

The Lion Plague

By wwolf

“Are you okay, buddy?”

Our mark sped around the corner and was off down an alleyway, his webbed feet splashing through the puddles.

“I’m... just, oi... give me a moment, Mate...”

English was crouched down in front of me, still where he’d nearly face planted on the concrete. He’d been fine just moments ago, but now the color was drained from his face and his normally majestic mane hung limp and dull.

Reaching down I slung one of his arms over my shoulder. “A bad slice of moose?” I asked with a chuckle. “I haven’t seen anything hit you this fast since you came down with a case of the shivers after we had that dunking at the sewage plant.”

He favored me with what I’m sure was supposed to be a withering glare but it came out looking more like a mildly annoyed house cat. “I’m going to have to call it a day, Mate. I guess my age is just catching up with me.”

I wasn’t adverse to heading home. We’d already picked up two bounties today and made more than enough to get by. It was getting towards the end of the afternoon anyway and I didn’t feel like being out on the street after dark. The autumn nights carried a breeze and my winter coat hadn’t yet grown in. I may be a wolf but I’m not a polar bear.

“Do you want to crash at my place?” I asked. English’s house was well past the edge of town and I couldn’t imagine him making the walk as he was. “Rebecca’s out of the city for the week.”

He managed to work up a grin. “I thought you’d never ask. Your couch is looking better by the second.”

It was still a bit of a walk back to the apartment and we were hitting the tail end of rush hour. Hundreds of bodies filled the streets, rushing in all directions and making anything but the slowest slog forward impossible.

Something moved in the corner of my eye. I couldn’t catch it, but it was enough to attract my attention even in the melee of rush hour. Something tawny.

“Oi, Mate! Careful there. You’re dealing with an invalid, remember.”

I snorted a laugh. “Sure. You’re indestructible ninety percent of the time, but helpless when it suits you.” I stopped dead, my head whipping around. I only caught a split-second glimpse, but it could be nothing else. “English,” I lowered my voice, “Didn’t you say you were the only lion in V-town?”

He slumped heavy against my side, wiping a hand across his forehead, already slick with sweat. “It’s gotta just be a costumer again, Tommy. Let’s just get out of here... Please?”

The kitten-like whine that pulled at his voice shut me up right then and there. He really was ill.

Another half hour and we were safely in the apartment lobby. Jon poked his head out of his office as we passed. "Everything alright, Sir?"

I adjusted English's weight. The cat was half out of it and it felt like I had an extra hundred pounds bearing down on me.

"Yeah. His highness is just under the weather. Do you mind heading down to the drugstore and picking something up?"

The dog nodded once, a sharp and precise motion. "Of course, Sir. I'll return in just a moment." He eyed English. "Perhaps I should get something extra-strength..."

The lion muttered something incomprehensible as I loaded him into the elevator. Yeah, there was no bloody way I was going to even entertain the thought of lugging his golden rump up the stairs.

The doors closed smoothly and we began up. We got about halfway before the lights flickered.

"What the..." This was Monru Hall, I'd never had power issues here before. A quick glance out the window and I could see *all* the lights in the city flicker. "Ahh bugger."

A moment later they came back on and I breathed a sigh of relief. Being trapped in an elevator with a sick lion wasn't exactly high on my list of 'do before I die' things.

I crossed my fingers and we managed to make it the rest of the way to the third floor without a hitch. Well, I say that, but it was about ten seconds after the doors opened that the lights went out again, and this time they *stayed* out.

"Well, isn't this going to make for a perfect night," I said with a sigh as I began lugging English down the hall. It was pitch dark but I knew it well enough when I stopped in front of the proper door.

"Here we are, buddy," I said taking the final few steps. For just a moment I debated depositing him on the couch but quickly thought better of it. With the condition he looked to be in I doubted leaving him on that back breaker would help anything.

He hit my bed with a solid *thunk*. I'd tried to let him down as easily as I could but his weight left my arms feeling like water even after just this short time. Thankfully his measured breathing relieved me of at least *some* concern. He may be out of it, but he didn't sound like he was at death's door.

We've already long established that my medical skills are limited to 'staunch the bleeding'. Growing up with regeneration is awesome, but it kinda stunts my medical knowledge when I can just wait for an hour and everything short of a broken bone heals itself.

Reaching down I set the back of one hand against English's forehead. It was slick with sweat. I was on pins and needles waiting for Jon to return.

There was a drug store just down the street. I was expecting Jon to be back in ten minutes, tops. It took him over an hour. The sound of his perfectly measured raps against my door could be no one else.

But there was something in that sound that sent shivers down my spine.

Opening the apartment door, I had only a split-second to see Jon's face before he pushed me out of the way and slammed the door behind him, sliding the deadbolt into place with a *clunk* that echoed through the room.

"The building is now under lock-down." He looked me in the eye. "You are not to leave this apartment. No one enters, no one leaves."

I raised one eyebrow. I could hardly see him in the darkness. "Jon... what's going on? Another riot?"

He checked the lock on the door before stepping past me to check all the other rooms, pausing for just a moment at English's side. "There has been a report of an illness in the city. It has begun spreading virulently. The General is currently working on it, but as a safety precaution

Commissioner Sayer has instigated our plague response protocol.”

I cocked my head. “Wait... we even have a *plague response protocol*? When was the last time we've even *had* a plague? With so many species the chances of a virus being transmissible is near zero.”

He turned towards me, silhouetted by the stars and the dark outline of the blacked out city. “This, Sir, is.” Reaching down, he lifted a heavy canvas backpack from where it sat on the floor next to him. “And I brought Mr. English some paracetamol.”

The dog's ear twitched. We both turned at the sound of someone stumbling down the hall. “This building is secure...” Jon repeated.

