being paranoid, thinking that we were still being tracked after this long.

Yeah, funny that.

We'd managed to pick up a few snatches of Chinese over the last few weeks, just enough to get by. And then read the wanted posters that had seemingly been posted *everywhere*.

By the sounds of it Nanning wasn't exactly a big bounty hunting outpost, but we'd managed to get there while some higher ups had been watching. I was starting to think that's how the tiger had timed it.

And, as many great and grand bosses are, they didn't take kindly to us showing them up. We'd made the news, and news travels faster than a group of foreigners like us. Every time we entered a new town they already knew who we were.

Well, that had its ups and downs. It looked like the bounty hunting guild here wasn't quite as well respected as back in V-town. A good half the people we met were more than willing to help us. The problem was with the other half, those who did everything they could to turn us in for the reward.

We were up in the mountains again. Gods, this place had more mountains than the Rockies!

Our supplies are getting low and, unlike back home, we didn't don't know enough about the wildlife here to say for sure what's safe to eat and what's not. Not to mention it would be nice to know exactly where we are again.

None of the maps I'd brought from home had anything more to say about this part of the world other than 'yeah, it's here'.

When we saw a sign for 'Noney' we were more than happy to follow it. Not that any of us knew what in all the gods' names 'Noney' was.

Thankfully, it looked to be a village.

Stepping in, it was clear we weren't in China anymore. For one thing all the effort we'd put into learning the language was for not.

I had to laugh. Jon couldn't even figure out which phrasebook to pull out.

Up the hard packed dirt path, we stepped into town. Well, you know you're remote when

everything stops the moment visitors walk into town.

For a long moment all people seemed to do was stand and stare. The only motion was that of the rest of the village walking tentatively up to their windows to get a better look at us.

At long last an old fox woman stepped forward.

I smiled.

Why is it always old women? They seemed to be the ones that made the *real* decisions the world over.

She said something that was totally lost on me.

"Sorry," I replied, keeping my voice calm, "I don't understand. We only speak english."

There was a long pause, then she made a gagging sound.

"English?" she said.

My eyebrows just about hit my ears.

"You can understand me?"

She smiled, showing the most hideous gap toothed grin. I felt right at home.

"Well enough." Her words were slow and rusty, but I can't tell you how good it felt to have someone new to talk to.

Things proceed quickly from there. A few stern commands from the woman and the rest of the town got back to work as if we weren't there, save for a few quick glances out way when they thought we weren't looking.

The woman led us down the street to a small timber building that I could only guess was her home.

"You are welcome," she croaked, waving us on, "Enter."

Brushing off our dirty feet, we stepped in.

Well, wasn't this *charming*.

To call the village the middle of nowhere would be praising it. The inside of the home, well serviceable and clean, could best be called rustic.

The woman made sure to close the door behind us the moment we were inside.

"Not safe," she said, fighting against her own throat to form the words. "The..." she made a coughing nose, "Are not far behind. They were at the neighboring village. On their way here."

I didn't even bother sitting down.

"Okay, folks," I said. "We'd best get back on the road."

"No," the woman said, laying a hand on my shoulder. "It is dangerous at night. You must stay here. They are no friends of ours. They have taken far too many of our brothers and sisters over the years. It is right we should shelter you. You are our guests."

I was a little bit concerned about what they might feed us, and how we could pay, but the issue sorted itself out.

The woman cooked up a thick soup of meats and vegetables I had no names for. The was a welcome change from the trail food we'd been living on for so long.

Paying her, and the village, back was surprisingly easy.

I'd said Noney was out of the way and I'd been right. We were likely the most distant travelers they'd seen in a century.

The woman had to translate, but Rebecca and I told stories of V-town and Canada. I didn't think they'd ever even heard of it.

I made sue to leave out the fact I'd been a bounty hunter, myself. Or mayor.

The evening passed pleasantly, and far more comfortably than any in recent memory. Even the

beds she provided were soft.

Well, it was nice while it lasted.

It had to be about ten at night and we were good and bedded down. We were warm, and the town was quiet. I was just about as happy as one could reasonably expect.

And it had to happen. From outside I could heard the heavy trod of many feet.

Who is their right mind would be traveling at this time of night? Well, it didn't take long to get our answer. Soon there was a soft but frantic knock on the door.

A moment later a man was in the room with us, speaking in hushed tones with the old woman. I couldn't make out a single word, the thrust was simple enough.

We'd been found. Again.

"Okay, folks," I said, sitting up. "It was a nice few hours, but it looks like it's time for us to vamoose."

The old woman raised a hand.

"There are only three ways out of the village. Everything else is blocked by the mountains. And," she paused for a man to speak with the man, "They've all been guarded. Your arrival here was seen." Her expression grew dark. "It was not one of my village that betrayed you, but you were seen none the less."

I let out a long sigh.

"Fine, then what?" I asked.

"You wait."

And that was that. Much of the night was a stand off. The bounty hunters wanted to search the village building by building, but not even they could pull it off with nothing but moonlight.

That didn't stop them from trying.

The village wasn't large, perhaps only a dozen or so structures in total, all clustered around a single dirt road.

And, from what images I could snatch out the windows of the home where we sat, there might just be more bounty hunters chasing us than there were villagers.

"I'm open to suggestions," I said once the old woman was gone, leaving us alone.

"This is my fault, Tommy," Jon whispered. "I should have scouted the terrain and stopped us from camping here."

It took everything I had to keep from laughing.

"Your fault?" I reached out and set a hand on his shoulder. "No, my friend. It's my fault for bringing the two on this adventure at all."

At that we smiled.

And the bounty hunters came another building closer.

One more building to go. They were just about on our doorstep.

"Okay," I said. "Here's the plan. We wait until there just about in here, then pile out through the window. We'll head towards the west pass. That's where we want to go anyway. We'll have to fight our way though."

Jon shook his head.

"No, Tommy," he said. "There has to be at least twenty men out there, never mind who they might have guarding the passes. Not even we can make those odds."

I was just about to begin arguing when the old woman stepped carefully through the door.

"I'm sorry," she said, her words halting. "There is nothing more we can do."

Standing up, I took her hands. "It's not your fault."
 Rebecca was by my side a moment later.
 "Thank you for everything you've done," she said.
 Turning, I looked for Jon. He was nowhere to be seen.
 Oh bugger.

I couldn't even tell how he'd gotten out of the house. The door was still closed and the windows intact. Nonetheless a moment later I heard a howl.
 A clipped, on-key, textbook perfect howl.
 I swore so much under my breath I'm surprised the room didn't turn blue.
 Rebecca and I scrambled to the window just fast enough to see a German Sheppard shaped silhouette racing south through the moonlight.
 Jon was off and running like a champion sprinter in the prime of his life, and behind him, falling fast, were at least two dozen bounty hunters.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.
 We'd made a run from the house as soon as the coast was clear. Heading west, Rebecca and I followed the original plan, the one Jon knew about.
 I couldn't think of anything else to do.
 The pass was already clear. The guards here must have taken off after Jon.
 I didn't like that dog's odds.

"But what about Jon?" Rebecca asked as soon as we'd put enough space between us and the village to stop for a much needed rest.
 My tongue was lolling out and the stitch in my side was screaming bloody murder.
 "I... I don't know, Babe," was all I could get out. "He..." I stopped and closed my eyes.
 "But we can't leave him," she said, but there was no conviction to her voice.
 "I know, Babe." Reaching out, I pulled her close, pack and all. It suddenly felt *very* lonely, surrounded by his alien land. "If anyone can make it, it's him."
 The night was the longest one I've ever seen.

We traveled slowly for the next week, straight as an arrow west, stopping at every town to ask if they'd seen a brown and black dog skulking about.
 Nothing.

We had to be getting close to India now and every step was a test for me.
 "Are you alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca asked one day when we stopped for our fifth break of the day. We were in a nice little clearing with the sun shining down around us.
 "I... yeah, Babe. Just out of breath," I said between pants.
 Reaching into my back, I pulled out a small knife. It looked like it was that time again.
 "You might want to go for a walk, Babe," I said, gasping for breath. This is going to get bloody.
 And I wasn't lying. Every time I'd had to do this the cancer had been worse. Soon it would be filling up my whole insides.
 "No." Reaching out, she took the knife from my hands. "I love you, Tommy." Leaning forward, she kissed my rather surprised lips. "How do we do it?"

Chapter 7: The Scent of Flowers



We still did everything we could to leave a trail for Jon – which wasn't much – as we headed west.

I'll admit our pace picked up with Rebecca looking after me. I'd kept her from it for so long out of a feeling of shame. I hadn't wanted her to see what was slowly eating me from within.

But now that I'd laid myself bare – in more ways than one – I was nothing but glad for it. Her thin and nimble fingers, not to mention her better point of view, meant she was far better at keeping the slow horror at bay.

I can't tell you the precise moment we finally entered India, but I sure as the gods knew what marked it.

Rain.

I hadn't the slightest what the date was, but we were pretty much convinced we'd managed to get here in the middle of rainy season. If it kept coming down like this my fur might start to turn green with moss.

“What's wrong, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked as I checked the leather pouch at my hip again.

I nearly jumped when she set her soft hand on my shoulder.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing, Babe. I'm just checking up on English.” Turning, I showed her the ashes. “I just always get worried whenever we get wet that some of the moisture will get through to him.”

She gave me a lopsided grin and a chuckle.

It was long ago we'd decided, though never really *said* it, that it was easier to refer to English directly. In some ways the lion wasn't quite dead. He was still with us. And it was the cagey old cat who'd sent us on this quest to begin with.

“I'm sure he'll be fine, Wolfy,” she said. “He hadn't complained yet, has he?”

I grinned back as I carefully fitted the top tightly over his remains.

“Nah, Babe. This trip is the quietest he's been in a long time. I think he's just looking forward to seeing his family again.”

Unlike Japan and China, the entry into India was a... subdued affair. We didn't even know we'd crossed the boarder until we'd managed to run across a caravan of traders who spoke english. We were somewhere in West Bengal.

With every step we took the rain seemed to get nothing but worse. Okay, I've lived in Vancouver all my life. I *know* rain. Bugger, I work for a company called *Storm Front* for the gods' sakes and I've never seen anything like this.

The skies were nothing but an uninterrupted cascade of water, and the once hard packed dirt path beneath us was mixed to a froth of mud so deep I was up to my knees half the time. It was going to take me weeks to wash the mud from my fur.

