

SHI

Volume One:

The End Where It Begins

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT THREE –

Ray

Chapter Nine:

‘What a waste of a life.’

HR13

‘What a waste of a life.’

‘I’m... sorry?’

‘Twenty-two years I’ve spent in these hallowed university walls. I’ve published more papers than you have hairs on your tail, and yet when I make the simple request that you turn up on time, the commitment still somehow proves too much for you. I’m starting to wonder why I even bother.’

‘Sorry, Doctor Singer.’

‘There’s your favourite word again. You won’t drag your family out of the muck with an attitude like that, will you, _____?’

‘No...’

‘Now come along and take a seat, everyone’s waiting in the seminar room.’ Teal’s shoes squeaked down spotless rows of polished glass tiles. HRB – History Room B. He knew it well. And yet as he approached the doorway, the B on the adjoining plaque parted into a one and a three. Strange. It had never done that before. ‘What are we expected to call you

today?’

‘Actually, I got my name back just yesterday. You can call me Teal.’

‘Oh, I shan’t be bothering with that. Teal what? Teal whom? A first name without the surname is as useless as a shoot without the root, a feather quill without the inkwell. It is just as well too – none of the rest of your family are blue, are they? Not even the dead one. I mean, they’ll nod their heads politely, and tweak their whiskers blue, but ultimately, they’re not blue, and they never will be. We all know you’re not really an _____. Teal is all you were ever really going to amount to.

‘Now it’s about time this car crash of a seminar started. I hope you’ve all done your reading. Even you, Ernesto. If you think you can hide behind that laptop screen forever, think again. Surely the salad recipes can wait until lunch. This week, we’ll be talking about a subject very near and dear to our hearts. What’s the matter with Teal?’

‘Oh, I did some additional reading for this earlier!’ Duna piped up. Duna? The pine marten didn’t even study history, and yet there he was, sitting opposite Teal in his dripping rowing singlet like the chair was lucky to have him. ‘He’s actually a good friend of mine. I think something’s up, and when I say something, I mean it. He didn’t even know that 5K5 had come out. Do you have any idea how much 5K4 we played online together? We were Karting Kingdom buddies, damn it! Karting Kingdom buddies!’

‘Psst, I forgot my book again,’ Finn whispered into Teal’s ear. ‘Can we share? Promise this’ll be the last time. We all went on this crazy bender last night. The first year doesn’t really count anyways, right—?’

‘Care to share, Finnegrin? This is a seminar space, open to

all ideas. If it's good enough to mutter under one's breath, surely it's good enough to add to the group discussion.' Teal heard the plastic casing of Finn's pen crack between his pads. He hated his full name. Very few animals insisted upon using it. Doctor Singer was the latest deplorable addition to the list.

'I dunno, Miss Singer.'

'Doctor.'

'Not quite, Miss Singer, but I do my best. You see, Teal likes me, and he reckons I like him too. But we've never really talked about it. After knowing each other for this long, it's no wonder it's been doing such a number on him. The highlight of his whole month was when we held paws together for the first time. Imagine what kind of a month that was. If I'd known it was that bad, I'd never have let him go. Might even have popped a kiss or two on that cute little nose of his.'

'A kiss? A kiss?' A hoof the size of Teal's head came out of nowhere to crash through the table, splitting it clean in half. Teal knew that deep voice. Out of the nothing, Buck strutted forth, towering over everyone with his arms crossed. High above, his tangled forest of antlers brushed the ceiling.

'Are all of you a bunch of idiots, or what? He's a red-blooded fox in the prime of his life, and he's never even been kissed before. It doesn't take a genius to figure that one out. A kiss? Ha, why don't you get him a bunch of flowers and some chocolates while you're at it? He doesn't want your stupid gestures. He wants it. It. He wants fur under his claws, and teeth on his neck. It's as simple as that. He wants to know what it's like to be wanted, to be craved. Allow me to demonstrate...'

The buck stepped forwards, effortlessly tearing the front of his singlet open. The tattered fabric was left to hang from his

well-toned waist. ‘That’s quite enough from you, Mr Hornby.’

‘Yes.’ Teal gasped. He recognised that voice too. At the far end of the table, tapping his broken, thrice-taped pencil against a dusty mound of medical books, was his father.

‘My son’s not like that at all,’ he said, reaching over to adjust his leg braces. He often did so when sitting down for long durations. Otherwise, his legs went numb, and he’d need Teal’s help to get back up. ‘And if he was like that, he’d have told me by now. He’s an only fox. If he knew he wasn’t going to leave me with any grandkits, that he was going to be the last of the ____ name, the end of the entire family, he’d have said something already, wouldn’t he? Wouldn’t he?’

‘I tried,’ Teal wanted to tell him. But his muzzle was glued shut, and he couldn’t make a sound. His battered phone buzzed in his pocket. *Message not sent. Insufficient credit.*

‘All valid contributions,’ Doctor Singer continued, ‘but I fear we’re drifting off topic. We all have our concerns, but the issue at hand is what’s wrong with Teal.’

‘What’s wrong with him is that he’s eating himself, Doctor.’ Melanie? When did she get here? The meerkat didn’t even go to Opus City University.

‘Eating himself? Interesting metaphor. Care to elaborate?’

Melanie cleaned her glasses with the corner of her scrub, running a squeaky claw around the the frame the way she sometimes did. Then, they were back on her nose, and she was gesturing to the slide show with her board pointer.

