

SHI

Volume One:

The End Where It Begins

Mae L. Strom

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– ACT TWO –

Sole

Chapter Four:

‘ ... ’

The first thing he felt was surprise. Surprise at the lack of pain, and surprise at the serene sense of stillness, certainly, but most of all, he was surprised by the fact that he could still feel anything at all.

That was a nice surprise.

The next thing he felt was his chest expanding outward, as his body worked to draw in a slow, steady breath. You couldn't breathe properly if you didn't have a chest, not to mention a set of working lungs. Things were getting better and better.

The only thing he knew was that he was slumped over, with his face pressed down into the dirt. He moved each of his fingers one by one, just a touch. Sore as they were, they seemed to be working just fine, and at the very least, they were all still attached. He was in no position to complain.

He continued from paw to paw, carefully manoeuvring each wrist around before moving down to his ankles. After that, he tested both of his ears before giving his tail a tentative flick. It was agonisingly slow work, but it had to be done. The

alternative was getting up and finding out that he'd left a bit of himself behind. He would have shuddered if he thought he could risk it.

Instead, he let his body take over the breathing, and handled everything else as slowly as he could. There was no punishment for being too careful. Until he opened his eyes, and had to face up to the aftermath of the crash, he had all the time in the world. For now, he was just a fox in the dirt.

He regretted not talking more to Melanie. Unsurprisingly, their conversations rarely broached the subject of roadside accidents, but all the same, his brain scrabbled for any titbits of information she may have shared with him, even in passing. It was a small comfort how much he remembered. For example, the fact that adrenaline and system shock were probably the only things keeping him sane right now. On second thought, perhaps he'd been talking to Melanie too much.

It was so easy to believe that if he simply lay there and waited long enough, he'd wake up back at home in his tiny bed. But the reality was that Teal had never been more afraid in his life. He could feel bits of broken glass underneath him, and the stench of burning clung to the back of his throat. What if the car was on fire? What if someone else needed help?

Only one thing was certain. Lying there, with his arms wrapped around his head and his tailed curled up tight, wasn't helping anybody. His arms and legs seemed to be working okay. It was time to put them to use while he still could.

After one more deep breath, he opened his eyes, only to be greeted with a faceful of moist, earthy dirt. In fact, it felt like his whole body was lying on the ground, instead of being strapped to his seat like before. Where was he?

With considerable effort, he levered himself onto his

elbows and looked around for the first time.

Glass was everywhere. Much of it was as fine as dust, glittering like early morning frost, but there were small, jagged chunks of it dotted around, crunching underneath his arms. It littered the road, extending right up to the water's edge, beyond which there was nothing but the swirling fog.

But what happened to the figure he'd seen? And where was the car? As if to answer his question, there was a horrendous groan behind him. Maybe he didn't want to know. He shuddered, slowly twisting onto his back.

The car was right there, submerged in the water with a single blinking headlight flashing away beneath the surface. What was left of the front half were already underneath. If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that there was something in the front seat, swirling in the obfuscating ripples of the water. The thought of it made him shudder, like someone was walking over his grave. But it was difficult to make anything out for certain. The water was so dark.

The rear tyres groaned, teetering back and forth. The only thing keeping the battered metal monstrosity on the road was the tangle of wires from a broken telephone pole nearby.

Levering himself onto his elbows and knees, Teal managed to climb to his feet, stumbling once or twice when his legs threatened to give way. Dust and glass shards rained from his clothes. After a slow count to five, he was still standing. That was a good start. Now onto the car...

He wiped his forehead and took a reluctant step towards it. The Foxtail Duster gave a shrill mechanical whine and tilted forwards, the tyres spinning in the dirt. The wires around the boot and the wheels were barely holding on.

'Easy now...' His voice sounded unreal, echoing around him. But sure enough, the teetering of the car slowed down.

Even the fog seemed to linger lethargically in the air. It was just like being in one of his dreams, the ones where everything moved as slow as molasses. He held his paw out and took another step closer. A whole swathe of telephone poles lay behind him, disconnected and strewn around in the dirt. That meant that it was safe, right? Right?

The wires were so taut, they could snap back at any second. Water lapped against the car doors. A few more steps, and Teal would be able to rest a paw on the boot. Glass cracked under his shoes. It was so close now...

The car groaned again. This time, Teal froze. It was a deep, guttural noise that he could feel reverberating underneath him. For a moment, all was still. Then, the car juddered forwards and nosedived straight in the water, taking the telephone pole with it.

'No!' Teal ran after it, stumbling on pieces of twisted metal and broken license plate, but it was too late. Helpless, he stood by the edge and watched the car disappear in an explosion of bubbles. Gradually, they dwindled down, until finally, with one last great bubble of air, the Foxtail Duster was gone.

The water grew calm once more. The only sign that anything had been there at all was the map, which floated in hundreds of scattered, pulpy pieces all around the edge.

'No.' He didn't know what else to say, standing over the dark waters that had swallowed everything. He knelt down to try and get a closer look, but it was no good. He could have stared into those waters for hours, until he was half-blind from the effort, and he would have seen nothing.

The stranger's car was gone. His suitcase was gone, his clothes were gone, and the prize pack was gone. He gazed at the sodden pieces of the map sheet. That had been his best

chance of getting out of here. And now, even that was gone.

His paws leapt suddenly to his pockets, searching with increasing desperation through each one. But they were all empty.

That was his phone, and his wallet, and his ID, and his passport. Even in his shock, the full extent of what had happened was starting to hit him. The red envelope was nowhere to be seen. It was the present his mother and father had given him, something that had taken years upon years of saving and scrounging and toiling away to put together. They had trusted him with it. And just like that, it was gone forever.

He didn't know how long he stayed there, on his knees, looking down at the water. There was a strong urge to dive down into the murky depths, and try to dredge it all back up. Of course, he would have been cut to shreds almost instantly by all the glass and metal floating around in the water. He wouldn't have lasted ten seconds. But just because he knew it doesn't mean that it was easy to believe it.

So he knelt there, breathing in the dust in the heavy fog, and picked at the plasters on his fingers. Leave it to his plasters, of all things, to make it to hell and back unscathed. His palms were damp with sweat. 'I guess they really are waterproof,' he said. But hearing his voice was no comfort. His throat was so dry, he barely recognised the rasp as his own. It sounded so distant, and tired.

There were many, many things that he could have said. But all the apologies and prayers in the world were like dust in the wind. He was on his own now. He'd made a terrible mistake. And he now had to make things right.