“Do you see that, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked, pointing up ahead. I almost didn't hear her. The wind tried to steal her words away almost before they left her mouth.

Thankfully, I did. It was a light.

Slogging on, it took us the better part of an hour to make what should have been a five minute journey, but at long last we cleared the last ridge to see a small village.

Was it wrong I howled in joy at even the slightest possibility of a hot bath?

Down into the small valley that held the village, we had to be careful not to slip, and even then we spent more time sliding down at the head of a mudslide than we did walking.

“Namaskaar!” I shouted as we neared. It was the only word in Hindi I knew. We'd learned it from the traders.

At first there was no response. I yelled it again at the top of my lungs for all the good it did.

Continuing on to the largest building in town, we could only hope it was an inn.

Throwing open the door, I stepped inside. I hadn't really *meant* to arrive that dramatically, but the wind had its own plans.

Well, we'd gotten it right. This was an inn, or a pub, or something. There was a dozen men and women sitting in here at tables.

They all looked up at us like we were demons stepped straight out of a story book.

“Namaskaar,” I repeated, my voice softer now.

One of them stood up and approached us. I wiped the dripping mud from my hand and offered it to him.

He ignored it completely.

Walking around us, he gave us both a close inspection. Closer than I really would have cared for.

He then said something, but I hadn't the slightest clue what it was. He said it again, but all I could do was raise my hands and shrug.

Rebecca was a little smarter than I. She dug into her pack and pulled out a small purse of Indian coins we'd traded for a week or so back. A moment later she was holding out what we *hoped* was about the right amount for a night's stay at a county inn.

The man backed away, his eyes going wide.

Uhh... am I missing something here?

Things just kept going from bad to worse when the other men and women in the room stood. And none of them looked too happy.

“Uhh, Babe,” I whispered, glancing across to Rebecca, “Perhaps they don't care much for visitors here.”

She didn't bother replying before we began to back slowly towards the door.

I wanted to run, but the day's hike, combined with my own infirmity left me gasping for breath no more than a dozen paces from the inn.

We were more than close enough to be caught by the angry mob.

Wonderful. How was this going to look? We'd journeyed half way across the world, beaten back monsters both natural and man made, escaped a whole *bounty hunting guild*, only to be caught by a pissed off gaggle of farmers.

I was just rising from where I'd tripped and fallen in the mud when I felt something heavy hit the back of my head.

Well... bugger.

I woke up twelve hours later. Or fourteen, or seventy-two for all I knew. I was cuffed hand a foot and stuffed – as far as I could tell – in a little shed out behind the village.

And it was *still* raining.

If there was one bit of good news in this whole thing it was that Rebecca was still with me. They hadn't tied her as tightly as they had I. For that I was grateful to any all all gods that may or may not exist.

“You alright, Babe?” I asked as soon as I came to.

Other than tussled hair and a few more scuffs on her old standby read leather jacket she looked not too bad.

“I was about to ask the same of you, Wolfy,” she said. They didn't bother hitting *me* on the head like that. You were the one who fought. As soon as I saw you go down I gave up.

I snorted. “What? You, Babe? That doesn't sound like you at all.”

For just a moment I could see the fear in her eyes, then she pushed it quickly away.

“Not normally, Wolfy. But this time I don't have anyone to carry your limp body away, and it wasn't like I was going to leave you here with a hoard of violent villagers.”

I worked up a grin.

“How about you scoot over here, Babe, and you let me chew through your bonds?”

I couldn't reach my own, but by the feeling of them they were nothing but twined rope. My teeth, no matter how dull, should be able to make quick work of them.

She rolled her eyes. “They're not *that* dumb, Wolfy,” she said. They tied me tight to the wall.”

I groaned.

Our wait, well longer than I would have liked, wasn't all that bad. It was the next day the rain *finally* let up. The land was still a mess, but at least you could look up without drowning.

And that was when we got to meet the head man of the village. He was an ox, or something along those lines. In his thick fingers I saw a phrase book that looked to be a long lost relative of the ones Jon had packed.

Locking the door securely behind him, he squatted down on the relatively dry dirt in here and eyed us.

“You. English. Speak.” I could tell by the way he said the words that they were hurting his throat.

And, oddly, he said them at Rebecca, not I. This poor little Wolfy was all but ignored.

“Yes,” she said. She spoke slowly and carefully.

The man grunted.

“You. Are. God.”

Okay, I'll admit it, I would have picked my jaw up off the floor if my hands hadn't been tied. Even Rebecca, normally unflappable, was taken aback.

She looked him straight in the eye. “No. Travelers.”

He paged through the book for a bit as she repeated herself. At long last he grunted.

“Lie. God. Rain.”

I would have face palmed if I could have.

“What now?” Rebecca asked. The man didn't seem to need a translation for that.

“Judgment,” was all he said.

I'm not ashamed to say that the single word sent a tremor of fear all the way from my nose to the tip of my tail.

A short time later a half dozen more of the villagers arrived with stout sticks. They untied Rebecca, but not me.

Rebecca was politely shown to the back of a wagon. I was carried in Zulu style.

“Anyone want to fill me in here?” I asked after I was none too gently dropped in the wagon. Instead of an answer I got our packs thrown on top of me.

Though I did still somehow manage to grin when English's ashes twacked me on the side of the head.

They didn't quite trust us *that* much. I was bound hand and foot, and Rebecca, while fairly free, had her ankle tied to the wagon. Though it seemed more ceremonial than anything.

“Where are we going?” I asked more than once. The answer, when I finally got one, was ‘Mumbai’.

Well, it beats walking.

The wagon took us to another village. From there we were transferred – with a piece of paper – to another wagon. From there to a barge, another wagon, and finally a truck. The paper stuck with us the whole time.

And, rather surprisingly, we were treated none too badly. Rebecca better than I, but we were fed and generally looked after.

Well, right up until we got to the truck. Then this little vacation came to an end. The truck was surprisingly modern. And in its back were individual jail cells.

When the truck doors finally opened again we were met with a... rather surprising sight.

I hadn't been quite sure what to expect of Mumbai. From what I'd seen of India so far I wasn't expecting much. Instead what I got was an impressively clean street and a row of relatively new buildings.

The man opening the truck door was dressed in a dark blue uniform. Somethings it seems are almost universal. A cop.

The man, surprisingly polite, cut both our bonds and helped us down. I would have howled in joy of being able to move freely again after almost a month of one type or another constriction.

There was only one problem through – they took our stuff. All of it, even English's ashes.

And from there I was shown into a cell and left with a lot of time to think.

I hadn't seen Rebecca in over a day. They separated us the moment we got in here. I can only assume she was sent to a woman's wing.

As for what it's worth this had to be one of the nicer prisons I've ever had the opportunity to be locked away in. Though I think that's more because I'd been speaking english during the booking procedure than anything else.

I had a nice little cell all to myself. The door was iron bars, but the walls were painted white concrete. Hey, I even had my own little barred window looking out at a little blue square of sky.

The sound of claws clicking down the concrete hall outside my door snapped me back to the here and now. There's aren't many folks locked up in this wing, so any activity is of interest.

At long last a man in a blue cop's uniform came to a stop in front of my cell.

Gods but the man reminded me of Jon. He wasn't a German Sheppard, but he was a dog. The way he stood, the way he walked... I nearly cried.

"Tommy Taggart?" he said, reading off a paper.

I nodded and slowly stood up. I didn't bother saying anything. It was obvious he didn't understand english.

A moment later the key turned in the lock and he ushered me out. I was more than pleased to note he didn't cuff my wrists.

This place was *big*. Outside of V-town, I'm pleased to say I haven't had to get too up close and personal to that many jails. This building put the cells we had sequestered under and around Police HQ to shame.

I shivered at *that* memory.

The further we walked the nicer the place became. From the bare and whitewashed cells to clean if spartan mess halls and exercise gyms, to halfway pleasant processing areas, to offices and meeting rooms.

It was one of those office that we finally stopped in front of. My escort reached out to knock on the door. A moment later a voice called us in.

The guard opened the door and motioned me onwards. He didn't follow.

The office, like the guard and the jail, was pretty universal. I'd know a low level manager anywhere.

The room was tight, but pleasant enough. The walls were the same white as the rest of the building, but there was a desk, a couple of chairs, and a window far nicer than the one I'd spent yesterday looking through.

And sitting on the other side of the desk was the scrawniest tiger I've ever seen in my life. He couldn't be more than twenty-five, and topped out at a hundred pounds. From where I stood he looked almost anorexic.

He smiled at me. The first words out of his mouth made me smile in return.

"Ah, Mr. Taggart. So sorry for the inconvenience." His voice had that stereotypical British-Indian accent that suggested the kingdom was still running some schools out here. "Please," he continued, "Have a seat."

I did, and my butt end was more than happy for a little padding after the gods only knew how many days of bumpy wagons and truck beds.

"The government would like to extend it's most heartfelt apologies for what you've been through, Mr. Taggart," the tiger continued. "You have to understand that we are still in the process of rebuilding after the most unfortunate events that left us like..." he gestured down at himself, "This."

I let out a long sigh and rolled my neck to get out the kinks. Well, here was something I could deal with – a bureaucrat. I was back in my element.

"Care to tell me what exactly I did wrong?" I asked, keeping my voice carefully level.

He coughed and looked away. "Ah, you see, Mr. Taggart, you arrived at a most inopportune

time. The rains that accompanied you were far more than is seasonable. You were outsiders in a small, rural town that was in the midst of a disaster. They did what so many might. They assumed you evil spirits and took action to keep you from doing mischief.”

My jaw just about dropped.

“They thought *we* brought the floods?” I asked.

He coughed again. “Ah, well, not *you*, Mr. Taggert. There is a goddess, particularly popular in Western Bengal. She's a human, controls the seasonal rains, and is most often seen with a canine companion and protector. I'm sure you can see how an honest mistake like this could be made.”

I laughed.

It started out as a soft chuckle but grew until I was almost falling out of my seat. I laughed so hard it felt like the stitch in my side was going to rip.

“So,” I asked, wiping my eyes, “What now? Are we going to be burnt at the stake?”

The tiger's eyes went wide. “No, no. Of course not, Mr. Taggert. We wouldn't dream of it. Some of our outer provinces may be less than civilized, but I can assure you *we* are not. We'll simply clear up your paperwork, write you both official pardons and you'll be free to go.”

Pausing for a moment, he reached down under his desk. I heard the familiar rustle of fabric.