‘Oh, it’s not a metaphor, Doctor. He’s dead, you see. Terribly, terribly dead.’ Teal’s stomach fluttered. It was like there was a beautiful swarm of maggots fluttering around inside. Or was it butterflies? ‘I told him all about the process a while ago, when I came back from my first full body dissection. It only takes four minutes from the point of death

for the body to start decomposing. What's wrong with him is that his cells are quite literally eating themselves. With no oxygen, carbon dioxide starts to build up in his system, releasing enzymes that trigger cellular autolysis.'

Teal wanted to plead for her to stop, to have mercy, but his jaws wouldn't budge. He tried to get up, to raise an arm, to blink even, but it was all to no avail. He stayed exactly as he was, slumped in his seat with the belt around his waist, just as it should be. How exactly is a corpse supposed to move anyway?

'Now because he wanted to give me a real workout, he went and died in a lake, which makes things complicated. If he's not currently being eaten by sea life, the water will actually help to preserve his body for longer. The colder, the better. If they find him within a few weeks, there might even be enough of him left to bury. The only question is – who's looking? Especially in the Sakuranese countryside. The university? The authorities? Personally, I don't think the odds are looking great.'

'Must you speak this way about my only son?'

Behind them, the doors burst open, and yellow light flooded the room. Everybody froze into place. Teal's seat fell onto its side, taking him with it, and he suddenly saw that they'd been nothing more than apparitions the whole time, a perspective trick of chair legs and flat faces that now seemed to stretch on forever, painted on the polished walls and floor. But the voice behind him was real. It was the only thing that was real. It felt like a lifetime ago since he'd last heard it.

'Teal. My sweet, sweet, brave little Teal. Is that really you? You've been through so much, and yet it seems you have so much further to go. I'm so proud of you. There's no shame in being tired of the long road. You can decide at any moment

when you've had enough. Nobody has that right but you. Until then, I'll be right here, watching over you. I always have been.'

There were a thousand things that Teal wanted to ask. He wanted to turn around and stare directly into the blinding light, but his body was limp, and before he knew it, his seat was sinking through the floor. But he needed to see her! He had to be sure she was real. Not like everything else...

'Cheer up, son,' the voice said, and he felt a tender paw stroke the back of his head. 'Cheer up, cheer up, cheer up...'

'Cheerup, cheerup, cheerp, cheerp, chirp, chirp, chirp!'

His eyes shot open. Someone was cradling his head. Paws? No, they were firmer than that. Hooves. 'Thank god,' he heard Allie sigh somewhere behind him. 'I thought he was never gonna wake up...'

High up in the rafters, the Chiri Inn's sixth and smallest resident was bathing in the early morning light, merrily chirping its song for all to hear.

Fireside

'Are you sure you don't want another cup, Shiro?'

The spout was poised at the bottom of his teacup, where the filling groove sat. Today's tea had been made with dried hibiscus buds, which slowly unfurled in the heat. The smell was delectable, and Teal was sure the purple buds would have been beautiful too, if only he didn't have to lift his upturned cup to watch them bloom.

'No really, I'm fine,' he lied. If the old monk had any doubts, he kept them to himself, bowing and moving onto Allie's cup without further comment. Teal needed something, that much was certain, but another half-dozen cups of sweet-scented flower water weren't going to cut it. After that

nightmare, the poor fox felt like he'd woken up with the hangover from hell. He'd have killed for some sprat flakes right about now. Just a few slices of chicken toast to sink his fangs into. A single chocolate fish...

No, scratch that. What he needed was a curry. A nice and greasy kebab, with Komodo fresh off the rotisserie. A fry-up to end all fry-ups, with hash browns and fried bread to soak up the events of last night as effortlessly as the golden yolk.

'If you took those bandages off,' Linn said, 'I'm sure I could whip up a poultice for the pain. Not that a poultice would do anything, of course. But the mind does a most marvellous job of fooling itself, especially, interestingly enough, when it knows it's being fooled.'

Teal shoved his bandaged mittens under his armpits. They barely fit. 'Thanks, but I'm good. They're just a little sore is all.'

'Naturally. From all the cart dragging.' Teal nodded. 'That you and Allie have both been doing all week.' Allie nodded emphatically. Linn looked down at the goat's hooves and smiled. As he topped up Sinn's cup for the second time, the dusty lenses of his pince-nez were gleaming.

Teal's paws were killing him. He'd never landed a proper punch before in his life. Why, oh why did he have to pick his first fight with a wall? His knuckles had been fine for the first few rounds, at least until he had to switch to the heel of his palms, and then, when his paws were numb, red and swollen like two bloody balloons, his claws. And yet not a dent had been made in the frozen waterfall. Not a single chip of ice had been carved away. The only mark he managed to make was a small smear of blood, which he'd been quick to scrub off with the underside of his sash. He'd be fine. It wasn't like he was ever going to run out of blood like a place like this, even if he

went around picking fights with every wall he could find.

What really hurt was his foot. Before he finally threw in the towel, Teal decided to give the waterfall everything he had with a devastating front kick. Unfortunately, his hind paw had clipped a chunk of the stone lantern still sticking out from the ice. No wolf had ever howled the way he howled that night. He may as well have been barefoot for all the protection his waraji torture devices afforded.

As always, the last cup of tea to be poured was Linn's own. 'So, whose turn is it next?'

'Yours.' Sinn was having none of it today. From within the poofy fortress of cushions and linen in which the black cat surveyed the battlegrounds, only her face could be seen, her green eyes like tart lime wedges floating amid the abyss.