His eyes started to burn, but he felt no tears running along his nose, or down his cheeks. His eyes were too dry for tears. 'I guess they really are waterproof,' he mumbled again,

stumbling to his feet to take one last look around. It hadn't been funny the first time, but he thought he ought to say something. At this point, words were all he had. He was sure the tears would follow later.

When he was ready, he clenched his fists, thumbing at the plasters on his fingers, and did the only thing he could after being stranded on his own in the middle of nowhere. He followed the road.

* * *

By the time he passed his hundredth telephone pole, he'd long since stopped counting. There was no point when the next one looked identical to the previous dozen, but at least for a while, it had helped him fool himself into thinking he was getting anywhere. He'd tied a strip of fabric around the base of the first telephone pole he could reach. As long as he never passed another pole with that same strip of fabric flapping in the breeze, he knew he wasn't walking in circles. He checked each one when he went by. There wasn't much else to occupy himself with.

It was just him, the still water and the long road. There was nothing to see but fog, and nothing to do but walk and reflect. There was plenty of time for that.

'I just hope I haven't hurt anyone.' He would have sworn on his life that there was somebody in the road. He'd seen them with his own two eyes for the split second before the car started turning. And yet when he scoured the area, he hadn't found a single trace of them. No footprints, no clothes scraps... nothing.

Teal could only pray that his mind had been playing tricks on him. Even after everything that had happened, he still had that much to hold onto. That was the single silver lining.

If the only animal he hurt was himself, it wouldn't be so

bad. He was no stranger to hard work. He could send his wages over to Sakurai to pay Ki back for his car, and after that, he could save up to reimburse the fund that his parents had trusted him with. Clothes could be replaced, and his Cherry Logic had barely been working at the best of times anyway.

But if he hurt somebody, he wouldn't know what he'd do.

He knew one thing. He wouldn't be doing much of anything if he didn't get himself to a hospital before something gave out.

He had no clue what he looked like. His phone was gone, and try as he might, he couldn't make out the slightest hint of a reflection in the murky waters. For some reason, he had an image in his mind of an action movie hero. He could so easily picture them: their perfectly tussled fur, a strategically placed scar across their eyebrow, a tail tragically cut short and a split bottom lip, not bulging, purple and swollen like a pouting mouth after a schoolyard tussle, but petite and precisely defined, slightly off-centre, and with only the slightest hint of red to colour their virtuous battle scars.

Their clothes were weathered in the way that only film clothing could be. Covered in dirt and grime, but utterly pristine, weathered against the grain of the fabric and torn asymmetrically in a sequence that would be replicated countless times in figurines, backpacks and embossed lunchboxes around the world, along with a witty catchphrase or two that the iconic blue hero could whip out before saving the day for the umpteenth time.

'Time to give old Commander Deathmangle a case of the blues!' Something like that, perhaps. Only more stupid.

It was such an absurd image, Teal almost preferred it. Instead, he was caked from head to toe in dirt like he'd just

dug himself out of a grave, shuffling forwards with a shoe whose heel clapped loudly with every step he took. His jacket was torn in long, unsightly strips around his stomach, and his jeans were in tatters. There was nothing cool or heroic about feeling his grimy clothes flapping around him, brushing against whatever wounds were lying just underneath.

The only things that had escaped unscathed were the plasters on his fingers. The cuts had probably healed up nicely by now. At least fate had a sense of humour.

He took another step just like any other, but this time, his shoe sank downwards into the dirt. He hadn't expected that. His arms flailed wildly for balance, but it was too late. With a yelp, he lurched forwards and fell flat on his face. 'Oof!' But he barely had time to be annoyed by the fall before he noticed something. Something important.

The dirt by his face wasn't tightly packed like the road. It was loose, and dotted with tiny blades of grass. It even smelled fresher, with the sweet aroma of wildflowers in the air. He tried to lift his head, but something brushed against his nose. He recoiled back at once, covering his muzzle preemptively in fear. But once his eyes focussed, he found that it was nothing more than the head of a yellow buttercup. What was going on?

He got to his feet and dusted himself off. He must have been daydreaming. He'd reached the end of the road without even realising it.

After walking for so long, it felt like he'd finally arrived at the mainland. Here, the entire path seemed to open up, leaving the still, eerie waters behind for good. Where the dirt road ended, a well-worn trail continued far into the distance, cutting through wispy fields on either side. There still wasn't a lamp or street sign in sight, but he'd take what he could get.

At long last, he was actually getting somewhere. Civilisation couldn't be much further away.

'Hello!' he called, jogging into the fog with a renewed sense of hope. His shoe heel clapped behind him. 'Hello, is anyone there?' When he was met with silence, he tried again in Sakuranese, yelling as loudly as his hoarse throat would allow. He wasn't jogging for long before he started panting, but he continued shouting for as long as he had breath, switching back and forth as best he could. Surely, someone out there would be able to hear him.

Somebody. Anybody.

'Hey, I need help! There's been an accident on the road! Someone could be hurt! Hello? Hello?'

It wasn't until he thought he was going to be sick that he finally came to a stop. It took a while for the world to stop spinning, and longer still for his knees to stop knocking together. Even if he hadn't been rattled from the crash, Teal was far from the running type. Eventually, however, his heart stopped pounding a drum in his ears, and things seemed to calm down.

The grass by the trail tickled his ankles, waving in the breeze alongside the loose, fraying seams of his jeans. He couldn't give up now. But what was he supposed to do? For all he knew, the dirt trail was every bit as long as the road, and the sky wasn't getting any lighter. Maybe it would be better if he took his chances off the beaten path. Who knows? If Ki had been living all the way out here, maybe there were others too. Others that might have access to a phone, and medical supplies.

Regardless, he knew he had to do something, and he had to do it soon. He didn't want to wait around to see what feral wildings were lurking in the Sakuranese countryside at night.

It was no place for a self-respecting animal. ‘I just wish I had a sign...’ He sighed. ‘Any sign would do.’

Unfortunately, he received no such thing. The most surprising thing was that he had actually waited for one, looking around hopefully just in case. But it had been a long day. He shook his head and got ready to continue the trek, and that was when he felt something indent the fabric over his right shoulder. There was something sitting on it, twitching in the periphery of his vision. With a small nudge of his shoulder, it took off into the air.

‘Oh.’ It was a moth.