“It is your good fortune,” he continued, “That your passport made it all the way here intact. That should speed the process considerably.”

And then came the most feared of all beasts, the paperwork. Thankfully, the tiger called for a tea service to help sooth my parched throat.

Between the man's accent and his penchant for tea, I couldn't help compare him to English.

“So, Mr. Taggert,” he said, “We're almost done. What is your reason for coming to India?”

I shook my head. “Just passing through,” I said. “We're on our way to Africa. I promised a friend I'd bring his remains home.”

“Ah.” He scribbled on his paper. “That would explain this.” Reaching down behind his desk again he pulled out the pouch holding English's ashes. Let out a a breath when I saw them. “We were wondering what this was.” He paused for a moment and signed. “You are aware that the transport of body remains is restricted?”

I rolled my eyes.

He looked at me and shrugged. “Don't worry too much, Tommy,” he said, a smile slipping through. “We'll make it simple. Just another piece of paper.”

I signed and leaned back in my chair. Well, at least I didn't have anything to hide.

I did make a point to leave out that the bounty hunting guild was looking for us in China though.

Reciting the story to this point, I gave the man the quick once over on our journey – remembering to let him know that if they ever encountered a particular German Sheppard wandering this way that he was with us.

“Very good, Mr. Taggert.” the man said. “We'll just have to go over the identity of the ashes. Just a formality, you understand. We need to assure that there is no fowl play.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “They're of a lion. My best friend, Micheal Jones. He was from Kenya originally. Everyone called him English.”

It took me a moment to realize the tiger had stopped writing. He'd stopped dead the moment's I'd said English's real name.

“Uh, yes,” the man stuttered out, “I'm sure that will be more than enough. We'll just get the paperwork sorted out and have you free in a few hours.” With that the man stood up and quickly

walked around me to the office door. He slipped into the hallway, leaving me here alone.

I couldn't make out a single word that was said in the hallway, but it sounded like the tiger was talking to the guard outside. A moment later I heard a set of footsteps taking off at high speed.

Bugger. What have you gotten myself into *this* time, English?

When the tiger returned he left the office door open behind him.

"Sorry to keep you, Mr. Taggart. Your escort will be with us in just a moment to take you back to your... ah, *accommodations*."

I wasn't quite ready to call this an uptick in my fortunes just yet, but when I got back to my cell I noticed my bed had been changed. Now, rather than the thin straw weave that had sat there before I had a halfway decent cloth and wool mattress.

I cocked an eyebrow as I sat down.

What is all the gods' names was going on?

My fortunes didn't end there. When evening meal came around I was expecting the same simple gruel they'd fed me before. Instead I was pleasantly surprised.

Curry has never been my thing, but after a month of whatever people scraped off the bottom of the slop barrel, curried chicken was a delight beyond description.

Sitting alone in my cell, I hungrily lapped up my meal from the bowl provided and looked out my small window. I could only hope the *paperwork* didn't take too long to process.

They must have completed my case at record speed. The sun was no more than kissing the horizon the next morning when I heard the *tat-tat-tat* of claws coming down the hallway towards me.

The same cop as yesterday let me out of my cell and led me off.

"Wolfy!"

I didn't even get two steps into the processing room before Rebecca had both arms, and possibly both legs, wrapped around me.

"I'm happy to see you too, Babe," I whispered, kissing her cheek.

We were interrupted a moment later by someone clearing their throat.

A clerk, a different one than the tiger I'd talked to yesterday, stood before us, our backpacks leaning on the wall next to him.

"Please ensure you have all your belongings and I'll sign your release," he said. He had the same British accent as the tiger, but didn't speak the language nearly as well.

About ten minutes later we were ready to go. All our stuff was here, though all I really cared about were our passports and English's ashes.

"Very well," the clerk said, scrawling on a piece of paper. "There is only one more thing." Stiffly, he reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch. "I'm sure you will find this sufficient compensation for your troubles."

He dropped the surprisingly heavy bag in my hand and turned to leave.

I don't think giving folks money like this is normal procedure, but we didn't question it. The man's back had hardly turned before Rebecca and I were hoofing it towards the door, and the fresh air it so tantalizingly promised.

We would have made a sprint for it, but that just would have been uncouth.

Out in the sunlight again, I couldn't help but stretch my arms. It felt so *good*.

There was a wide set of steps leading down from the building to the busy road beyond. We took them at an easy stroll.

“Well, Babe,” I said, “This wasn't exactly my plan, but you can see the Arabian Sea out there. We're almost to Africa.”

She snorted and smacked me lightly on the side of the head.

“Don't get ahead of yourself, Wolfy. We've still got a long way to go to get to Kenya.”

Descending the last few steps, I noticed what was setting me off about the street here. It had cars.

We don't have many cars in V-town, but I'd gotten fairly used to them in Japan. Here there was a near perfect mix of pedestrians, rickshaws, and motor vehicles swarming the street. And one long, black, car in particular was stopped right at the foot of the steps, its doors open.

“Mr. and Mrs. Taggert?” a cat asked. He was standing in front of the car, clothed in a black suit that must be sweltering in the heat.

We stopped dead.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

The cat smiled. “My employer would like to meet with you.”

I took a step back.

“And who is your *employer*?” I asked.

The cat cocked his head slightly as if to ask, *you don't know?*

“All will be explained, I'm sure,” he said. “After all, she was kind enough to arrange for your speedy discharge from jail and the bag of coins you now hold.”

And with that we got in the car. The driver offered to stash our packs in the trunk, but Rebecca and I declined. We'd only so recently gotten them back that I didn't want them to be out of arm's reach.

I can count the number of times I've been in a motor vehicle on my hands and toes. Most of those were his English and his baby. They'd never prepared me for this.

Even the ambulances in V-town tend to drive rather slowly, I don't think I've ever been above forty kilometers per hour. The way this guy drove left both Rebecca and I cowering in the foot wells. I couldn't make out the words he screamed out the window, but I had a feeling they weren't blessings.

In due course was made our destination. And we were all suitably impressed.

The house in front of us was on par with the greatest and grandest of what you might find in V-town, and far above my own rather meager apartment. Large wrought iron gates opened as we approached, pulled aside by workers seemingly standing there for that exact purpose.

We were expected.

Up the graveled drive, the car finally came to a stop at a large white, colonial style mansion. Yet again there were people just waiting for us. I didn't even have to open the car door.

It didn't take many steps after we crossed the threshold for me to start developing an inferiority complex. Don't get me wrong, I've been to lots of places like this before, but always while wearing one of Smith's suite.

As it was, dusty, dirty, strung out, and reeking of our time in jail, all I could do was stare.

“Thank you for coming.”

My head snapped up. In front of us stood a grand staircase, and down it, ever so slowly, stepped a grand old dame of tigriss.

I don't think I've ever used the phrase *grand old dame*, but this was one case where it fit.

Her fur was long gone grey, and she was as thin as a reed, but she simply carried an air of... well, not quite royalty, but close to. Even her voice was smooth and cultured, only ever so subtlety

cracked by the ravages of age.

"My name is Jasmine," she said. "I do believe you are carrying my dear Michael."

I had to rack my brain for a long moment before it came to me. One of English's first adventures after leaving home had been to befriend – and *almost* marry – a tiger named Jasmine in India. She had been the daughter of a local governor or something like that.

Well, it looked like she wasn't doing too bad for herself.

It was only moments later we found ourselves in a calm and sedate sitting room, cups of tea and cream biscuits spread before us.

"So you're her then?" I asked, slurping my tea. I may have gotten a good meal in jail last night, but I had a lot of calories to catch up on.

She nodded her head gently. "Yes," her voice had that same British schooling accent I was getting used to. "I'm pleased to hear he hadn't forgotten me."

I closed my eyes for a moment and set a hand on the pouch that sat on my lap.

"I don't think that could ever happen, Jasmine. English... he was a unique person. I wouldn't be surprised if some of his final thought were of you."

I decided not to mention his widow in Japan.

"Tell me," she said, her voice shaking, "How did he die?"

I relayed the story of English's time in V-town, and how we'd met, than finally parted. She cried now and then, but was smiling when I continued with our journey to here.

"Ah," she said, wiping away a tear, "Then we are most fortunate that my grandnephew happened across you."

I smiled. "That would explain a lot. I take it these coins are yours?" I offered her the pouch but he pressed it back to me.

"No, my dear friends, think of it as my gift to you. I haven't seen my Michael in so many years, but he still means a great deal to me. It truly is the least I can do."

And she hadn't been kidding on the *least* part. Jasmine, it seemed, was rather well off. No matter how hard we tried to refuse, we just couldn't turn her down when she offered us a room in her home.

Over the next few days as we recuperated she came to me again and again, asking for stories about English. I was happy to oblige. I was rather surprised to hear she wasn't married. Apparently the old lion had meant more to her than he'd ever known.

Jasmine spoke to me a great many times, but even more to Rebecca. The tigress may have a sizable staff here at her home, but she seemed to have precious few *friends*. Like most anywhere in the world, money didn't automatically buy you a happy life. The two woman spent more and more time together each day.

Worked well for me. Gave me time to plan out the next step in the journey.

"Rebecca," I said on the forth day as we were waking up and getting ready for breakfast, "How would you feel if I went the rest of the way to Kenya alone?"

I think she just about punched me.

"Tommy! There's no way you're leaving me alone now. Now after all we've been through."

I grinned and leaned forward to kiss her.

"It's not that, Babe. It's just... well, English asked *me* to do this. I shouldn't be long, it's just across the Arabian Sea. I should be able to book passage. And besides, someone needs to hang around in case Jon shows up."

Rebecca wasn't exactly happy about it, but I did at last convince her to stay here, and Jasmine was more than happy to accommodate us. She even found me some Kenyan currency and a phrase book.

It was on my last day in India before boarding a westbound junk that Jasmine came to me.

I was sitting in our bedroom, making some final adjustments to my pack when a soft knock came at the door.

"Yes?" I called.

She stepped through slowly, as if afraid to enter a room in her own home.

"Tommy," she said, voice barely above a whisper, "I have a request to ask of you."

I motioned her to take a seat on the bed beside me.

"Anything," I said.

Pulling a small locket from under her blouse, Jasmine flicked it open to show me a tiny black and white photograph. I had to look hard before I could recognize the two people.

A frighteningly young lion and tiger.

"It's the only photo I have of him," she said, voice yet softer now. "The only thing I have. I... I would ask you for a pinch of his ashes to keep with me. To remember him." She smiled shyly, "And to bury with me when I pass on not so long from now."