The badger added another white stone to the Go board nestled between them. 'You know, I suspect you could give me a real run for my money, if you only stopped using your turn to try and spell out quite so many obscenities.'

'A dull victory is worth far less than a memorable defeat,' came the grumbling response. A black paw crept out from beneath the bed wrap to finish the tail on a particularly colourful curse. Allie was bright pink before Teal even had a chance to shield his eyes. 'And it's your turn to ask around again.'

'Really? Hmm. Well I suppose I'd better make it a good one then, shouldn't I?' Linn scratched his greying chin, surveying their little game from on high. 'Alright then. Indulge me. What do you miss the most about your time spent on the other side?'

Sitting to the left of Linn, Sinn was the first to answer. 'I miss being able to answer questions like that with a knife in the back.'

‘Ah yes, the simplicity of youth. I remember it fondly. Shiro?’

‘Hey!’ Allie piped up. ‘Why’d you skip me? I’m the next one down. Don’t I get an answer too?’

‘Of course.’ Linn topped up the goat’s teacup, to show that no insult had been intended. ‘But we all know how much you dislike those questions. Lady Umeboshi doesn’t approve of such retrospective talk.’

‘Well maybe she doesn’t know everything,’ was the goat’s reply. The badger was so startled, he knocked his bamboo bowl right over. A wave of white stones flooded the board. Even Sinn seemed more concerned with what she’d heard, rather than the fact that her least-favourite caprine had just spoiled her almost perfect expletive run. Allie nudged Teal with the edge of his hind hoof. ‘Isn’t that right, uh... Shiro?’

Teal could only offer him a shrug and a faltering chuckle. Listening to Algernon’s story seemed to have done him a world of good. The only downside was that now, everybody knew that something was up. Allie wasn’t the best as far as keeping secrets was concerned.

‘So what do I miss, what do I miss...?’ Allie’s hoof drummed up and down the embroidered grass pattern on his hat. ‘I’m guessing we can all take family and friends as read.’

‘A sound assumption,’ Linn nodded approvingly.

‘An impertinent presumption,’ Sinn muttered under her breath. Allie ignored her.

‘In that case, it’s easy. I miss my flower patch! Not the piddly little thing we had on Drumlin Street, I mean, but the proper one we lived on in the countryside. There was a whole acre to tend to, and I gave all of my flowers names, and I could recognise them by smell alone. We could’ve lived there forever if the farmer hadn’t found us...’

Smelling weakness, Sinn leapt at the opportunity with her claws out. ‘Wait, so the land wasn’t even yours?’

Allie sighed and flicked the straw hat over his eyes, refusing to rise to the bait. ‘There’s no shame in not having your own place,’ he said. The sentence sounded like well-trodden ground for the goat. ‘It was just after the war. Everyone that hadn’t died was still rationing. Farmland was like gold dust.’

‘No, I understand. I just find it interesting that what you miss the most about your life was something that never actually belonged to you in the first place.’

At that moment, Sinn proved that she was capable of every bit as savage a grin as Lady Umeboshi herself. The only thing that wilted it was the goat’s lack of outrage. When he nodded, Teal thought she was just about ready to be sick. Underneath her claws, the mouse had finally given up the fight, and without the struggle, she didn’t look like she knew what to do with herself. ‘So what about you, Shiro?’

‘Me?’

‘Is there another Shiro in here?’

The blue fox sighed. Where to even begin? Having Animoogle at his fingertips was a start. His phantom Cherry Logic was never going to stop burning a hole in his pocket. Having access to some of the most precious historical records at the OCU Library didn’t hurt either.

But those were all the superficial things. He missed his afternoon coffee breaks with Finn. He missed flicking on the news late in the evening with his father, and groaning about how depressing all the stories were, and if they weren’t depressing, how boring they were instead. He missed his 5K4 races with Duna, one of the few friends at university that he considered a worthy match, even though the marten was the

only one that hadn't yet passed his license. He missed the shifts at O-Bun Sesame that went quickly, where they felt more like a dysfunctional family than a group of strangers side-eyeing the clock, and he missed talking to his mum. He never talked to a living soul the way he did when visiting her. That was probably what he missed the most.

'I miss Mr Paprika,' Teal told the dying flames of the fireplace. Linn bowed his head low.

'I'm so sorry to hear that. Someone close?'

'It's a drink,' Teal said, and the old badger broke out into full-bellied laughter.

'I admire your honesty, Shiro,' he said, after it had settled. 'I have to confess, I've never found one quite as worthy of celebration, though a few certainly came close.'

'I didn't know monks could drink,' Allie wondered aloud. Linn gave his ample paunch a worldly pat.

'Oh, yes,' he told the astonished goat. 'Intoxication is quite the vice. Drinking, not so much.'

'I don't get it.'

'I suppose it can seem a little arbitrary. The transgression, you see, is in the excess, the loss of mindfulness. It's like the difference between eating to live, and living to eat.'

'Yeah, but you're not exactly...' Luckily, Allie caught his tongue before it could blurt out much more. He picked up his teacup and hid behind it. Linn just smiled.

'It's quite alright, Allie. You're not the first animal to wonder how a morally virtuous and principled monastic monk can get quite this large.' The small goat flushed. 'And there's a simple answer to that.'

Linn picked up his teacup and took a deep draught. As he finished the last gulp, he gestured over to Sinn, who was still grumpily sorting through the scattered black and white stones

on the floor mat. ‘I never said I was a very good monk.’