Peering out the peephole I could see two things, jack and squat. Anything other than the door across the hallway was out of sight. Squinting, I tried to angle myself to make out what was coming.

The words that escaped my lips were not the type of thing to be repeated in polite society. What in the gods' names was *that*?

It was an otter. Well... *had* been an otter. Most otters tend to be short, streamlined folks, happy go-lucky. The man that stumbled down the hallway towards us leaned heavily against the wall and must have weighted a good two-hundred pounds. I'd never seen an otter over one twenty-five. Even from this distance I could hear him gasping, a phlegm choked bubbling from deep within his chest. As he came fully within sight I froze as solid as a corpse in mid-winter.

Whatever this thing was it was *not* an otter.

It had the face of an otter and the webbed hands, but its body was all wrong. Too thick, too heavy, his dark brown coat was slashed through with streaks of yellow like a reverse tiger. A growl escaped his lips that most definitely could never have come from his species. And when he turned I had to hold back a retch.

His tail.

I knew regeneration, likely better than most anyone else in the city. I knew what regeneration felt like, I knew what it *looked* like. The otter's thick and muscular tail was being eaten away. It was being *regenerated* into something else.

“Jon...” I whispered. I never got any further.

In a heartbeat the creature's head whipped around, locking in on the sound of my voice. I had only a split-second glimpse into his eyes. There was nothing there. Regenerating just a single broken bone would leave me ravenous for days, eating all the food I could find.

The otter's *entire body* was being regenerated in a matter of minutes.

The force of his body slamming against the reinforced door of my apartment left my ears ringing. I could feel Jon's arms around me, pulling my back. “Sir, we need to get you to safety...”

I didn't even need to glance around. There was only one way in or out of the apartment. We were trapped.

English's roar is a terrible thing to behold – I've only been lucky it's rarely been directed at me. For just a moment I felt something nearing peace when I heard it from the street. So often in the past it had heralded my salvation. But a quick glance into the bedroom and English still lay there, tossing and turning, mumbling in the midst of a fever dream.

“What's going on, Jon?”

The dog had pulled one of my stools up in front of the apartment door, eyes never leaving it. The creature on the far side still slammed against it every now and then, knowing prey cowered behind, but seemed to have been distracted by the other apartments. I suppose a normal door and a full refrigerator were easier pickings than us.

“I... don't... know, Sir.” The clip to Jon's voice had become harder, verging on a stutter. “The last update I received was forty minutes ago, before I joined you.” He reached down to press the button on his walkie talkie. There was nothing but static. “HQ is not responding. The last report I

received was..." He paused for a long moment, taking a deep breath. "The last report I received was that the plague had penetrated HQ and begun infecting members of the force."

"Oh bugger."

He looked over to me. "Indeed, Sir."

Lions. They were everywhere.

They could be nothing else. The streets were dark, and neither of us had binoculars, but we both knew it. The flashes of tawny between the shadows, the rosy tails that flicked and curled. I'd swear to the gods that one of them looked straight up at us. Golden face surrounded by a perfect mane of blood-soaked brown hair. The only thing missing were the eyes. None of them had golden eyes.

It was midnight and we hadn't seen anything but lions in over an hour. At first I'd been able to pick out the occasional survivor on the street below, even a valiant police dog. A squad of six dogs had tried to make it to the apartment a couple of hours back. Four of them were dead. The other two... well, I don't think they were trying to save us anymore.

"Do we know how it spreads?" I asked.

Jon shook his head as another boom echoed around the room. The otter... and yes, by the gods I'm going to keep calling him an *otter*, was back at it.

"No, Sir. Though for it to take effect so quickly I can't believe it is transmissible through the air. I can only guess that it is contracted through blood-to-blood contact or--"

"Saliva," I broke in with a bitter laugh. "We're dealing with werewolves here." I began to laugh. "We're dealing with bloody werewolves!"

"Sir..." Jon looked at me, eyes wide as I continued to laugh, my gut hurting. "Please stop..." But I couldn't. I looked down at my hands, wolf paws.

We were dealing with *werewolves*.

The booming of the otter against the door stopped. Perhaps he heard a kindred spirit. In here we had a lion and a wolf with regeneration. We were just about as close to him as we could get.

There was the sound of a crunch. Something dry and brittle falling away.

"The wall!" Once again Jon was in front of me. It hardly had the time to register before a massive golden hand plunged from the wall, reaching for me, razor sharp claws glinting in the darkness.

There was a scream of rage as Jon struck out, his own canine claws slicing deep furrows in the rock hard muscle.

"Run!" was all the dog said.

Great idea, slight problem. Where to?

A heartbeat later the otter was through the wall, leaving a gaping hole where once flawless drywall had stood. Jon leapt upon him, wrapping around the larger man's chest and clawing for his throat.

I'd never once seen Jon fight like this. We'd been shoulder by shoulder before, fighting for our lives but I'd never seen him like this. The dog was here to kill.

A roar of pain and the otter stumbled back, blood dripping. A moment later his hands wrapped around Jon's waist, ripping the dog from his back.

"Jon!"

I rushed forward but never even got close. The otter's fangs closed around Jon's shoulder and the dog let out a howl of pain. But not one to match the otter's.

Jon was trained well. By the time the otter pulled back, Jon's blood dripping from his fangs, it was too late. The beast's eyes went wide.

Jon's nimble claws had slipped in to slice his jugular.

Blood all but geysered from the otter as he stumbled back, Jon falling from his grasp – and straight into my arms.

“Jon? Jon! Are you alright, talk to me!”

The dog looked up at me, his clear blue eyes wide. “I’ll be fine, Tommy. I just feel...”

The bite on his shoulder was already healing preternaturally fast, tiny strands of golden hair beginning to mix with his brown.