I let out a long sigh and smiled.

"For you, my dear lady, anything." I was a poor imitation of English's voice but it worked.

Leaning down to my pack, I pulled out the heavy leather pouch. I opened it to find the perfectly uniform gray ashes.

Reaching a hand in, I took a careful pinch and let it fall into the locket, making sure not to lose a single grain.

Chapter 3: A Royal Welcome



Jasmine had been more than kind. Ever since getting off the boat in China we'd been running scared, just trying to keep our heads above the proverbial water.

Now... well, I didn't quite feel like a king, but first class passage on a real *passenger* ship was a huge step up from anything I'd had so far.

Though I started missing Rebecca almost the moment the docks sunk from sight. It was hard to think of a time I hadn't had her by my side.

The ship may be nice by all comparisons, but I didn't leave my cabin much. I simply sat on by bed and looked out the window, watching the waves pass. And holding my best friend's ashes to my chest.

It was silly, I knew it, but I could almost hear the old lion's voice in my head. Encountering Jasmin has put a whole new spin on the man I'd come to think I'd known so well.

'Sorry, Mate,' he'd say. 'I did tell you about her, didn't I? She was a fine lass. Some days I can't even remember why I left.'

Landing in Kenya was an experience I won't forget as long as I live. It wasn't that it was remarkable in any way, but rather in how it *wasn't*.

We came to dock at Mombasa, a fair sized city. It was no V-town, but it had everything a weary traveler could want.

And that was what surprised me so. I'd had so many images running through my head about Africa, and Kenya in particular. It was almost impossible to reconcile the backwards, hostile place I had in my mind with what I saw before me.

English had never talked about his home much. I suppose that was more the culprit than anything. It left me to come up with wild fantasies of a barren land and an ungrateful people who had driven him out.

Mombasa was, as far as I could tell, a perfectly viable city. Sure it was smaller than V-town,

and it didn't have much of our newer tech, but it was far and beyond what I'd been expecting.

'Sorry, Mate,' English whispered in my ear as I walked down the gangplank. 'Didn't mean to disappoint you. I guess I never really expected you to make it this far.'

I grinned, never looking down at the leather pouch at my waist. "Never underestimate the perseverance of a wolf," I muttered.

He just laughed.

Thankfully, Jasmin thought ahead, even if I hadn't. Not only did I have the phrasebook but she'd also arranged for my cabin to be next to some native speakers from around here. They'd been more than happy to give me some lessons in exchange for a few coins.

Well, first things first, I needed to get a map.

I'd racked my brain during the trip, trying to remember where English had said he was from. *Lake Elementia* was the best I could come up with.

It took me a while to find a cartographer. English was laughing all the way.

'I could have told you if you'd just asked me,' he whispered.

"Yeah, lots of good that does me now. I wasn't exactly *expecting* for you to up and die on me like that."

"Trust me, Mate, I wouldn't have if I'd had the choice."

"Is this the best you've got?" I asked the map seller, stumbling over the alien words.

The man, some breed of wild dog I couldn't recognize, gave me a foul look.

"Tell me where you want to go and I'll find you a map of it."

I sighed. We'd already been through this a dozen times. The only thing keeping him from throwing me out was the steady supply of coins I was giving him for his time.

"Lake Elementia," I repeated. "My friend said he from a village near there, but none of your maps list it."

The man managed to both shrug and growl at the same time.

"I have maps of everything in Kenya. If it's not on my map then it's not worth talking about."

I snorted.

"Fine then," I said. "He might have been referencing a town from before the..." I stopped dead. I didn't have a native word for Cataclysm.

The man picked up quick enough though. "Before the Wrath? Yes, I've maps from back then, but they'll cost you."

I hefted my coin bag. It was losing weight at an alarming speed.

"I'll pay."

That was... okay. I've lost track of the days.

The journey west towards Lake Elementia took a *long* time. And I'm still not there.

The map maker hadn't know where it was English was from, but I had been able to find a reference to a city named Nakuru. All the references were from before the Cataclysm.

I remember English referencing that name. I think.

The lion just chuckled from beside me.

The land around here was far sandier than I was used to. And hotter, oh gods the heat. I think the temperature was a good ten degrees above anything I've ever experienced before. It had been alright on the coast, but rose freakishly fast as I pushed inland.

I'd had to stop a good dozen times to buy more supplies. The money Jasmine had given me was

a god send, but it was nearly gone now. I was saving what was left for an emergency. That, and a cabin back to Mumbi.

As it was now I walked towards every town I saw pop up over the horizon. Folks must not be all that used to foreigners here. Every time I stepped into a new village the children would yell out and come running to get a look at me. Hey, who was I to complain? I was getting good enough at the language here to finally begin to tell stories. It was those stories I traded for food, a bed, and directions.

How bloody hard can it be to find a family of lions around here anyway? I haven't seen a single Panthera Leo since English died. That was once thing I had been expecting... I'd been expecting to see lions thick on the ground here once I got to Kenya. There were lots of species I've never seen before, but no lions.

Although, one thing I did notice was the effects the Cataclysm had here. This was the far side of the word from where the Cataclysm had started, and it was noticeable. There weren't a whole heck of a lot of humans here, but they were closer to one-in-five as opposed to the one in a hundred we had in V-town.

Gods but there are some days I miss Rebecca. I miss how soft she is, how warm, how she always had time to listen to me. How she was always there to cry on.

And I missed her soft hands. Slicing my side open to cut out the cancer was becoming more and more common. When we'd left V-town I hardly had to do it more than once a month. Now it was practically every other day I was having to cut open my own body.

And it was taking longer and longer to heal now. Not to mention the dozens of scars that were left over. The fur on my left abdomen was now a mass of grey streaks, hardly any brown to be seen.

I was about to Lake Elementia when I was waylaid by a storm. What is it with me and storms? They were never a problem before this trip, now they seem to be coming up again and again.

The clouds seemed to burst upon the sky they drove in so fast. I hardly even had a chance to go to ground.

There was no village in sight. The best I could find was a single gnarled tree standing alone in the sandy soil of the Serengeti.

Even then I almost didn't make it. My tail got drenched as I dove for shelter.

Looking out, I watched arcs of lightning shoot across the sky. They light the land up almost like a clear day. Through them I could see a huge, cruel land.

'It's not that bad, Mate,' English whispered. 'It's like most anything else, if you're born into it then it's normal. I was young here, I ran these hills. It's all in what you're used to, Mate. Welcome to my home.'

The next day I finally had the feeling I was getting somewhere.

It wasn't anything in particular, but just a *feeling*. This *felt* like somewhere English would call his kingdom.

Cresting yet another hill, a lake spread out in the distance before me. I smiled as a hot wind caressed my brow. Clearing a spot in the grass, I sat down and unfolded my map.

Well, this *could* be Lake Elementia... I'd passed Lake Naivashi a few days ago and I'd going more or less north-west...

I was just starting to decide I was *here*, wherever *here* is, when my jaw hit the dry, silty dirt.

"What the... ow!"

My hunting instincts kicked in and I tried to roll onto my back to get a look at my attacker but

the heavy pack kept me immobile.

A weight slammed down on me and all of a sudden I was concerned with just breathing.

A deep grunting voice came from behind me. It was speaking in the same language I'd been picking up over the last few weeks.

"Still alive? My blow should have killed anything."

I snorted out a laugh. "Sorry to disappoint you," I said, gasping for breath, "But I'm harder to kill than most."

Counting to three, I waited just long enough for my attacker to let down his defenses before lashing out with a foot.

Bingo.

I couldn't see what I hit, but it felt like I'd just kicked a granite wall. Gods, what was this?

Scrambling forward, I make off downhill on all fours. After a few seconds I worked up enough speed to dig my hands into the dirt and spin around in a half circle. There was just enough momentum left to help me stand upright.

I blinked.

There was too much dust in the air from my escape to see clearly but...

I almost cried out when he stepped into sight.

It... it wasn't English, but he was so, so close that it took everything I had to keep from running forward and tackling him in a bear hug.

Well, he looked like English likely did forty years ago.

The young lion stopped when I stared openly at him. A moment later a growl began to grow deep in his throat.

"Why? Why does your kind keep coming here?" he yelled.

And that broke the illusion. He may look like English, but he didn't sound like him. My old friend's voice had been smooth and cultured, dripping of his careful British facade. Even when the mask slipped English's voice had still been deep and mature.

This young lion was just that. Young. How voice was higher than his large body would suggest, and the rolling, almost sing-song accent that had been all but worn out of English was far more pronounced.

I stumbled, trying to find the right words in the local dialect to word him off, but I was too slow.

Again, my old memories betrayed me.

I knew English too well. I expected the young lion to move like him, to *think* like my old friend.

Having the high ground on me, a mark laid down with a heavy pack, English would have fainted a leap, but come in low instead, sweeping my legs and sending me to the ground while keeping his distance.

This man... he did things I've never even seen before. For starters, he roared.

English *never* roared, except perhaps in pain. It was one of those things that made him a *lion*. And as such it was something he tended not to show off to the world.

I'd never found the roar of any creature all the intimidating, but then again I've never before had the chance to hear one in battle.

My brain was telling me it was nothing but a meaningless display of bravado, but my feet didn't want to listen, they were stuck to the ground as surely as if nails had been driven through my toes.

And that was when his weight crashed into me.

You remember how I said English would *faint* a leap? That's what I expected of this man, too. And I was wrong.

In a heartbeat I had several hundred pounds of lean lion muscle laying atop me. Than a moment

later beneath.

We were rolling down the steep incline of the hill, end over end.

Thankfully the lion hadn't thought his plan through too well. My back was protected by my now worn and stained pack, and *he* was laying atop my chest, cushioning the blows there.

Sometime later the world stopped spinning and we came to a rest at the bottom on the hill among scrub grass and shallow pools of sand.

The lion was laying daze beneath me.

Staggering to my feet, it took everything I had not to empty the contents of my stomach right then and there.

Turning, I saw the lion rise from the corner of my eye.

"You alright, buddy?" I asked off handedly.

And that's when he jumped me a second time. And this time the lights went out.

When next I came to I was bound hand and foot. I almost thought I was back in India until I looked up to see the clear blue skies. And slightly closer to hand, the lion who was rummaging through my pack.

I let out a long breath. Who wants to take a bet I'd just met English's family?

"Well, buddy," I said, speaking to the ashes that were still hanging at my waist, "It looks like we've made it. We've got the royal welcome and everything."