Allie laughed. When he put his cup back down, the badger made sure to fill it first. ‘Although let it never be said that I died defeated,’ he continued. ‘If one must take pride in something, I suppose you could do worse. And it appears we’ve come full circle, because if I had to pick the one thing I miss most about my time on the overside, it would be exactly that. The long games of Go, played with the closest of friends, that would stretch from sunset to sunrise on those endless summer nights, and still never be long enough.’

The sheer thought of it seemed to light up the old badger’s face, although the glow was quick to disappear with a shake of his head. He bent down to help Sinn with the stones, but even entombed in blankets, she would accept no assistance. ‘Sinn, I do believe the next question belongs to you.’

‘But what about Kapp?’ Allie quickly interjected, much to Sinn’s chagrin. ‘Doesn’t he get an answer too?’

Linn inclined his head. ‘If he wishes.’

Allie tiptoed around the fireplace to draw the back door open. The wolf was waiting for him in the grass. He was upside-down.

* * *

His body was a temple, pointing as straight as a compass needle with his yellow claws splayed out. Both paws were rooted deep into the dirt. At the apex of his towering fourteen-foot handstand, between two shaggy, soil-speckled hind paws, the cast-iron rice barrel rested. *Down.* The wolf’s straight arms began to compress, until the masses of his knotted beard were coiled on the ground before him. *Bring in.* With his head an inch off the ground, his knees slowly bent, bringing the heavy rice barrel down until the iron base rested flat against his thighs. *Push out.* His legs straightened back to

their original position. *Back up.* And he returned to his full height, ready to begin the process all over again.

Down, bring in, push out, back up. Down, bring in, push out, back up. As impressive as it was to witness, the process was entirely mechanical. His tree trunk arms looked like they could have performed the feat for days. His forehead was as dry as a bone, and it was only occasionally that his chest remembered it was supposed to be breathing at all. This wasn't work. It was rest. This was relaxation.

'Hey, Kapp!'

One of the wolf's shaded eyes ignited. He graced the interruption with a nondescript grunt, instead of a growl.

'We're playing the question game. Linn just wanted to know what you miss the most about being alive.'

A second eye opened to join the first. 'Did Puckenbones speak?' Allie nodded. 'And?'

'Sinn said she missed being able to kill people that ask stupid questions.' Amusement rumbled from the back of the wolf's throat. 'So... what about you?'

Kapp's black lips slowly parted, revealing a grin that bared his jutting yellow fangs from tip to root. 'I miss being able to eat them.'

'Psh, you've never eaten anyone before in your whole doggone life! But nice try anyway. Real scary.'

Allie reached up to tap the giant affectionately on his big wet nose before he returned to his place at the fireside. It was the first time he'd ever dared approach him. 'Hey, this hibiscus tea really hits the spot! I like how you used proper althea buds for the decoration. Roselles don't look nearly as pretty.'

'A real stickler for the flowers, this one. Who knew the cud chewers of the world could have such a discerning

palate?’

‘Sinn, please. You’re very kind to say so, Allie. It was my pleasure.’

‘Do you think kiba-kibas might like it too?’

‘Allie...’

There was a chirp, followed by a sigh. ‘Never mind.’

Kapp was so confused, he didn’t know what to do. He tossed the iron barrel aside with his hind paws and lingered there a while in his perfectly formed handstand, thinking. Cocking his head every which way didn’t seem to help make sense of it. Not many animals could grow the heart of a lion overnight.

Chiri Inn

‘Psst. Hey, Teal? It’s gonna be okay, buddy.’

‘No, it’s really, really not.’

‘You can survive without it for a day. It’s just a ribbon.’

‘I can’t explain it. You go on ahead, I’ll catch up.’

‘Oh, like last time?’

‘Allie...’

‘No, I’ll go ahead. But this time, if I come back to find that your legs are all bashed to hell, you can jolly well bandage them up yourself...’

Teal checked his wrist at least a dozen times a day. They were already halfway down the thoroughfare by the time his paw brushed by his sleeve, and his heart stopped. The red ribbon wasn’t there. But it was always there. He muttered his apologies and raced back to the Chiri Inn as fast as his straw sandals could carry him. He had no idea why he’d become so attached to the thing.

Clearly, it was nothing more than superstition, some silly little post-life coping mechanism. But after everything he’d

been through, he didn't think a small length of red ribbon was too much to ask for peace of mind.

He returned to find the crimson loop sitting neatly on his bed wrap, waiting for him. 'Oh, thank god. Thank god, thank god...' He crumpled his fingers together and inched it over the crude wrap of bandages. It took four knots before he was satisfied it would stay in place. He wasn't taking any chances.

He was all set to leave again when he heard the rattle of wooden wheels outside. He wondered who it could be. Nobody visited the Chiri Inn. Not well-wishers, not mail carriers, and certainly not prospective customers. He sidled up to the window, and sure enough, voices came wafting in. The first was jaunty and shrill, with as many nervous squeaks and quivers of laughter as words.

'... never be this late again, you hear? I swear it on, uh... Oh! My death! And I'll swear it on my mother's, my father's and my own kits' too, if you prefer, hahaha. If it... if it please you.'

The resulting groan was immediately recognisable, deep and bassy as it was. 'Wolves prefer silence.'

'Yes, of course. Silence. Nothing—haha—sorry, nothing like the sound of silence, as they say. It's basically the music of nature, all bamboo and waterfalls and chirpy cicadas. Not that this world has chirpy cicadas, or quiet cicadas, or any cicadas really, but you know, there's this amazing wind box in the marketplace that makes almost the exact same sound every time a breeze blows through. If you so desired, I could always dip into my family's hourglasses and pick one up for you—'

'Why are you here?'