Obviously, it couldn’t have been the same one that he rescued at home. That would have been absurd. But all the same, he couldn’t help but smile as he watched it spiral in the air, darting and diving and swooping through the grass, as free as anything possibly could be. It wasn’t just a welcome sight for Teal, though he was certain he’d never been so happy to see one. It was also the first living thing he’d seen in hours. Of all the things it could have been, it had to be a moth.

But it didn’t stick around for long. Teal had barely followed it through a few loops before it suddenly darted off, carving a path straight through the field. ‘Hey, where are you off to?’ he called after the small dot, which grew fainter and fainter with every flap of its tiny wings. It may just have been a moth, but Teal wasn’t eager to part with whatever company he could find.

Just before the fog enshrouded it completely, it seemed to come to a halt, where it hovered in a circle a few feet above the ground. ‘The trail’s right here!’ Teal shouted.

But the moth was insistent, circling the air even faster for a few moments before vanishing out of sight completely. ‘Hey!’ Teal picked up his feet and chased after it, keeping an eye on

the road behind him. ‘Where are you going?’

At first, he could barely see it through the fog, but the further he jogged, the more glimpses he caught amid the endless grey void. It was only the vaguest of impressions – a wingbeat here, a flutter there. But Teal knew he couldn’t just wander off the beaten track and risk losing his bearings completely. He did his best to keep the trail behind him at all times. If ever he needed to return to it, all he had to do was turn tail, and sooner or later, he’d find it again.

When he finally caught up to the moth, he found it on the edge of a hill, hovering in yet another circle above a mound of pale pebbles. At the centre, the small, delicate bud of a white chrysanthemum was just beginning to bloom. It was strange, almost like the moth had been waiting for him to catch up.

He edged his way over to it, trying to move carefully, but the terrain wasn’t making it very easy for him. Small stones skittled underneath his hind paws. All the same, he pressed on, getting closer and closer with every step. ‘Hey there. What are you doing—?’

His shoes skated straight over the stones. He scrambled to get his footing back, flailing his tail as a last-minute counterbalance, but the rocks underfoot only gave way to yet more rocks that tumbled down the side of the hill. He clawed at anything he could reach, pulling tufts of grass clean out, but the slope was far too steep. His paw stretched out, reaching to the mound of pebbles. Then, he found himself sliding down.

Before he knew it, he was falling head over heels, and when he finally came to a stop, he hit the ground hard.

It took a good minute or so of groaning before he even attempted to lever himself onto his backside. Everything ached even more than it did before. He rubbed his bruised tail, his bruised elbows, and everything else that was doubtless

going to be purple and extremely tender for the next few days.

To add insult to injury, the heel of his shoe had flown clean off, and he was in no mood to go looking for it. At least it wouldn't be clapping anymore. Silver linings were getting harder to come by. But where was that moth? He scraped the dirt from under his claws and gazed up the hill.

It was probably a million miles away by now. And good riddance. What a cruel trick to play on him. Sheathing his claws, he turned around and there it was, hovering not a foot from his nose. His eyes narrowed. 'Thanks for that,' he grumbled. But then he saw it, silhouetting the moth like an angelic ring. It was faint, barely visible through the grey mist, but it was definitely there. Of that much, he had no doubt.

It was a light. And whether that light was a lamp post, an old-fashioned gas light or a flame on a stick, the fact that it was a light was enough. 'You're a lifesaver,' he muttered to the moth, which fluttered back and forth in response, beating its tiny wings. He meant it this time.

Without a moment's hesitation, he made for the light, limping along with his heelless shoe dragging behind him. The moth followed close behind.

* * *

At times, it seemed hopeless. His senses were next to useless with the atmosphere so impenetrably thick around him. But all the same, he climbed over crags and ducked under too many old, withered branches to count, always following the hazy halo in the distance that somehow never seemed to get any larger, or for that matter, any brighter. It wasn't until he passed his own set of footprints for the second time that he realised that something was very, very wrong.

After leaving the trail behind, Teal had long since lost anything resembling a reference point. He wasn't sure he was

even in Nahashi anymore. If he had been well and truly lost before, he didn't know what that made him now. 'Stuffed' seemed to win out over a host of less savoury, but infinitely more satisfying words. 'Damned' had come a close second.

At home, he often heard the train pulling out of the station in the morning. The sound used to drive him insane, because more often than not, it ended up waking him up at the most unnatural hours of the day. He would have given anything to hear that train now.

Even the moth didn't know where it was going. It appeared to have resigned itself to hovering over his shoulder and following him wherever he went, landing on his jacket to take short breaks, and occasionally alighting on the grass to swipe a few glistening beads of dew from the long blades.

Teal hadn't drunk a single drop since the plane landed. Whenever the moth swooped down, he licked his dry lips and watched it jealously.

Shaking his head, he slumped down on the side of a withered stump for a moment, using his tail to dust away the leaves. His hind paws were exhausted. The moth settled on his finger and got to work cleaning its antennae. Several times, he found himself reaching for his phone, only to come up empty-handed.

Up ahead, the pale light continued flickering, always just out of reach. 'You know, in a few hours, that light is going to be the only light we've got. Then we're really in trouble. If you think being as blind as a moth is bad, wait until you see me stumbling all over the place. At least you can fly.'

It continued fiddling with its antennae, nonplussed. He sighed. 'Now I don't know what I'm going to do, but you've got to have some old branch or crevice that you could hole up in until the morning.' It tiptoed along his wrist, ducked under

his sleeve and poked its tiny head out. ‘Oh no you don’t,’ Teal chuckled wearily, waving his paw to send it back into the air. ‘Not unless we can find a massive sleeve for me.’

Eventually, after much cajoling, it settled, disgruntled, back onto one of his fingers. Then, it was back to silence. Teal watched it stretch its legs. It didn’t escape him that he’d been spending all this time talking to a moth. But he had to talk to somebody. The silence was worse than anything.

In the silence, there was nothing to block out the voices whispering all his worst fears to him. Nothing to block out the flashes from the crash - the tyres screeching like banshees, and the windshield crackling like ice on a newly frozen lake. He shuddered.

Leaning over, he ran a finger gently down the moth’s back. It didn’t seem to mind at all, even lifting its azure wings for him. He looked down at it with a mournful smile. Yellow bands ran down the thin black abdomen, and in the centre of each of its mottled wings, two ringed yellow dots sat, staring out like a pair of inquisitive eyes. At least he didn’t have to be alone. ‘You know, for a second there, I really thought we were going to find a way out of here.’