When I spoke the lion's ears pricked. He looked up from my torn and battered backpack to stare at me with his large golden eyes.

"You... speak... english?"

It took me a moment to separate the name of the language from the name of my friend. The answer to both was the same.

"Yes," I said, cocking my head. "You do, too?"

He grimaced and went back to ransacking my pack with a renewed energy.

Well, I have to give the lion genome one thing, strength must run in the family. After digging through my pack and finding little of value save some hard biscuits, the lion stuffed it back together and threw it over his shoulder.

I was almost afraid he was going to leave me here until he reached down with his hand and hefted me, like a scrawny rucksack, over his other shoulder.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but he only grunted and gave me a shake to shut me up.

The lion was a fairly long way from home. It was the morning when we met, and the sun was just kissing the dusty horizon when yet another village appeared in the distance.

Ah, *this* was more of what I'd been expecting of Africa.

He details came out as we moved closer. The village was little more than a small collection of huts and adobes. Everything was mud colored and seemed to be trying to merge back into the earth.

The lion who carried me let out a haunting *hoh-hoh-hoh* call as we neared the town. That brought everyone running.

The feeling wasn't all the different from what I'd experienced upon entering the other villages over my travels. First the children rushed out to see who I was, then the woman looked out from their homes, and finally then men came out to meet us in the street.

The big difference was point of view. I wasn't used to seeing all this laying atop the shoulder of a lion.

The welcome hadn't exactly been a warm one. No one said much to me. They'd spoken to the kid who'd caught me in quick, on-off beats of language that I couldn't quite catch, then tossed me, still bound, into a small outbuilding.

And, by the look of this place's construction, this particular building was a part-time chicken coop, part-time jail.

I was getting good to being hogtied and thrown in jail. Not a talent I'd recommend picking up for wide eyed adventures.

The important thing in times like these, as boring as it sounds, is to stay calm. Panicking, particularly here where my entire journey *requires* me to make friends with the family to use their graveyard, wouldn't do me much good. Sure I've got some experience in escaping jails, but where would I escape to? I'm already here.

They'd stripped me of my pack, but not what little clothing I was wearing, and that includes English's ashes.

"Well, buddy." I said to them somewhere in the distance as I squirmed around on the hard packed dirt to get more comfortable, "It looks like I met the family."

He didn't bother chuckling. 'I never said it would be easy, Mate. If home was so welcoming do you think I ever would have left?'

I drifted in and out of sleep, catching what I could of the sunbeams that filtered through the high, empty pained windows of the building. The day was hot and I was panting. It didn't do me any good to exert myself.

It was that evening, when the light was failing, that I hard footsteps coming my way. You know, I'd just realized how that young lion had managed to get the drop on me. As adapted as my body was to hunting in the forests around V-town, these lions were at home hunting on the savanna. I laughed, my parched throat cracking. Well, they likely looked at me the same way I'd looked at English the first time I'd seen him out and bumbling about in the woods.

A moment later the whisper soft tread of the feet came to a stop outside the door. I could hear the sound of the door jam being pulled free.

And, somewhat more relevant to my immediate interests, I could smell the aroma of food.

A moment later the door opened and I saw the same lion who'd caught me. He was carrying a bucket of water and a plate of what looked like raw meat. Hey, I wasn't about to start complaining.

He paused for a long moment in the doorway and looked at me. When he spoke his words were clearer than they had been when we'd first met, though sounded like he'd learned them without ever hearing them spoken aloud.

"You are from far away," he said slowly, carefully pronouncing each syllable.

"Yes," I replied, rolling into a sitting position and nodding my head.

He looked down to the food in his hands.

"This is for you. The elders will decide what is to be done. Until then you are my responsibility. I was the one to capture you."

I couldn't quite make out the expression on the young lion's face in the failing light. He looked half proud, half sad.

I worked a cautious smile to my lips, careful to keep my teeth covered.

"I'm Tommy," I said. "What's your name?" There hadn't been much conversation on the way here. I didn't even know who he was.

He paused for a long moment. "My name is Gathii," he said, voice stern.

"Nice to meet you, Gathii," I said opening up my smile a bit more. "Do people around here normally assault travelers?"

He set the food and water down on the dirt in front me. It may be impolite, but I didn't waste a moment before dipping my head forward to take a lap from the water bucket, though I could only hope he'd untie for to eat the meat.

The lion kept a fair distance from me, almost as if afraid to come too close – odd considering I'd made the journey to the village on his shoulder.

"We... do not welcome strangers. This is a king-less kingdom. We have chosen to live apart. We are the only of our type we know."

I paused in my drinking.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask. Was this really English's home? Was *he* their lost king?

But there was something about the way the kid said *king* that made it plain the word was loaded. There was a reverence there, but also a fear. I may not be the sharpest claw, but I didn't want to tip my hand too soon.

Gathii left soon after, never untying me. That made for a difficult dinner. Sure real wolves can eat without hands, but that's not a skill I've had need to develop before.

It wasn't until the next evening I saw him again. It wasn't until then I saw *anyone*. Everyone else in the village seemed to be keeping well away from my little cell.

"So what are they going to do with me?" I asked.

Gathii shrugged. "As with so much, they do not know. You are my responsibility. I must fed you, I must look after you. You are my burden. Perhaps you will be traded off next time we need medicine from the outsiders."

Wonderful.

The next night he came again, but this time he tarried longer.

"Where is it you are from Tommy?" he asked. His english was getting better by the day.

I smiled.

"About as far away as you can get, kid. I doubt you've ever heard of North America?"

He narrowed his eyes for a moment and then nodded. "Yes. It is far to the east. Or... it is far to the west as well."

I laughed. "I'm impressed. That's where I'm from. From a city called V-town."

It wasn't long after that Gathii left, but there was a difference this time. I could hear him running as fast as his feet could carry him.

"Tommy?" the next night he was back. This time he carried more food and water than normal. He also carried a stack of old, leather bound books under one arm.

I nearly began drooling the moment I saw those books, never mind the food.

"Tommy, I'd like you to help me read these."

I was more than happy to oblige.

It wasn't many days after that Gathii cut the bonds, on my hands at least.

The books were exquisite. Old, sure, but they were text books, written in British english. I had the feeling these were the same books English himself had been raised on by his mother.

The days went by. I've been for here three weeks at least. Yesterday Gathii cut the last of my bonds. He even managed to bring me back my backpack a few days ago. I was still stuck in this little

hut, but other than that things were looking up.

And I have to say, Gathii was an impressive student.

He'd asked me to work through every book he had. We've covered everything from pre-Cataclysim geography to language and even a smattering of science.

He'd just arrived again with my nightly ration of water and meat when the sat back on his haunches and asked me, "Why did you come here, Tommy? You're not simply a traveler. No one, even the most lost tourist could ever find themselves in our kingdom of sand and ruins."

I let out a long sigh. It had taken a lot of careful dancing around the issue to keep English a secret. I'd had to deflect questions about the ashes a dozen times over.

I leaned back against the wall behind me and cracked my spine.

"Gathii, you're right. I came here for a reason." Reaching out, I picked up the leather pouch. "I had a good friend back in V-town. His last request was that I take him home."

The cat stood there for a moment, trying to puzzle out my words.

"Your friend was to the east of here? That was the way you were heading."

I laughed softly.

"No, kid. Far as I can tell he was from right here. I called him English, but you might know him as Micheal Jones."

For just a moment he stood there, staring at me. I could see him working it through in his head.

"No," he said at last, his voice just a whisper. "The king is gone. He said he would never return."

The silence stretched out between us for a dozen heartbeats, then the young lion sprung to his feet.

He said something, but it was in a language I couldn't understand.

Then he was gone. He left his precious books behind, though he didn't forget to bar the door.

Well, *that* could have gone better.

Last I'd seen of anyone was two days ago. My food was gone, and my water was running distressingly low despite my rationing.

There had been a great commotion outside once Gathii run off. Then... nothing. I haven't seen or heard a body since then. If they left me alone much longer I'd have to try and break out.

I had my backpack loaded and a mud brick pried from the wall. I was only a couple of minutes from getting ready to bash the door down when I heard a set of footsteps in the dirt.

Well, that was unusual. All the lions around here naturally walked all but silently. I normally had to strain my ears to hear them at all, yet this one was plain as day.

There was a heavy scrape as the bar was pulled from the door.

"Come out, Tommy," Gathii called. "You are free to leave."

Shrugging on my pack, and none to discretely keeping my brick in hand, I stepped out into the dark night. The young lion was the only person in sight.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

The kid shrugged. "They're waiting for you to take him away," he said.

I cocked my head. The lion motioned me on, so I followed him.

"Michael Jones," Gathii continued. "His name is... remembered here. The was the son of a foreigner and the mad king."

"Singa," I interjected.

The cat jumped like I'd slapped him.

"We do not use his name, Tommy. To do so would be to welcome back the madness." There

was a pause as we continued on. “The mad king had many children with his many wives, but it was the one you know as *English* who finally stood against him. We all saw the king's madness grow to overtake his mind, but it was your friend who put an end to his reign.”

“Then he left, Tommy. None of us knew why at the time, but the prince became king, and he abandoned his people. You are not one of us, Tommy. You do not understand what it is for a pride to be without its king. It was long ago, but we remember it. We were directionless, without identity. For many months we could not forgive him for abandoning us. Then we discovered why.”

“We thought the madness gone with the death of Singa, but we were not so fortunate. The madness that took our king had already spread its seeds deep into our people. Before the year was out the signs of madness were seen in the younger men.”

He stopped at the crest of a hill, taking a deep breath and looking at me.

“Tommy, we have never been a large people. Even at our height we were less than five-hundred. Four-hundred of those were women. The madness of Singa spread through his line, and *all* of the tribe's younger generation were of his line. More than ninety percent of they male cubs began to show signs of the madness as they grew older. I am one of the few that has not. I... I have but five remaining brothers.”

The lion pointed out into the darkness. Just at the edge of my vision I thought I could see a mass of huddled people off in the distance.

“My family, Tommy. I would do anything to protect them.”

My skin went cold.

“And I will,” he continued. “I have always been a suspect case for the madness. My... my obsession with the books is not considered healthy. As a result I have been chosen to take you and our king from the village.”

I let out a breath.

“So you'll escort me back to the coast?” I asked.

He shook his head as he began walking again. “No, Tommy. I am to ensure you *never* return. I have been given that as my... task. The result of the task is that I shall not return either.”