The first animal whimpered. 'H-here?'

'Here.'

‘W-w-well I’m here to drop your duties off, aren’t I? Looks like you’ll be starting off at the breach today—how terribly exciting!—and look here, later on, you’ll be trekking up north to cut down trees. Why you’ll be going all that way, I couldn’t possibly say, haha, but if it wasn’t important, why would they be soliciting the help of a beast of your stature? Now when I say b-b-b-beast...’

What followed next was a series of increasingly pained groans. When Teal’s curiosity got the better of him, he inched his nose past the window shutters. The first thing he saw was the handle of a steaming hand-drawn wagon. It was a fine wagon too, made of lacquered white wood, with hand-painted patterns of tea leaves underneath the real shoots that hung over the sides. The bouquet of green tea in the air was impressive, doubly so considering the wagon’s small size. Allie could have pulled two of them at once. But then Teal saw the wagon’s owner, and it all made sense.

A giant flying squirrel was struggling to lever Kapp’s necklace over the wagon’s back doors. He was adorned in an embroidered poncho that looked several orders of magnitude too expensive for him. In spite of his species’ name, he wasn’t much taller than Lady Umeboshi, the tufts of his ears barely reaching over the untamed hillocks of the great wolf’s knees. The stone duties were like gravestones in his spindly arms, and he handled them just as attentively. Each time he set one down, he wiped his forehead and wafted fresh air to the underside of his skin membrane before moving onto the next. Though he spoke incessantly, he never once dared to lift his eyes from the dirt.

All the while he worked, the unimpressed wolf looked on, his darkening shadow swallowing the flying squirrel, his wagon, and the grass around them without even touching the

sides. The wolf's tail tweaked more violently with each successive groan.

'So I hope—harrumph!—that this helps in any way to make up for the terrible mistake I made.' *Twitch.* 'I never—gah!—sorry, never in a million years thought I'd ever cross tails with a wolf like yourself.' *Twitch.* 'I'm lucky you didn't flatten me. And glad besides, haha! Yes, glad like you wouldn't believe, like you couldn't—oof!—imagine...'

But the wolf's patience had run its course. He reached down to pluck the necklace from the ground. When the flying squirrel spotted the giant descending paw, he squeaked and clung to the last tablet like his death depended on it. Kapp raised him up until they were eye to eye. Twelve feet over the long grass, the flying squirrel's stubby legs kicked for all they were worth. His bushy tail was a whirlwind.

'Will it break?'

'W-wha...?'

The wolf's blazing eyes narrowed. He regarded the flying squirrel before him with a venom that Teal had only ever seen reserved for mosquitoes, fleas and traffic wardens. 'Landing on Anzen Road. So far away. Will it break?'

'Well n-no. The duties on the necklace are practically indestructible, at least until the inscribed tasks have been carried out.'

'Good.' Kapp cocked his head at his tiny captive audience and grinned. 'Will you?'

'I d-don't know what it is you're planning—'

The wolf reeled his arm back, as if readying it to throw. From the way the flying squirrel chattered, you'd never have believed he was already dead. 'Fear not, morsel. You were born a kite. Kites fly.'

'What you're talking about is my patagium, and no, that's

absolutely not how it works!’

‘Squirrels always land claws first.’

‘You’re thinking of cats!’

‘Why are you here?’ Finally, the wolf had him. The giant flying squirrel had no answer. ‘The necklace is mine. Duties are mine. A wolf’s business is no morsel’s concern. Don’t want to go up? Maybe you’ll go down...’

The wolf’s terrible jaws parted. Closer and closer, the hanging necklace drew, dangling over a slick black tongue that led onto endless rows of keen, waiting teeth. As desperately as he clung to the cold stone safety of the tablet, the flying squirrel’s grip was waning. Inch by inch, he was sliding down. Teal couldn’t bear to watch. His claws silently raked the window shutters. He was just about to yell something out when finally, to his relief, the flying squirrel broke first.

‘Okay, okay!’

Reluctantly, Kapp drew the necklace back. To keep his predicament fresh in his captive’s mind, the wolf’s black lips remained parted in a perpetual snarl. Every exhale ruffled through the flying squirrel’s fur, swelling the arm and leg membrane under his poncho like the sails of a ship.

‘Of c-c-course I wanted to—gulp!—offer you my services. After what happened, haha, they belong to you. I b-belong to you. Paws on heart, that’s the whole truth and nothing but the truth. B-b-b-but...’

The flying squirrel managed to find purchase with his hind claws. Giggling hysterically with relief, he inched his way back up the tablet, using the inscriptions for footholds. ‘B-b-b-but my boss also—pant, pant!—said that while I was here, I may as well check up on you too. Y-you know, see—woah!—see how you’re doing. See that the inn’s not in

any hot water. See how you feel about his offer...'

'Not interested.'

'Hahaha, he s-s-said you'd say that. But he urges you to reconsider. One—unf!—one word from him, and you could be guarding the entrance to the finest tea house in all of Anzen. He's worried that you're wasted out here, guarding nothing in the middle of nowhere for d-d-drink. And what drink at that? A drop of ethre every blue moon? At the Blue Moon Pavilion, you'd—hrrg!—have a barrel a night. Every night's a blue moon at the Blue Moon Pavilion! Just think about it...'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I owe a debt.'

'What debtor could possibly exist out there that you wouldn't tear apart in an instant?'

'Wolf. Business. Morsel.'

'Haha, r-right. Although my name's actually Eke...'