‘Chirp!’

He closed his eyes and nodded, continuing to stroke soothingly along its back. He knew there was no point in feeling sorry for himself, but all the same, he could feel himself start to well up. He was so afraid. ‘There was so much I could have done differently, so much I needed to set right. I’d do anything for a second chance. Anything...’

‘Chirp!’

‘I know, I know. I talk too much.’ Wait...

Moths didn’t chirp. But then what was making that noise? He gulped. Against his better instincts, he cracked a single

eye open. The moth was sitting deathly still on his finger, staring down at the ground without a single wing tremor or antennae twitch. Something was lurking by his hind paws.

There was another chirp, this one even louder than before. Over the stump, Teal caught the barest glimpse of white. Barely breathing, he tried to inch his leg away, but that only made matters worse. He heard a death rattle, like the sound of a thousand old bones clacking together, and that was the final straw. He yelped and threw himself backwards off the stump.

There he stayed, close to the ground with a paw over his mouth. The moth hovered uncertainly at his side. That was the most hideous noise he'd ever heard. He had no intention of meeting whatever was responsible for it.

From behind the stump, he heard another chirp, and then the clacking once more, which echoed through the fog like a set of possessed wind chimes. What could possibly be making that sound? But after some small scabbling noises, it stopped abruptly. Then, there was nothing. No more chirping, and to his immense relief, no more death rattling. He stayed where he was and waited, but sure enough, the air was as still and silent as it was before.

Now, the only question was why. Had it wandered off, or was it instead merely edging its way around the stump to take him by surprise? With great reluctance, he crept to his knees and slowly poked his nose over the dead wood.

He was greeted by two dark eyes and a hundred rings of chattering teeth. 'Aaaah!' He fell straight onto his back with a heavy thud. 'Oof.'

All his breath was knocked out of him. Defenceless, he scabbled backwards in the dirt, wheezing with both paws up to his face. 'Please don't eat me,' he gasped. 'Foxes are lean; there's more dirt on me than meat!' With his eyes clenched

tightly shut, he waited for a bullock devil's jaws to close upon him at any moment.

But they never came.

There was always a chance that he was being toyed with, and the moment he opened his eyes, his life would be snuffed out forever. But after a while, he began to grow impatient, and worse still, curious. If he truly was done for, he'd rather they get on with it already. He parted two of the fingers over his eyes, and tentatively gazed out past the plasters. He'd prepared himself for the worst, but he still wasn't prepared for what he found.

A pale egg was sitting on the stump, the largest he'd ever seen. It was about the size of his head, finely indented with many rings of sharp, interlocking grooves. How on earth did that get there? He picked himself up off the ground and took a cautious step towards it. His tail lashed apprehensively behind him. But nothing happened. Why would it? After all, it was just an egg, right?

He stared at it intently, daring it to move. He was waiting for something crazy to happen, like for an extra-terrestrial nightmare to burst out of the shell and try to latch onto his face. After his luck today, it wouldn't even have been all that surprising. And yet it stayed absolutely, resolutely still.

The moth was similarly suspicious. It flew a few wary circles around it, diving closer and closer, but never touching it. When it stopped its divebombing strategy, Teal expected it to return to his shoulder, but instead, it alighted directly upon the top of the shell. A few bats of its wings, and it seemed satisfied. After a short victory strut, the moth returned to Teal's side.

It really was just an egg. He breathed a sigh of relief. Now the real question was what in the blazes the egg was doing

there. He strafed around the stump, but there were no tracks leading off into the fog, and there didn't appear to be any answers from the egg itself. The pattern seemed to be identical around the entire shell. He leaned in to get a closer look, and that was when the egg sat up.

'Chirp!' Teal almost had a heart attack. He snatched his paw back at once, and the egg came to life before his eyes.

It was the strangest-looking creature he'd ever seen. The interlocking grooves weren't a pattern at all. They were rows of tiny fangs, the jagged points of which were now all facing outward, chattering away and spinning in various formations. It was standing atop a small pair of stubby white legs, which protruded from the egglike exterior, the only part of the creature that didn't seem to be composed of teeth.

From within the centre, two tiny black eyes gazed out between the rattling rows of fangs, wide and teeming with wonder as the creature teetered back and forth. When it saw Teal, it chirped and jumped up.

'Uh...' Teal's jaw may as well have been on the floor for what use it was to him now. Exhausted as he was, he could still feel adrenaline coursing through him from the earlier scare. He had no idea what to do. His fur had puffed up so much, he could feel his jacket slowly riding up his back. 'Why hello there, you little... you.'

One of the rings of fangs about halfway up its body parted slightly. Two stubby arms emerged and gave a little wave.

Teal just stood there, gawping. That did it. There was no way he was conscious right now. Surely, he must have been choking on car fumes on the side of the road somewhere, or else he was back at home in his bed, dreaming up the whole thing. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

And yet his dreams had never felt this real before. And he

wasn't sure he'd have been able to make up anything like this. He rubbed his eyes. Unfortunately, when he reopened them, it was still very much there.

He shook his head and tried to clear his throat. It had been a long day. 'Sorry, let's try that again. My name is Teal. I'm a red fox, which I hope you can still make out underneath all this dust. And what are you exactly?' He reached a timid paw out.

Unfortunately, despite his best intentions, the creature startled almost immediately, hopping straight up into the air. Its limbs withdrew into the egglike body, around which the rows of fangs all spun together, locking into place. By the time it came back down and thumped onto the stump, it was an egg once more.

'Darn it. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you.' Teal retreated a few steps back. The moth stayed close by, flitting between both of his shoulders, but never straying beyond his paw's reach. It didn't seem to know what to do with such a strange creature. After being fooled once, it certainly wasn't taking any chances. For all Teal knew, the moth had the right idea.

He knelt down, rubbed his fingers together and made some gentle tutting noises, like he would to beckon a gecko or pet salamander over.

After a while, the grooves in the centre parted, and two tiny, curious eyes stared back at him. Sure enough, after a few chirps to test the water, the stubby limbs re-emerged from within the rows of clattering teeth. The creature scabbled to its feet, taking a few moments to get its balance together. It even appeared to do a few stretches, if it could be called that, starting a ripple from a single fang and sending it all the way around its body. The sight was curiously hypnotic, like a

rolling meadow in the wind.