I wasn't sure where Gathii led me. The night was too dark to see, and I didn't know where I was in any event, but the lion's paws never faltered.

“Here, Tommy,” he said after we'd been walking a good half hour.

At first I didn't see anything. We were in a scrubby patch of dirt like any other.

Then the clouds shifted and I saw the moonlight fall on something. A gravestone.

It was small and hastily carved in a bit of rock. Likely etched by a claw.

Bending down, I tried to read the text. It was in two languages, one of them was English.

‘To my beloved mother. May you rest peacefully even if you are to never see your green hills of home again’.

I let out a sigh and looked at the ashes I'd brought so far.

‘Well, Mate,’ he whispered, ‘We made it.’

I didn't do anything more that night save sit and wait. It didn't feel proper to do this with the moon above us.

When the sun came it welcomed a hot and calm day. The perfect day for a funeral.

Taking out the leather pouch once more in my hands, I looked down at it. It was no fine work, simply what they'd given me back at the hospital, but yet it had survived all this way.

“So is this it, English?” I asked.

There was no response, not even the ghost of a whisper.

Taking another look at the grave site, I noticed there was not one mound here, but two.

"Who's the other body?" I asked.

The lion took a deep breath, as if steeling himself for the word. "King Singa. He had brought a great curse down upon us, but we could not leave his body to rot."

I shrugged. So be it.

Digging with my hands into the sandy soil, I made a small hole in the earth next to English's mother. I hadn't a full body to bury, so it wasn't hard.

Setting the pouch gently into the hole, I couldn't step back. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"Gods, English," I whispered, "Why did you have to die and leave us?"

A heavy paw set gently on my shoulder.

"He has done everything he could, my friend," Gathii whispered. "He saved both our lands from madness."

At that point, I'll admit, I began bawling.

It was a good hour before I could work up the strength to fill in the hole, sealing English away forever in the red soil.

I wanted to hear his whisper on the wind, I *needed* him to tell me he was at peace now, but there was nothing.

At long last I had the strength to stand. Adjusting the pack on my back, I turned east.

"Come on, Gathii," I said. "I'm going home."

Chapter 9: Going Home Again



I...I don't remember hiking being this hard.

Gathii had been good to his word. He was charged with making sure I never returned to the village, and he would die before he failed.

The fact the mission had been nothing more than a cover for his own banishment hung heavy over him. He did everything he could to look brave and strong whenever I glanced his way, but I could see he was little more than a scared kid.

My lungs were burning and the stitch in my side felt like it was going to tare me to pieces when I called a halt the next afternoon.

Taking a long draw from my canteen, I looked out at the land spread out around us. Well, it certainly wasn't the lush forests of British Columbia.

Gathii sat down next to me. He hadn't said much since the funeral.

"So," I said, trying to strike up a conversation, "How old are you?"

I really didn't know much about the lion. We'd spent weeks talking, but it had always been him asking questions. He'd a keen mind and a curiosity about the outside world. I'd had to fight for everything I'd learned about him or his village.

"Nineteen," he said after a pause. "I've been a man for five years."

I just about choked on my drink. The kid was younger than I had been when *I'd* met English. Gods but I felt old.

"Is this your first time away from your village?" I asked.

She shook his head, sending his mane rustling.

"No. I am one of the few who were willing to venture to the outside world to trade. A little too willing it seems. I've always wanted to see what was on those maps. This is my chance to find out."

He smiled, but the expression was nervous and unsure.

"Don't worry, kid," I said, patting him on the shoulder. "As I see it I own you one. Or at least I

more than likely owe English one, and you're the closest person I can pay it too. I may be no expert, but we'll get you going."

It quickly became clear the Gathii wasn't kidding, he knew the world well around here. And that was good for me, as things were going I wasn't going to be able to keep at the trail long. I'd been getting pretty rough when I'd arrived at English's village. Now every step was a fight.

Not to mention that I was having to sneak off every night to keep the cancer at bay.

I can't quite put words to it, but there was just no way I wanted Gathii to see just how bad a way I was in. The way the kid looked at me after I told him my stories was... well, let's just be glad English wasn't still alive. The kid would likely think him next to a god.

"So where are we going?" I asked. This wasn't the way I'd gotten here.

"Not much further, Tommy," he said. "You said you wanted to journey to Mombasa? Nairobi is the city closest to us, another three days journey. From there..." he averted his eyes from me. "We should be able to find transport to Mombasa."

When the kid said the word 'Mombasa' he would look about nervously.

"I'm taking it you've never been that far before?"

His lip curled up in a faint smile.

"If I'd been asked before you arrived I would have said that no member of my village had ever journeyed further than Nairobi. I thought myself the most traveled of my family. It seems I was wrong."

I laughed. "Yeah, you've got a bit of a job ahead of you to beat English's record. Come on, let's get going."

Even with my slow pace Gathii was just about right on, we arrived in Nairobi three days later. It was likely the largest city in the county.

And as we were limping down its crowded streets I was finally able to put a finger on what was *wrong*.

Everything was normal.

That may sound like an odd thing to say, but it's true. I'd just put my best friend, and one of the greatest men I've ever known, to rest and the world... just went on.

Thankfully, Gathii had taken some coins from his village to shore up my dwindling supply. It bought us a room for the night and passage on a horse drawn caravan east, all the way to Mombasa.

Gods... gods, I feel so *hot*.

I wish... I just wish Rebecca was here right now.

I'd only had to cut myself open the day before yesterday, but yet again I was all but too weak to walk.

"Are you alright, Tommy?" Gathii asked, sitting beside me in the back of one of the covered wagons. He handed me a water skin that I pressed away.

"I'll make it," I wheased out. "I'm just an old wolf. That's all."

"Please, Tommy," Gathii whispered, leaning closer, "Tell me what it is that plagues you. Many of the traders are afraid of coming near me, much less you. They fear you've been struck with some disease and that they may contact it."

I worked up a smile. Yeah, fat chance of that.

"Tell them not to worry, kid. What I've got isn't catching." I gave him a quick explanation of my cancer. It isn't as easy as it sounds as the lion had never encountered even the *idea* of cancer before, likely so much as regeneration.

When I got to the end of my little medical lesson he just nodded.

“So that is why you came,” he said.

“Heh?” The pain had lessened enough that I was able to sit up again.

“You feared your own life would end before you put your friend to rest. You wished to die without debt. Most... honorable.”

I grinned. “Yeah, sure. We'll go with that. I owe a lot of things to a lot of people, but English was a score I had to settle personally.”

The journey went on. I didn't get any better, but at least I didn't get much worse. Riding in the back of the wagon saved me the effort of walking and that seemed to help sooth my body some.

You don't get to see much from the back of a wagon, but what I did was still beautiful. That was a different landscape than what I'd seen when I'd walked to the north.

Heh. With a country like this I had to ask myself why English had bothered to run so far.

The caravan was quick. It only took us about a week and a half to get to Mombasa. I never thought I'd be so happy to smell the salty sea air again. It smelled like home.

Only problem, *home* was still more than a couple thousand kilometers away.

Pinching what we coins we had left, Gathii and I searched out a ship headed to Mumbai. I'd managed to arrive in Kenya in style, in a nice cabin. The two of us were headed back on little better than a garbage scow, wedged into the tightest little berth they could find. And that was about the point I couldn't slink away and deal with my cancer in privacy.

“It is a gift from the gods,” Gathii whispered as he watched my side heal.

I wasn't thinking of it quite so highly these days. When this had all started I'd been able to heal from my self inflicted wound in little under a minute. Now it was taking over twenty.

I lay on my back, panting as spasms of pain rocked me while my side healed. “Something like that, kid,” I said. “Just be careful with gifts from the gods. They always seem to be double sided.”

He nodded wisely and went back to watching.

India couldn't come into sight soon enough.

I was well past embarrassment now. I asked Gathii straight out if he would carry me down the gangplank. I could hardly walk.

And that was how we arrived in India. Gathii was wearing my backpack, carrying my limp and withered body in his arms. He looked around at the bustling, modern city of Mumbai like it was something completely new to him.

Much like I suppose English had when he'd first arrived here.

I would have sent Gathii on alone to find Rebecca, but I was afraid what her – and more to the point Jasmine's – reaction would be. The kid was a near carbon copy of English. I didn't want people thinking I'd just discovered reincarnation.

It took us a good many hours to press our way through the crowds of people in the street, but at long last we arrived at the tall wrought iron gate of Jasmine's manor.

Now all I had to do was convince the guards to let us in.

Sure then men at the gate had seen me a great many times when I'd been here before, but that had been when I'd been standing upright. As it was now I was alarmed to note my beautiful brown coat had gone almost completely grey and I must have lost a good thirty pounds.

And that's saying something as I've never been above one-fifty in my life.

The problem solved itself soon enough when I heard the sound of running feet.

"Tommy?" Her voice was breathless, "Is that you?"

A moment later the gate was thrown open and I was nearly crushed in Rebecca's arms.

I don't think I've felt this good in weeks.

"Hey, Babe," I whispered out.

I had to do some quick talking to explain Gathii, but at long last we were sitting in Jasmine's home again, as safe and sound as one could hope for.

Jasmine just about wept openly when she first saw Gathii. And I'd taken pains to warn her first.

Gathii, on the other hand, looked small and frightened. Nairobi was a fair city, but it was nothing to Mumbi. This was all new to him.

Plus, I doubt he'd ever been offered tea and clotted cream scones before.

"But what of you, Tommy?" Jasmine asked. "The journey has taken much out of you."

I sighed and used what little strength I had left to sit up. Rebecca reached discretely out to steady me.

"I'll make it," I said. "I'm going home."

She smiled. "In that, I can believe you. Please, let me help how I can. You have brought me back my beloved, if only in death, then brought me news that his line still continues. It is the least I can do to book all four of you passage back home as quickly as possible."

I may be weak, but I can still cock my head.

"Four of us?"

Rebecca wrapped her arms around me. "Jon showed up a couple of weeks ago," she said.

About an hour later there was a sharp, perfectly measured knock at the door. A moment later a familiar German Sheppard walked in.

And stopped dead in his tracks when he not only saw me, but Gathii.

I didn't think I've *ever* seen Jon with his mouth hanging open. Too bad I don't have a camera.

Another round of explanations later and Jon was seated next to me, retelling how he'd made it Mumbai.

"It is not as complex as you would think, Tommy," he said. "The bounty hunters who chased us were competent, but not exceptional. I was able to draw them away from you with little difficulty."