Kapp let the necklace fall. Much to Teal's surprise, Eke didn't spread his patagium wide, elegantly gliding down in half circles to alight upon the soft grass. To the contrary, the flying squirrel dropped like a rock, making a noise not unlike that of his namesake on impact. Though the necklace's thick banded cord pinned him at the waist, the other stone tablets fell mercifully around him.

'Fly home, morsel,' the wolf grunted. 'Tell him. The next morsel he sends, I keep.'

'R-r-r-rightio, sir!' Eke wriggled out from the necklace, scrambling over tablets and loose stones to return to the safety of his white wagon walls. Before he could wrench the wedge out from under the wheels, however, Kapp strolled over and stuck a lazy hind paw out. His huge leathery pads curled

possessively over the side.

‘The wagon stays.’

Eke gulped. His response came in the form of a long, continuous question, which never quite escaped the base of his jiggling throat. Covered in dirt and speckled with straw, the flying squirrel jabbered like he was rabid, gesticulating wildly between the wolf, the wagon, and the dirt path he’d trodden in on as if that was supposed to help. When Kapp suggested that he’d be entirely happy to keep the squirrel instead, he went purple, and gave up on speech altogether.

It was all he could do to throw himself back onto the ground when the wolf knelt down, swiped up the entire wagon and padded over to the rushes of the nearby marsh with it, the tea caddies and steaming iron kettles clattering only slightly more coherently than their owner. If nothing else, the splash it made was spectacular. All of the water swirled green. The beautiful lacquered wood bobbed once, then twice. On the third, it continued down, its painted leaves sinking just as surely as the real ones beneath a mire of hungry bubbles.

The flying squirrel cried. He chittered and protested and pulled his cheeks raw, but eventually, Eke seemed to realise that he was in a predicament that no amount of words was going to solve. There would be no pleading with the gods of the marsh, or the great wolf. His wagon was gone.

Before he left the Chiri Inn for good, cradling his head and wounded pride beneath his arm folds like a blanket, Eke made the interesting decision to take a running charge at Kapp’s discarded rice barrel. Teal had to wince when his fist came into contact with the iron base. That had been the loudest cry of all.

By the time Teal amassed the courage to emerge from the inn, the wolf was alone. He found him sitting on his haunches

by the marsh. The crude assortment of fabrics and leather belts that served as the wolf's only clothing hung from his waist, covering his modesty and lightly brushing the tall green shoots. One after another, he dipped his mitts into the fragrant waters. Anything that didn't escape into the sky, he brought up to his long lapping tongue, or dripped onto his forehead, or poured down his back.

Without an audience, the wolf was almost silent, save for the slow, steady heartbeat that his dripping tail thumped into the dirt. For a while, Teal was content to watch the strange ritual play out. The wolf was many things. Stoic was not one of them, and yet Teal would never have believed it looking at him. His shaggy fur drank the offering of water just as thirstily as his muzzle, and in the sunlight, the droplets twinkled on his guard hairs like gems.

'Kapp?'

The wolf turned around. Rivulets of water trickled from his cupped pads, running together to form streams along his knotted beard. His long mane rippled in the wind, but that was the only thing that moved. His ears were pricked, and his tail was taut. Teal had never seen eyes like these before. They were almost like Allie's eyes when the goat was greying out, only these didn't lack for comprehension. Working behind them was something more ancient than intelligence.

Somewhere, deep down, Teal's erudite instincts realised what was going to happen before he did. His weight shifted automatically to his back foot, and he found his body coiling itself up like a spring, all without a sound. Behind him, the giant at the marsh's edge raised a paw. He curled it up into a fist, and he beat his bare chest four times. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* Each strike dared him to run.

Thump! On the fourth, he did exactly that.

Teal leapt for the safety of the inn. He never saw the wolf coming, though his ears managed to catch the moment his monstrous hind paws left the ground, crossing the distance between them in a single bound. Before he could blink, there were claws around his waist. With a thunderous growl, the jaws of death opened wide, and then everything went dark.

Mouth

The smell was unbelievable. It was impossible to breathe and impossible to move, and he could feel a hundred points pinching his neck like daggers. None of them had yet sunken into his flesh, but all of them were pressed up tight, needling his skin. Every time his heart thumped, they pressed a little tighter.

‘Try to run, I bite.’ The voice of death echoed all around. Its breath was so... warm. ‘Tap, if you understand.’

Somewhere beyond the darkness, his pinned arms twitched uselessly at his sides. He couldn’t raise them, even if he wanted to. Even if he dared. What he could move were his legs. He could feel the cool grass tickling at his ankles, only an inch or so over the ground where the single paw was holding him. Stretching out his toes, he managed to clip the floor with the tip of his waraji sandal. To his relief, it appeared to suffice.

‘Try to scream, I bite,’ the disembodied voice told him next. ‘Tap if you understand.’

Teal tapped his hind paw again.

‘When I ask, you answer. I’ll know if you lie. Your body will tell me. Wolves don’t need words. Wolves speak the only language that matters. The language of bone, and flesh, and blood. Blood does not lie.’ The fangs tightened on his neck. Teal gasped as the claws gripped his waist, holding him in

place. With each pulse, he could feel his own fear giving himself away.

‘Tap if you understand.’ He could barely dare to breathe, but his sandal skimmed the ground all the same. There was an approving rumble from on high. ‘Good.’