For a time, Teal just stood there, watching it bumble around. Then, an idea crossed his mind. He brushed the dirt from the tattered remains of his jacket and crouched down by the stump, doing his best to make himself look less imposing.

‘Hey, you don’t know your way around, do you? We could really use some help.’ The words had barely left his lips before he was second-guessing himself. This was madness. He may as well have been talking to a real egg. And yet there was a strange intelligence in the creature’s eyes. What did he have to lose?

The creature certainly seemed to have some understanding of his words. It even appeared to bow slightly, though Teal wasn’t sure if his mind was just playing tricks on him. All the same, he nodded back. With a quick hop off the stump, it took a few waddling steps towards him, giving a few affirmative clacks for good measure. ‘We need to get out of this place,’ he told it slowly. ‘We want to go back home, back where there are other animals. Can you help us?’

Its eyes closed for a moment of introspective trilling, rocking back and forth on its tiny stubs. When it opened them again, they were blazing with purpose, two brilliant, burning stars in the darkness. Teal took a step back. Something was about to happen.

The circles of fangs around its body rattled ominously. Suddenly, one of them stuck straight out, wavering like a jagged compass needle. The fang pointed directed at Teal. He quickly ducked out of the way. It was soon joined by another, and then another, until they were all sticking out, their jagged edges glinting in the light. Then, the rings started spinning.

It was slow at first, with each circle of fangs clacking over the other, but before long, they were clattering frantically

against each other, revolving so rapidly, it sounded like it could take off at any moment.

Sure enough, one by one, the stubby limbs drew back inside, and the creature began to lift into the air. The grass was whipping around it furiously. Teal squinted, shielding his eyes from the gale. The moth tried to fight it, thrashing its wings against the wind, but it was too strong. Teal cupped it in a paw and held it close to his chest. He staggered back, first one step and then another, before he managed to dig his heels into the dirt, his clothes billowing around him.

Just when it seemed like it couldn't possibly go any faster, there was a blinding flash of blue light. And just like that, it was gone.

Teal's paw fell open, and he stumbled forwards. He couldn't believe his eyes. It had vanished into thin air. He waved a paw over the place it had been hovering. The air had an astringent taste to it, and it smelled faintly of burning.

He looked around. The wind had cleared much of the fog in the surrounding area away. He could make out ridges and hills that he'd never been able to see before, but the creature was nowhere to be found. Teal didn't know what to make of it. Even the moth seemed confused. It darted back and forth indecisively. What were they supposed to do now?

There was flash of blue light up ahead. Could it be...?

Teal jogged past the stump and peered through the thinning fog, waving the wisps from his face. Sure enough, there it was, perched on one of the many forked, wizened branches of a white tree. When it saw him, it chirped excitedly. The rings of fangs stood on end, vibrating wildly and spinning once again.

'No, don't—!'

But it was too late. With another flash, it was gone, the

sudden gust of wind knocking the branch clean off. The old tree groaned, and there was a monumental creak. Teal and the moth watched what was left of the trunk slowly and inexorably teeter over, splintering in a cloud of dust when it struck the ground. It rolled a few feet on the grass before coming to a stop.

But before the dust had even settled, there was another flash in the fog, this time even further away. ‘Hey!’ Teal called, lumbering after it with his broken shoe heel. ‘Where are you going?’

He chased the creature from spot to spot, each time only barely making it there before it disappeared in another blast of wind. Slowly but surely, it seemed to be leading him through the fog. Where he was going, he couldn’t have begun to guess, but surely anywhere was better than this place.

Teal was red-faced and panting like a workhorse before the creature finally came to a stop. He found it sitting atop a tall rock, resting its eyes with its stumpy legs sticking out. It greeted him with a contented chirp.

Four well-worn trails split off from the rock, surrounded by old, wilted grass and pocketed with old stone lanterns. Teal felt a jolt of relief when he saw that each path was accompanied by its own wooden signpost. He couldn’t read what any of them said, that much was immediately obvious. But it didn’t matter. He was one step closer to civilisation.

‘So I guess I need to pick a path, huh?’ he said to the creature. It gave a lazy swivel where it sat, clacking a few of its fangs together. Teal shrugged and trudged over to the first trail. It looked much like the rest of them, just a footpath carved into the dead grass that stretched far into the fog. The only thing that broke it up was a few stone lanterns lying on their sides.

It was a melancholy sight. Flecked with dirt and tarnished with years of wear, each lantern bore fine carvings of characters that were etched deep into the stone. Most had only a few, but for some, the carvings ran from the very bottom of the posts right up to the top of the four-cornered umbrellas. Many of the lantern heads remained intact, still poised to protect their long-extinguished flames even as blankets of moss covered them from top to bottom.

He moved over to the second trail, but it was much the same story. The only difference was how many lanterns were lying there. But just like with the first trail, they were all situated close to the rock, always strewn around in the dirt and always clustered together in small groups. None of them were lying on their own. Not one.

By the time he moved on to the third trail, he barely raised an eyebrow. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said, scratching his head. He continued right past it to the fourth and final signpost. ‘All these paths look the same. How am I supposed to choose—?’ And then he saw it.

A lone lantern sat askew in the middle of the trail, leaning towards the cluster of fallen ones lying not inches away from Teal’s hind paws. A yellow flame burned fiercely from within. Teal stared at it, intrigued. This must have been the light that he’d gone in circles trying to follow. And all this time, it was just an old stone lantern...

Without warning, the lantern uprooted itself from the ground, revealing a huge clawed, scaly foot. Teal stood there in disbelief as it sped off in the fog, the claws hopping down the path without disturbing a single blade of grass.

‘Hey, wait!’

He tried to run after it, but less than a few strides in, and it was already as far away as it had ever been, blinking away in

the distance. This time, however, he knew better than to believe that it was just out of reach. Teal trudged back to the rock with his head held low.

The moth lingered for a few moments longer. When it returned to him, it flew backwards, still staring out after it. It seemed exhausted. Fighting against the flurries of wind that the egg creature kicked up must have been the final straw. It fluttered down onto Teal's shoulder, and there it stayed, its poor wings splayed out.

Teal sighed. 'Now what are we supposed to do?' The creature sitting on the rock chirped encouragingly. It landed on the ground with a rattle and waddled over to the same trail the lantern had sped down, its fangs clicking together with every step. 'Wait, am I supposed to go after that thing? But it was so fast.'

The creature gave an impatient trill.