"The problem," he continued, "Was their sheer numbers. As predicted they had the pass well guarded. I made a point of fighting my way as far as I could without causing any true damage. Then, when I was sure you two had enough time to properly escape, I surrendered."

"You what?" I didn't think I had enough power left to sit up, but apparently I could still all but bolt to my feet.

He smiled. "You needn't worry, Tommy. They were sent to capture us, not kill. I told them I would not struggle if they let you go."

"You can likely guess my journey from there. I was marched back east. However," he said, smiling, "I did not plan to go as far as they desired. Thankfully, they did not take me back to Nanning. Rather I was taken north to Qiandongnan." A smile crept to his lips. "That served my needs well."

"What I needed was a large city. A center of government. What I needed was somewhere I could contact the local constabulary."

I cocked my head. "You're kidding."

He grinned. "Not a all. I've no experience whatsoever with the Chinese police. But, as you

might say, we are all alike – on some level.”

“I simply waited until we were passing by a formation of police officer, then began making a scene. I acted as so that they no choice but to arrest me. As I expected, what the bounty hunters was doing was illegal.”

“Bounty hunting in China is, in broad strokes, the same as in V-town. The government puts outs contracts, the bounty hunters fulfill them. They are not empowered to simply abduct anyone they wish. It took some time, but I was able to get my story across while I sat in jail.”

He chuckled slightly. “It may surprise you, Tommy, but the Chinese do not use German Sheppard like I for their policing, but they are still primarily dogs. Between my training and my papers I was able to convince them of my authenticity in short order.”

“It was only a matter of time before I was free, and the bounty hunters who had chased us found themselves safely behind bars.”

The next two weeks passed pleasantly enough. Jasmine was good to her word. She was more than kind, and without her I likely would have wasted away.

It took time to arrange for passage back to V-town, and she used those days to call in some of the best doctors she could find. My cancer was still growing unchecked saved for Rebecca's nimble fingers with a knife.

When the doctors first arrived they were all but blown away by my – even greatly reduced – regeneration. India it seems has many things, but I am still an oddity even here.

Many rounds of pills later – and a few flashes of radiation – and I could at least walk again. I wouldn't be winning any sprints, but I could at least be *me* for a little while longer yet.

The downside, as the docs were careful to explain, was that this was a temporary reprieve. I was not healed, only given a brief moment of grace.

The day finally came for us to leave India. Jasmine had arranged for a ship to take us as far as Japan. It was a passenger liner. And a nice one. I only wished we'd had it on the way in.

I was ridiculously proud of myself when I was able to walk up the gangplank no more than holding hands with Rebecca.

Standing on deck, I turned to look at Jasmine and Gathii. They were still both standing on the dock. The tigress was whispering something in the young lion's ear.

And I'm pretty sure I could see the kid blush under his mane as he joined us.

The voyage was slow and gentle. The waters of the bay of Bengal all but rocking me to sleep as I lay stretched out on a deck chair in the sun.

Rebecca was to one side of me and Jon the other. It was only a pity I couldn't work on my tan.

“So, Wolfy,” Rebecca whispered, making me open my eyes again, “Is that it then? English has been laid to rest?”

I smiled and rolled slowly onto my back. “Yeah, Babe,” I said. My voice was rougher than I wanted on account of all the drugs. “I think Michael Jones has finally gone home again. I can't say if he's ever found peace, but he got his last request. And,” I grinned, “It looks like we've started up a whole new generation.” I sat up ever so slightly to see Gathii where he stood, leaning on the railing at the bow of the ship, looking out towards the horizon. “I think we should introduce him to Ging and Liz when we get back.”

Glancing over to my other side, I watched Jon for a moment. He had his reading glasses firmly back in place and was writing a report of one type or another. All he was missing was a uniform and he could just as well be back on duty.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He glanced up at me. “My reports, of course. I’ve been alarmingly lax in my paperwork during this trip.”

I just laughed.

It was later that night I was alone in my cabin. Everyone else was off having dinner, but I just couldn’t stomach the thought of food. The drugs were helping, but my gut still burned something fierce.

We had a small writing desk in our cabin. I was sitting there now, rooting through my pack that sat propped up next to me.

It has to be here somewhere.

And there it was. It had been sitting in the bottom of my pack since we’d left V-town. I’d hardly taken it out once.

My journal.

I lifted out the battered and scuffed leather bound book. Opening it up, I could see my entire life spread out before me.

The first pages were some of my earliest letters put to paper, crude and rough. They tightened up quickly enough. I flipped though to some pages about a third of the way though. There was an entry here from just days before I met English.

I smiled.

Moving on, I found the entries from our trip to Edmonton. And later yet from my time as mayor.

I almost cried when I found The entry from our wedding. I did burst into tears when I found the one from Ging and Liz’s birth.

Wiping my nose, I searched the room until I found an old, blunt pencil. I sharpened it with a claw.

Jon had reminded me. I’d better start writing this trip down.

It was only when I finished the entry that I realized I was almost out of space in my journal. I only had a single page left. I’d have to buy a new one when I got back to V-town.

Our ship made decent time. It wasn’t long before we were in the straights of Malaysia. We made dock at Kuala Lumpur to take on supplies.

None of us got off the ship, even though many of the other passengers did. We’d had enough adventure on this voyage, none of us wanted to tempt fate and get left behind.

Rebecca and I were down in our cabin when we heard a loud crash come from above deck.

Say old habits die hard, but we were both scrambling for the door before we could even think. Just a lot slower than we used to.

Do people still qualify as pirates if they’re attacking a ship in dock?

By the time we staggered on deck there had to be a good half dozen men storming up the gangplank. They’d already overwhelmed the skeleton crew left on the ship and were corralling the passengers off to one end of the deck.

“Don’t even think of it, Wolfy,” Rebecca whispered as she pulled me off with the rest of the passengers. “You’re not as young as you used to be.”

I fought up a smile. “None of us are, Babe.”

A moment later I felt someone bump into my side. A glance over and I saw Jon standing there. Well, all that was great, but where in the Gods’ names was Gathii?

“Alright, people,” one of the pirates shouted, raising a gun, “We’re going to do this nice and

easy. You're going to give us all your valuables in this sack here, then you're going to stay up on deck while we take a look-see in your cabins. Anyone who acts up gets shot, got it?"

I was rather impressed by the man's english.

Rebecca with a hand on one of my shoulders and Jon with a hand on the other we... just... stood there.

"Jon," I whispered, "You're just going to wait here and let this happen?"

He shrugged and whispered back. "I am out of my jurisdiction, Tommy. It is not my place to intervene."

I could hear the strain in the dog's voice.

The pirates were fast, it didn't take them long to get to us.

Jon and I were pretty straight forward, neither of us had anything in our hands, and no clothing to conceal anything.

Rebecca.

"Turn it out, lady," one of them said, coming forward.

Before I even knew it I had taken a step between them, blocking the man's way. A growl was growing in my throat.

"Oh! So we've got a brave little dog over here do we? Looks like you've already been hit with the mange. Get out of my way, mongrel."

I didn't budge. The growl in my throat just grew louder.

The man, I only noticed now he was a dingo of some sort, raised a knife.

"Get out of the way, mongrel or I'll slice you."

I couldn't help the morbid smile that slipped to my lips.

"With a butter knife like that?" I said. "I've fought a dozen men, better than you, at once."

And it was true. Under other conditions, twenty years ago, with English by my side, I wouldn't have hesitated to take them on.

Now...

From somewhere off in the distance I heard a scream. It didn't sound like a passenger.

A moment later it was followed by a roar.

The thug holding a knife to my nose turned towards the sound. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Lunging to the side, in perfect time with Rebecca, I shot one of my hands up, my claws coming in solid contact with the soft underside of the thug's wrist. A moment later I heard a heavy *clink* as the knife dropped to the ground.

Then bugger all broke lose.

Okay, I have to explain this some.

I'm a professional. A professional hunter, a professional bounty hunter. I've done stuff like this for a living for years. I must have bounty hunted for longer than almost anyone else in V-town save English.

There are certain things you make sure of before you start taking someone down. One of the most basic is *you get all the civilians out of the way*.

It may not sound like much, but there were a good twenty passengers up here, not to mention another two or three crew. Plus the half dozen pirates themselves.

That made of a very crowded, very confusing, deck.

Someone pushed past me to try and escape and very nearly sent me overboard. It was only Rebecca's quick hands that kept me on this side of the railing.

"Come on," I said, pressing forward. "We have to make sure no one gets hurt."

Glancing down, I wasn't too concerned about the one man I'd disarmed. Jon had struck him and

the dingo was out cold on the deck.

There was another scream from the general direction of the pirates. Now I *knew* who it was. I'd been around English long enough to know a *dear gods, there's a lion trying to eat me* scream.

I smiled grimly.

About ten seconds later and we'd pushed our way to the main group of pirates. There were three of them still standing. Two were armed with knives, and the boss was waving his gun around.

"Get back or I'll shoot!" he screamed.

Standing at the far end of the deck I sat Gathii. He was kneeling behind two prone pirates. The pirates weren't moving.

"Rebecca the left, Jon the right," I whispered. "I'll take the one with the gun."

"But..." I never did figure out who said that. I was already putting everything I had left into one final spring.

As far as my attacks have gone, this one was nothing in particular. I made a lunge though the air, clearing the distance between me and the pirate boss in no more than a heartbeat.

But, on a more personal scale, I couldn't help but be proud. My side felt like it was about to split open and I was already short of breath, but I was still a Taggert.

I landed on the man with an ooph. He hadn't seen me coming, and I wasn't in any condition to cushion the landing.

My motions were slow and weak, but I still fought with him for control of the gun.

And I nearly had it when the lights went out.

A moment later I came too, my ears ringing and my jaw aching.

I spat out a tooth.

Opening my eyes, I saw the pirate standing. He was raising the gun, aiming at something I couldn't see.

I heard a roar. It was growing louder.

"Ah, bugger."

Reaching up, I put every last ounce of strength I had into my arms.

Reaching out, I grabbed the gun and pulled it off target.

Only one problem. I could only pull it down.

A single bang left my ears ringing, then my gut erupted in a whole new world of pain.

I wasn't sure how long I was out, but it couldn't have been that long. When I next came to I could hear screaming and people running.

Also, far in the distance, I could hear sirens.

"Tommy! Tommy, talk to me!"

"Hey, Babe," I whispered.