Warm drool dripped down the sides of his cheeks, oozing over his eyes. It made little difference. Open or closed, there was nothing to be seen in a place such as this. He was caught in a dank, endless cavern, and there was no light at the end. Soon enough, the voice of death arose once more. ‘Fox,’ it accused, as though the word itself were cursed. Teal gulped.

‘At my lowest, you are there. Always. Without fail. The witch buries me in tin, promising glory, death, or both. When she snatches them back, who is watching? I throw her fire from my fingertips, and miss. When I return, who is waiting? I share offerings from my own hunt, the finest catch. Who spits it back at me? I’m stepped on by specks too small to pick my teeth with. Later, one follows me home, threatens me to my face. Both times, who is the watcher? Both times, who is there? Both times, who is silent?’

Teal couldn’t speak. An iron vice was crushing whatever life he had left out of him. He gasped for air, but there was none to be found in the sweltering cavern. Its stalagmites were closing upon him now, tighter and tighter, just itching to open his throat.

‘You came on the Wolf Moon. Why? To mock? To jeer? To punish? Pup, you speak with Death himself. Rivers of blood won’t slake my thirst. Trenches of flesh won’t sate my hunger. Claws of bone and mountains of stone won’t halt me. They are as sand beneath my feet. Before me, fire melts and ice blows out. Shadows flee while their owners freeze. All fear my bite, kings and beggars alike, and all will know it. I

am Death. Speak, or drown in silence. Which gods sent you?’

‘N-none...’ Teal somehow managed to eke out.

The entire cavern rumbled around him. One of the stalagmites lodged itself below his Adam’s apple, trapping it in place. ‘The gods didn’t send you?’

Teal felt like he was about to faint. Unable even to open his muzzle, he shook his head from side to side, juddering his sandals against the ground until his ankle cords loosened, and they slipped right off. Any moment now, and his legs were sure to join them. He could already feel them turning to jelly beneath him, and yet his body barely moved. He was being held firm...

And yet even as the echoes of the cavern were slaking away, he felt the claws around his waist loosen. The walls of the cavern relaxed, and a halo of light even emerged from the bottom. Cool air was rising up. He gulped it down greedily. Death was a generous captor. When the fangs returned to his throat, they pressed lightly up to his skin, brushing through the dense thicket of his winter coat. Compared to what came before, it may as well have been a caress, though he felt foolish for even thinking such a thing.

‘Rota didn’t send you, did she? To fly me to the halls?’ The voice of death was smaller now. Its ferocious booming surety was gone. In its place was something different, something less primordial and cruel. Something almost... meek?

‘No,’ Teal told the darkness. For a moment, he felt a pinch at his neck, but his heart spoke true, and he was relinquished.

‘Lilja... didn’t send you? To lead me down, to the worlds of fog and ice? To meet again?’

‘Nobody sent me here. I came alone. I don’t know any of those names.’

Fangs gnawed his neck up and down, searching for the slightest hint of a lie. But the hunt proved fruitless. In the only language that mattered, Teal's bone, flesh and blood spoke with the honesty of his tongue. The cavern's disappointment was palpable. 'You are no envoy,' it told him simply. Teal felt the words rush past him, cool and dry. 'Just a fox.'

'Yes.' This time, the fangs didn't even bother to graze him. It wasn't a question, after all. The only animal the wolf was talking to was himself.

The slick walls of Teal's prison grew still. Up above, he could hear the proverbial cogs turning, squelching in all their fleshiness. Every time the wolf swallowed, the soft palate closed up, his epiglottis flapping about like some unfortunate butterfly had fluttered from his stomach and gotten itself trapped. But make no mistake. Even if he could barely see a thing, Teal could still feel, and the wolf's mouth was steadily growing dryer. Sooner or later, he'd have to let him go. His giant tongue had already retreated back within the safety of the cavern. When light began pouring in, he was certain the wolf had decided to release him. But something stopped him short. The jaws closed, and the fangs descended once more.

'You carry the taste of prey. Prey that knew its time was done.' Kapp's words echoed around him. No longer was it the disembodied voice of death, only the voice of a giant ravaging wolf. Teal didn't know whether that was better or worse. 'In my tribe, the weakest fly from Honour's Wharf. Only cowards run. Were you a coward too? There's no shame. We can't all of us be wolves.'

Teal didn't know what to say. Kapp would know if he lied. Within the confines of the cavern, nothing could escape him. He decided to keep his silence. The wolf took it as answer enough. 'Fox, you have lived with blunted teeth. But in death,

you found me. I can be your fangs. Do you want it to end?’

Teal shivered. Invisible daggers traced lines down his neck in the dark, gentle as feathers. He’d been right the first time. It was a caress. ‘It’d be quick. Just give the word, and my jaws snap shut. Your life’s yolk runs down, rich and slow. Nothing will be wasted. Wolves do not waste.’

‘But we’re already dead,’ he heard a familiar voice murmur. Was it his? It sounded so distant, and none too convincing either.

‘There’s death, and there is death,’ Kapp’s deep voice replied. ‘Here, we are nothing. No bodies, yet we breathe. No bodies, yet we eat. Where does it go? Same place as the blue fire you drink. Nowhere. No heavens, no hells, no rights, no wrongs. No more. I can show you. Just give the word.’

What scared Teal the most wasn’t that he’d say yes. What scared him was how long he thought about it. That he considered it at all, even for a moment. Every fear and doubt he’d ever had resurfaced in his head. Every shrill word on the playground, every pointed hoof, claw or wing. Every passing pair of eyes that widened, or worse, narrowed. All the voices whispering in his head as he trawled, bleary-eyed, through cold website statistics in the dead of night.