'Okay, okay, if you say so. You know, all this running around is a whole lot easier when you can just poof away and reappear wherever you want. How do you even do that? Magic potion? You wouldn't happen to have a spare, would you?' The creature leaned coolly against the rock. 'Yeah, I thought not.'

Teal had no idea whether or not he could trust it, but right now, he didn't have a whole lot of options. And frankly, in a place where eggs made of teeth could disappear, and lanterns were sprouting legs, you could use all the help you could get. On the plus side, if he ever got out of this alive, he was sure it'd make for one hell of a story, even if nobody in their right mind would ever believe him. Move over, butter knife.

He took his first step down the path, but before his shoe even hit the dirt, the death rattle was sounding off behind him. Almost immediately, his hackles were up. He turned around,

trying in vain to comb the mohawk of fur on his neck back down. ‘Was that you?’ The creature just stared up at him with two wide eyes, seemingly oblivious.

After a few seconds, he tried again, but the rattling resounded once more, this time even louder than before. He whipped around to catch the creature shuddering violently, squatting down with all its rings of fangs stretched out. When it realised it was being looked at, it stopped abruptly and jumped up, chirping away. ‘Well it’s too late for that. I already saw you. Now just tell me what I need to do to make sure I never have to hear that noise again.’

It patted him aside with a brazen trill and proceeded to wobble down the trail, holding both stubby arms up to its eyes. Teal cocked his head. ‘You want me to cover my eyes?’

The creature gave another loud chirp. This time, it turned around and started tottering backwards, even less sure-footed than before. At first, Teal wasn’t sure what to make of it. But when the small creature came to a stop and motioned to him with one of its arms, he realised what the creature was getting at. At least, he hoped so.

He decided to follow suit, turning his back to the path and feeling out every step before pressing his hind paw down. Luckily, he wasn’t in a hurry. Each of his steps easily covered a half-dozen of the creature’s. The moth seemed to be able to sense that there was another long walk ahead. It hopped from his shoulder into one of his torn jacket pockets, where it nestled down to rest. Teal couldn’t blame it. He’d have done much the same thing, given half the chance.

Together, Teal and his sole companion, the unsteady, toothy egg, paced backwards a considerable distance. He made sure to keep an eye on the rock they started from. It was the only landmark he had. The further they went, the fainter it

became, veiled in the encroaching murk. It was barely visible by the time the creature finally came to a stop and spun around, chirping victoriously. It appeared they'd reached the end of the line.

'What is it?' Teal turned his head curiously. There it was. The lantern was further away this time, but he managed to get a good glimpse of the fire at its heart before it fled back into the fog, its single clawed foot flailing away. The flame was floating, flickering in the wind without any sign of a candle or wick. It was the strangest thing. He wondered what would happen to it if it went out. It was the only stone lantern of the lot that was still lit. No wonder it was so shy. 'Wait...'
Something clicked inside Teal's head.

He bent down to pick the creature up. Its fangs clacked together apprehensively. 'Oh, hush now,' Teal cooed, carefully scooping it into his arms. 'If I wanted to eat you, don't you think I'd have done it by now?' The fangs at its back pressed into place, locking accommodatingly.

And with that, he proceeded onwards, holding a paw up to his eyes to block out as much of the light as he could. Gradually, it grew brighter and brighter, until the yellow haze was a glowing halo around his paw. Slowly but surely, he was able to close the gap, until the lantern was only a few feet away, blocked from his sight only by his fingers.

'I get it now,' he gasped. He turned his back on the lantern and gently lowered the creature to the ground. 'It only moves when you look at it!' The creature chirped indignantly in response. 'Well how was I supposed to know?'

He shook his head. 'Never mind. That doesn't matter. What's important is this: if I follow that lantern, will it take me out of this place?' The creature chirped. 'Are you sure?' It chirped again. Teal's brow furrowed. The absurdity of the

situation hadn't escaped him. He closed his eyes and lowered his head into his paws. 'Can you even understand a single word I'm saying?' It chirped just as enthusiastically as before. He sighed. 'Don't chirp if you can understand me.'

It stood stark still and didn't make a sound. Not a singlefang flexed on its body. Its dark eyes locked with his. Teal slowly inclined his head. 'Okay,' he said. The creature bowed back, and they shared a quiet moment together. Without all the waddling and trilling, it appeared to be significantly more reposed; Teal might have even said proud. 'Thank you. For all the help.'

The creature chirped one last time. It gave a small kick into the air, and with a quick spin and a final flash of light, it was gone. Something told Teal that he wouldn't be seeing it again. The trail was already lonelier without it.

The moth crept from his pocket, its head craning around in seeming confusion as to why a sudden gust of wind had ruffled its sleeping quarters. 'Don't worry,' he whispered. 'It's going to be okay. Something came along to light our way. We're getting out of here.'

* * *

Shadow fell upon the land like a smog. There was no silvery moon to break through the darkness, nor the faintest hint of a star in the night sky above. It rolled over fields and swept through trees, stilling the wind and silencing any errant rustling of leaves, or warbling of insects. Nothing could escape it.

Nothing save for an old lantern.

Tuberous roots and clumps of moist earth hung from the claws of its enormous scaly foot, upon which it hopped, weaving through a maze of old trees and dead shrubs with its head held high to light the way. Every few steps, it came to a

stop and dug its claws deep into the ground, anchoring itself to the spot. There, it would wait, still save for the mysterious yellow flame burning at its heart. Carvings along the stone post cast the shadows of ancient characters in a small circle around it.

Teal followed close behind, a paw over his eyes and his shoe clapping loudly behind him. At first, it had been difficult to resist making eye contact with the only source of light he had, but over time, he had mostly gotten used to it. After a short rest, the moth returned from his pocket to join him. In the darkness, it stayed close, hovering over his shoulder with its small, papery wings beating together by his ear.

Once they caught up to it, they would often take a moment to savour being in the safety of the halo again. The floating fire radiated no heat, but bathing in its light still felt warmer than being slowly smothered by the surrounding murk. There, dark shadows cavorted, just out of view. Whether it was just his eyes playing tricks on him or something more, Teal decided early on that he was better off not knowing.

When it was time to move on, he lowered his paw and the lantern leapt another few steps ahead, starting the cycle anew.

He didn't know what was keeping him on his paws. After walking for the best part of a day without so much as a sip of water, he should have been exhausted. But he wasn't. He was more determined than ever, floating down the path like it was nothing. It could have been the adrenaline. Maybe, but something told him that it would only have taken him so far. Beyond that, the only thing he had left was hope.