A moment later I felt her arms close tightly around me. Glancing down, I could see she was staining herself in my blood.

"So," I asked, fighting for breath that simply didn't seem to want to come, "How bad is it?"

Jon stepped into my vision from the wavy edges.

"I think we had best get you to the local hospital. Now."

One last thing I saw before blacking out again was an image of a lion running towards me. He looked to be in a panic. I wonder why?

Gods, what hit me?

When I woke again I couldn't even tell I'd opened my eyes, everything was black. The only thing telling me I was still in this world was the gentle rocking of the room. We had to be on a ship.

“Hello?” I tried to call out but my words were little more than a soft mew. When I tried to move it felt like my bones were made of water.

It's dark. I can't move. And I'm all alone.

I'm not ashamed to say I cried.

I'm not sure how long it was before a sound reached me in through the darkness. I could hear footsteps.

“Hello?” I called again. My voice was no stronger.

The footsteps quickened.

It felt like my brain exploded when someone opened the door. Even the dull light from the hallway seemed enough to burn. And then they turned on the lights.

I hadn't been able to say much so far, but I did cry out at that.

“Tommy?”

My eyes were screwed shut to lessen the pain, but I'd know that voice anywhere.

“Babe...” I whispered.

Another two days and I was no better, but at least they decided I could sit up now.

That was the first chance I got to look at my chest. Gods but I was a mess.

I remember thinking long ago, when I'd nearly lost my leg, how cruel a world it must be to live without regeneration. Now it looks like I've been sent to live there permanently, dropping in head first.

“You're a foolish wolf, Tommy,” Rebecca whispered into my ear as she changed my dressings.

“A brave one, but foolish.”

I managed to smile. “Hey, Babe,” I said, “After a lifetime with me, what else would you expect?”

She'd told me that I'd managed to save Gathii from being shot, but only managed to take the bullet myself. And right on top of my cancer.

“What?” I'd asked, “Wouldn't that be the best place?”

She shaken her head.

“Tommy, we don't have any doctors here to treat you. We were able to get them to patch up the bullet wound in Malaysia, but the cancer was ripped apart. Now it's spreading.”

I'd sat there for a long moment after she said that.

My cancer had been somewhat controllable as long as it stayed in once place, as long as it could be cut out.

Putting all the strength I had left, I raised one arm from beneath the blanket they had me under.

There was little to it but fur and bone.

Another week... or something close to it, I can't tell going in and out of sleep these days, and Rebecca, Jon, and Gathii had come to my room. That was unusual as there was hardly enough space in the infirmary for even one visitor.

“Tommy,” Rebecca said, “We're almost home.”

It hurt to smile now, but I did anyway.

“Will you take me up on deck?”

There was a single wheelchair on the ship, and I was now in possession of it. I could feel every bump in the floor and every panel of wood on the deck as we slowly moved forward.

We were just behind the railing at the very bow of the ship. I knew this place. We were in Active Channel. We'd left this way on the *Sojourn*.

And there, off in the blue distance, just peeking above the horizon, were the towers of V-town. They were grander and more magnificent than I remembered.

Chapter 10: Life Is What we Leave Behind



I sat there in the wheelchair for the hours it took us to come to dock.

“Are you ready, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked from beside me. She'd never left my side as I sat here.

“Yeah, Babe,” I said. My voice was stronger now. “I'm ready.”

She reached for the handles of the wheelchair, but I waved her off.

“No,” I said, shrugging the blanket from me. “I will not return in disgrace.”

It took what little I had left, but I rose from the chair. Holding the railing before me in a death's grip, I slowly straightened.

And had to hold back a cry.

“I'm ready, Babe,” I said though clenched teeth. “Let's go home.”

Walking down the gangplank, we'd waited until everyone else had disembarked. That meant I had all the time I needed.

Jon and Rebecca by my side and Gathii standing behind, I walked sedately down to once again set claw on solid ground. I never tripped, never swayed, never clung for the rail.

I was home.

There was a small crowd standing before us. How they'd gotten here I had no idea.

“Dad!”

If Jon hadn't taken a firm hand on my shoulder I would ended up a crumpled heap as Ging and Liz crashed into me.

“Hey,” was all I was able to get out. “I'm glad to see you too.”

Well, I'm now likely of the few people in V-town who can say they've ridden in our once and only ambulance *twice*. Thankfully, this time the sirens weren't blaring. There was a dalmatian doctor in the back with me. I may hate the smell of antiseptic, but right now even it was welcoming.

I was once again bound for V-town general.

“So this is your city, Tommy?” Gathii said from his chair behind my bed. “It is very nice.”

I smiled. The action was less difficult now that the doctors had me hooked up to enough painkillers to tranquilize a horse.

“You’ve been given the grand tour?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, your son and daughter have been very accommodating. They’ve wanted to know everything about your time in my village.”

I would have laughed, but I *knew* that would hurt.

“I am concerned, Tommy,” he said, “I... my mission was to prevent you from returning. It is obvious you will never do that. I don’t know what to do now.”

I reached out and put a too-thin, too-frail hand on his.

“There’s a company called Storm Front,” I said. “You should check them out. I’m sure they’d be more than happy to hire you.”

When I woke again I could smell flowers. They were almost enough to cover the pervasive, soul sucking stench of the hospital.

When I opened my eyes I could just as well have said I was in a greenhouse. Every flat surface in the room was covered thick with vases and cups of water. I could hardly see the walls through the riot of colors.

And on my chest rested a small red box.

“You’re awake.”

I glanced over to see Rebecca sitting on a chair beside me. Is it wrong that my first thought was ‘she looks old’?

Well, it was true. There were rings under her eyes, wrinkles on her cheeks, and more grey in her hair than I remembered. Though she was still dressed in the red leather jacket I so always thought of her in.

I smiled and fought to sit up. I failed.

“Hi, Babe,” I said. My throat was rough.

She reached out to the little box on my chest, opening it.

“We had this specialty made for you, Tommy. I remembered once you said you’d like it. And,” she fought to work up a smile that looked fake even to me, “I don’t think you need any more flowers.”

My nose started twitching immediately.

There was only a single thing in the box. It was a long strip of dried meat, dipped in something brown.

“Chocolate venison,” she said.

I smiled.

“So,” I said, having to pause for breath between almost every word, “How goes the government, Max?”

The oni sat in a free chair next to Rebecca. He was just the latest in a long, long line of people come to see me.

I suppose that was what *really* brought me to understand I would never be walking out of this room. Everyone I knew was coming here, in single file, dressed in their finest black suits, to say goodbye.

Gods but it was morbid.

“So what will happen now?” Max asked. “In just one year we’re not only losing English, but you as well. It... it’s like we’re losing our royalty.”

I sputtered and coughed, then at last worked up a laugh. It hurt like a bugger, but I laughed. Straight from my belly.

“Man,” I said, trying to suck in a breath, “That’s the best joke I’ve heard in a long, long time.”

“Hey, Babe,” I whispered, “Did they bring my pack in here with me?”

I heard a rustling, but I couldn’t work up the energy to open my eyes.

“It’s here, Tommy. What do you want?”

“My journal.”

A few seconds later I felt a weight come gently down on my hands. It was all I could do to close my hands around the worn leather.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes.

Opening the book to its final page, I looked at the space left. There wasn’t much.

“Pencil?”

She pressed one into my hand.

I smiled.

My hand was shaking, but I ever so slowly wrote. I didn’t quite fill the rest of the paper, but it was close enough.

I wrote only two words.

The End.

Setting the book and pencil softly on my chest, I laid back.

“Well, Babe,” I said, “It’s been a nice run, hasn’t it? I’m surprised I even made it to... how old am I anyway?”

From out in the hallway I could hear two sets of footsteps coming my way. I’d know Ging and Liz anywhere.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath.

The black at the corners of my vision was growing, something greater than mere darkness.

“Hey, Babe,” I whispered, “Do me a favor. Give the kids my journal.”

wwwolf

Author's Note

Hi everyone,

Well, this is a rather sombre occasion. For the longest time I thought I'd never get to this day, *The Hunters* is complete. It all ends where it all began, this particular chapter of my life is closed.

For those of you in the know, I posted the first chapter of *The Hunters* the same day I finished writing *The Mourner*. It was a form of closure for me. Unable to find any buyers for my books I posted the stories online in an effort to ensure that someone – anyone – would read them, to make sure the characters wouldn't die with me.

I made myself a promise that day. I vowed that I wouldn't stop writing, wouldn't stop badgering agents and hounding publishers, wouldn't give up on the dream until I had the complete *Hunters* series posted. I made a deal with myself to keep writing until Tommy's story was done, to not give up on my goal of becoming a published author until my first and favourite character was cold in the ground.

Well, this is that day.

Yeah, I'm being over dramatic. It's not that bad, I've still got a couple final tricks up my sleeve for getting published, but right now the chances are looking slimmer than a Police Dog's paunch. I really did think that I had what it takes, both the talent and the tenacity, but at some point you have to look around and ask just where the last decade has taken me. I've yet to see my name in print and my fingers are getting darn tired.

So why am I telling you all this? Long story short, don't expect to see too many more posts from me in the foreseeable future. I've now posted all my furry material (with one major exception!), and I'm not sure if I'll be writing much more right away.

It's not all doom-and-gloom though. This is no rage quit, and I'm not pulling an "I'm leaving the fandom forever!" here. I just need to figure out the way forward. For all the bad stereotypes of the community I've made some great friends here. Two-hundred posts and I haven't had a single piece of negative feedback. A huge thank-you to everyone who's commented and chatted with me, not to mention those who have helped me edit and improve my work. It's been absolutely great meeting you all.

So, what does the future hold for this world-weary-wolf? (A... wwwolf, if you will. Now you at last know the secret of what it stands for!) Good question. If anyone reading this has any contacts in the publishing industry, I'd love to talk to you. And, on a related note, there's a good chance I'll be opening myself up for commissions. I'm not too sure how much interest there will be in commissioning me, so we'll take it one step at a time.

TLDNR Version: Thank-you all for reading, I'm taking a break for a while, and we'll see what the future holds.

So, from Tommy, Rebecca, English, Jon, Max, Griss, Aggy, Graham, Brown, Amstys, Molly, Crit, James, Forty-Two, Richard, Mary, Trevor, Jonathan, Llyal, Sixty, Forty-One, Archer, Forty-Seven, Robert, Alice, Ophois, Johnathan, Emma, Manson, and me... wwwolf, thank-you for hearing us out.