Eighty-two percent fatality rate. Sixty-four percent. Thirty-three.

Even at his lowest, there was always the survivor’s niggles that stopped him short. What if it didn’t work? What if something went wrong? But there were no such doubts here. The wolf was an inveterate hunter, whose fangs had never missed their mark. If he gave the word, that was it. As quick as a candle being snuffed out, his light would be gone. All he had to do was give the word.

‘No,’ he said. The cavern groaned around him. Its

stalagmites embraced him with all the tenderness of angel's wings, but he stood firm. He wasn't talking to the wolf this time. He was talking to something far more intimate. He was talking to death. His own death.

'So many times in my life, I thought I needed you. I thought you were exactly what I wanted. A way to punish others for doing me harm. A way to punish myself, for not being better. But I was wrong. You're not an answer to any of the doubts and fears and pain that put me here. You're just the silence in between. You're just the nothing. When I made it to the other side, the only thing that changed is that everyone I love is now gone. I'm never going to see them again, and it's all because of you. You took away everything that ever mattered to me, and still you want more. But you won't get it.

'Maybe you won't go away. Maybe I'll still think about you from time to time. Maybe part of your shadow will always be there, lingering somewhere behind me. Waiting. But right now, I'm staring you dead in the face, with your fangs ready and waiting at my throat, and I'm telling you no. You're coming for me one day anyway, right? Whether it's to bring me up to the clouds, drag me down to the flames, or take me somewhere else entirely. But it won't be today.

'Nothing lasts forever. One day, everything'll be yours. Even me. But until then, I think I've got a few more smiles and a few more tears left in me yet. Even if no one else'll be around to remember it, I will. Even if it's sad, boring, or hell, even pointless, that's for me to decide, and me alone. You can wait your own damn turn.'

One by one, the claws of the iron vice retracted from his waist. Though Teal's prison quivered, it was true to its word. The mouth of the cavern slowly opened up, and he emerged blinking into the light.

Terra Fauna

The wolf sat back on his broad haunches, panting like he'd been running for miles. Long ropes of drool drooped from his thick black lips, lashing together into glistening webs. He made no attempt to wipe it off, or lap it up. Though his yellow eyes darted this way and that, they were wide, unseeing. It wasn't until they found Teal that his chest began to slow.

'Nothing leaves my jaws,' Kapp told the fox. 'Hundreds tried. But none escape. What hunter lets its prey escape?'

'A hunter that isn't currently hunting,' Teal said, slipping his sandals back on. In the cool air, the wolf's slaver had congealed to the point where he could slake the stuff off by the armful. Even so, it was painfully slow to drip down, and it clung to his fur like glue. He was going to smell like the inside of a wolf's mouth for days.

'Head hunter is always hunting,' came the wolf's despondent reply. His tail gave a bitter lash. 'Nothing here to hunt, or to fight. Eating sates no hunger. Rivers quench no thirst. Training hardens nothing. The land is cursed. No killing, no sleeping, no rutting, no drinking, no belching, no bleeding, no marking trees. No use for long claws, fangs or stones. Wolves may as well be lambs.'

'Or foxes.'

Kapp's hackles flared suddenly. 'Not blue ones,' he growled, tearing the slobber from his beard. 'Not me. Not me!'

The great wolf rose to his full glory. His tawny mane swallowed the sun. 'Should have eaten you, louse. Better eaten than weak, all black and blue. Better eaten than broken.'

'Guess you'd better find a mouth big enough then,' Teal said calmly. 'Because from what I hear, it's not me that's

broken. You could have been the greatest warrior in your time, feared and revered throughout the land. You could have killed hundreds, thousands even. But none of that makes a difference now, does it? Nobody needs a hunter in a world where nothing lives, and nobody needs a killer in a world where nothing dies.'

The wolf's silence spoke volumes. The fox went on. 'If killing's all you're good for, you're no better than the wolves you forced off your wharf. That's what you're really afraid of, isn't it? That you're no different from them. The ones that bring the rot, or so you all told yourselves as you watched them fall from the top—'

'Another word, I split you open, louse. One claw, from tail to whisker.'

'Okay.'

The wolf huffed. He hadn't been expecting that. 'I swear, fox. One more word...'

'Go ahead.' Teal closed his eyes, and spread his arms wide. 'I'd never be able to get away from someone as fast as you anyway. Do it. See what difference it makes.'

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was there to greet him. The great wolf was back on the ground, holding his head in his arms. Teal was surprised to see him so low. One of his paws hovered over his left breast. As delicately as Teal had ever seen them, his shaggy knuckles floated down to brush through the fur. It was almost childlike. *Pat, pat, pat, pat. Pat, pat, pat, pat.*

'Kapp?' The wolf's only response was to bury his head even deeper. *Pat, pat, pat, pat.* 'Kapp?'

'Leave me.'

'I... don't know if I should.'

'Then kill me, and have it done. No one will know. Call

me fangless, turntail, wether. Curse me to the gods. Just be quick.'

'Kapp, I could never kill anyone.'

The wolf's eyes shot open. 'But you can.' *Pat, pat, pat, pat.* 'You're doing it now. Every time I see you. Every time you speak. Every time I smell you on the air.' Teal turned to leave, but the wolf's accusations rang on, only growing in ferocity.

'Coward! Weakling! Trickster! Worm! Finish what you started, fox, or helbeasts take your bones. Fenrur take your stones, Hugonne and Munonne your eyes. And I the rest! And I the rest...!'

END OF CHAPTER PREVIEW
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