That was a nice thought. Hope had helped him in other times when he felt like he had nothing else. Maybe it was helping him now. If nothing else, it was certainly helping him deal with the broken heel of his shoe, which had been driving

close to madness for a while now.

Luckily, the stone lantern took them to what looked like a gorge. Here, the trail finally came to an end. There was no more dirt or dead grass for his heel to sink into. Only a narrow, stony corridor, surrounded by tall walls on either side. All that could be seen through the fog was a narrow pathway through the rocks, which seemed to lead up, and up, and up.

Where it went, Teal couldn't have said. For all he knew, it led up into the sky itself. But it was at least somewhere, and after being lost for so long, somewhere was good enough for him. The lantern scabbled along on its claws, and he took his first step inside.

Here, Teal slowed down, taking advantage of the lantern's bright, wickless flame to look around. At first, there wasn't much to see besides the bare, gnarled walls on either side, but before long, messages began appearing, carved into the rock.

Some were spread far apart, towering so dramatically over his head, he was at a loss at which species would even be tall enough to make them, and yet others were clustered together by his hind paws. Most of them were solitary, but a few seemed to stand in answer to others. He wished he could read them all. Even the moth seemed curious, zipping from carving to carving. They looked old. Who knew how much history was contained within those scrawlings?

Between many of the crags and crevices of the walls, small paper charms hung down, their strings flapping in the breeze. He ran his fingers through them, wondering why they were flailing so wildly, and he was surprised to see his breath fogging in the air. He could barely feel the cold at all.

Higher and higher he climbed, and the messages and paper charms climbed with him, growing greater in number until they were being written and plastered all over each other. So

numerous were the charms that they were pooling together on the floor. Unable to dig into the rock, the lantern contented itself by concealing its clawed foot beneath them. Teal found himself having to tiptoe over them to avoid being ankle-deep. The moth did much the opposite, making a game out of divebombing through them.

The only things that didn't seem to be growing were the walls around him. At the entrance, they had towered over everything with no end in sight, but the further he ascended, the shorter and shorter they became.

It wasn't long before he could make out the peak, underneath the unsteady light of the lantern. From what Teal could spy, squinting behind his paw, the flame was flickering more wildly than ever. He prayed it wouldn't blow out before they reached the end. Just how high up were they going?

'Chirp!'

What on earth? He looked around, and who should he find perched at the top of the walls but three of the fanged, egglike creatures from earlier. 'Well hello to you too.' Evidently, there was more than one. Two of them were sitting down, their fangs chattering away. The third was walking along the edge, tottering precariously with its arms held out.

Teal wondered if any of them was the creature that had helped him earlier. Somehow, he doubted it, but it was difficult to tell. They all looked strikingly similar.

At that moment, a heavy gust of wind blew through the rocks. With a squeak, the creature on the edge lost its footing and plummeted straight towards the ground. Teal sprinted forwards to catch it, but the rings of fangs were already grinding away in the air. Its limbs flew inside, and before it could hit Teal's outstretched paws, the creature disappeared in a flash. He stared at the empty space.

The stone lantern stood in front of him, its flame barely holding on in the breeze. For a moment, it was still. Teal's eyes widened. Without hesitation, the old lantern took its chance, jumping up on its claws and disappearing up ahead.

'Hey, wait!' Teal called. But it was already gone. With the wind shrieking deafeningly in his ears, he raced after it.

He stared into the distance, desperate to catch sight of the flame, but no sooner had he seen it than it was already gone again. 'Stop looking at it!' he told himself, feeling his way along the walls in the darkness. 'You're helping it get away!' But it was easier said than done. Finding something was a lot harder to do when you weren't allowed to see it.

Onwards and upwards he crept, wading through charms that piled over his shoes. Surely there wasn't much further it could go. This high up, the fog was starting to thin out. He felt like he was climbing a mountain.

Finally, he glimpsed a hint of light on the walls up ahead. The lantern's head was poking around the corner. As quick as a shot, it snapped back and hopped away. Teal stopped and listened to its claw scraping on the rock. One step, two steps... but the third step never came. Why? Had it finally stopped? Teal followed after it with his eyes to the ground, slowly patting his way along the inscriptions in the wall. He could hear the moth's wings flapping by his ear.

Closer and closer, he came to the corner, but as he crept around it, the wall fell away, and he found his paw swiping through thin air. His breath misted out in front of him like a cloud. At long last, he'd reached the top.

The lantern was barely a stone's throw away, its claws buried deep in the centre of a long, narrow stretch of tall green grass. The ground on either side fell away to swirling nothingness. It was a long, long drop, but there was no fog

hovering above it. Teal suddenly realised why. He'd finally broken through it. It was a sobering thought. Even the fog didn't reach this high.

At the end of the grass stood the most serene waterfall that Teal had ever laid eyes upon. It looked like it had jumped straight out of the pages of one of his childhood fairy tales. Even after everything else that had happened, Teal still found himself questioning whether it was real.

It was like nothing he'd ever seen before. It reached so high into the sky, Teal had no comprehension of where it could possibly begin, and it continued so far down, he knew with a glance that there was no way he'd ever be able to see the bottom, if indeed one even existed. The silvery water was perfect, unbroken from one end of the colossal stream to the other. Nary a drop was out of place, not so much as a bead of moisture dripping from the long blades of grass that dipped into it.

Were it not for the brilliant glimmers of light that danced over the narrow walkway, Teal would have been forgiven for thinking that the entire waterfall was frozen. After all, as enormous as it was, it made not a single sound.

On the grass, the lantern was swaying back and forth slightly without a hint of wind, almost as though from exhaustion. Teal did his best not to look, but a single glance was all it took. The clawed foot sprang up from the ground, and in three quick hops, it tore down the grass and threw itself straight through the waterfall. With an anguished hiss, the fire fizzled out, and without its yellow flame, the old stone lantern smashed into pieces on the other side.

What was Teal supposed to do now? Go back? There was nowhere to go back to. If he truly needed to follow the lantern, then really, there was only one way to go.

Teal pushed himself from the edge of the rocks and edged towards the waterfall. Wind whistled through the grass. It was so high. He held his arms out, taking one careful step after another with his tail lashing behind him. The moth clung tightly to his shoulder. The path was barely wider than the span of his arms. He laughed. This was madness.

When he drew close enough to the pearly wash that he could reach out and touch it, he nudged one of the stone chunks with a hind paw. It rocked back and forth. One half was jutting out, crushing a small patch of grass, but the other disappeared behind the water. There was a small gap in the walkway through which the water cascaded.

What lay beyond, he couldn't say. But what was undeniable was that there was something there. The stone had to be leaning on something. He squinted through the water, and he was sure he could make out other pieces of the lantern on the other side. A path lay beyond the waterfall. It had to.

'Here goes nothing,' Teal whispered to himself. His face was inches from the rushing water, and yet there wasn't the slightest hint of mist coming off of it. The air felt no colder. He raised an arm and slowly turned it over. Reflections from the waterfall were shimmering across his body. 'Hey, you might want to stay close for this.'

He opened his jacket and held the inside pocket open, but the moth was nowhere to be seen. He craned his neck back, but it wasn't sitting on either of his shoulders either. Where on earth was it? He turned around.

The moth was hovering in the middle of the grass. It didn't seem to be doing much besides flapping its wings. It just stayed there, level with his eyes as though it was waiting for something. 'Come on then,' he said, jostling his pocket encouragingly. 'It'll be fine, I promise. You won't get wet.'

But the moth didn't seem to react. 'You are coming, right? I can't imagine why anybody would want to stay in this place.' The moth did absolutely nothing. It just fluttered there, staring at him. For whatever reason, it wasn't coming with him. He sighed. 'I guess this is it, then.'

Reluctantly, he held his paw out. It alighted obligingly in the centre of his palm, where it did a small circle before looking up at him, its tiny antennae twitching away. 'You know, it might seem crazy that I've been talking to you this whole time, but I think we both know it'd be crazier to pretend you couldn't understand me.'

It flicked its wings, and the yellow eye markings on each of them looked like they were winking at him. 'Now I don't know who or what it was that sent you. Whether it was luck, some benevolent force up there, or even if... you know what, never mind. But thanks for sticking with me, whatever you are.' Teal gulped. Why was there suddenly such a lump in his throat? 'And you take care, you hear?' he added. 'No matter what happens out there, you never give up, even if you find yourself on your own like I did. You'll find another way out. I know you will.'

With that, the moth lifted gently from his paw. Teal sniffed. It looked like he was on his own again. He turned his back to the moth and gazed up at the colossal waterfall before him. 'And say hi to Mum for me.' He closed his eyes and held his arms out. He couldn't give himself enough time to think about what he was about to do, or he might never be able to do it. It was now or never.

He counted to three in his head. One, two... three. Then, with one last deep breath, he stepped forwards.

Streaks of light danced behind his closed eyelids. Everything was muffled. His shoulders braced, expecting to

feel the weight of an entire waterfall pressing down on him, but it was nothing of the sort. The water was so light, it almost felt like it was cascading upwards along his body. He tried to open his eyes, but they burned so fiercely, he had to jam them shut again before he could catch as much as a flash. Blind, he drifted forwards, sweeping the water aside with his paws like he was swimming through the air. It wasn't cold. It wasn't even wet. It was just... just...

Suffocating. Red spots were flashing in his vision. He couldn't hold his breath for much longer. He flailed through the water, kicking out with his legs. Was he even moving? It felt like he was inching forwards, but it was impossible to tell. He wasn't even sure he was still facing the right way. How much further did he have to go before he reached the other side? Was there even another side?

That wasn't a question he needed answering. He just had to keep going and going, holding his ears down and pressing on with his tail swishing like a rudder behind him. His chest was burning. His heart, which had been pounding like a drum, was already slowing down, like it had given up.

No, not yet. Not when he was so close. Just one more stroke, and he'd make it. See, the shimmering was getting lighter. Just one more stroke, and then another. Why was everything so quiet now? He had this. Just one more stroke. Everything was going to be okay after all, even as the entire world was shrinking down to a speck. Just one more stroke. He couldn't give up. Just one more stroke. Not when he'd come so far. One more stroke. Not when there were still so many wrongs to right. One more stroke. Not now he'd finally found someone who might love him back. One more stroke.

But his arms wouldn't move. Teal tried to breathe, but nothing was coming in. He was sorry. He was sorry he

couldn't have been better. But he'd tried. Nobody could say he hadn't tried. Maybe next time, things would be different. Things would be better. Next time...

His body was drifting now. After so much pain and fear, there was a welcome sense of peace. He'd done everything he could, and now, at the very end, he could finally rest.

And then the cold air hit him.

He broke through the waterfall and landed on his face, coughing and spluttering like a newborn kit. His paws combed feebly through the grass. His lungs raked in air like he couldn't possibly have enough of it, even as his chest was heaving. Everything burned. He was shivering, rattled to the core, but very much alive. And more than that, he was bone dry.

Silvery drops poured from his clothes and fur, but instead of tumbling down, they fell straight up, leaving trails in the air like raindrops on a windowpane. He could feel the water trickling up the sides of his cheeks, cascading along his fur and dripping upwards from the tufts of his hair. Gasping, he swiped a paw through the drops and watched them divide in the air, spiralling outward in their own smaller trails.

It was only then that he realised that the waterfall wasn't falling at all. Or rather, it was falling, but it was falling in the wrong direction. Still catching his breath, he shambled to his knees and cupped his paws together in the stream. It ran straight up the back of his wrists. He reversed his paws, cupping them to face the ground. This time, water pooled in his palms. Before long, it was overflowing.

He carefully withdrew his paws from the waterfall, thin ribbons escaping through the gaps in his fingers. On the count of three, he threw it skyward, and the water soared into the air. Slack-jawed, he stood there with his arms by his sides and

watched it slowly rise, sparkling under the light of the waterfall, until eventually, with one last twinkle, it disappeared into the starry night. ‘Pinch me if I’ve ever had a dream like this,’ he mumbled to himself. Wait a minute...

He rubbed his eyes. No, he wasn’t hallucinating. There were stars in the sky, and a moon. A big, bright, beautiful silver moon. That certainly hadn’t been there before. His gaze drifted downwards from the sky, and for the first time, he saw where he had landed himself.

There wasn’t a hint of fog in sight. The narrow stretch of grass led back down the rocks to fields of rolling, verdant hillocks glowing in the moonlight. Fluffy clumps of pollen were drifting in the breeze like falling snowflakes. Beyond the untamed hills, bushy trees and endless farmyards dotted the horizon, and in the centre of it all, a small, homely village of straw-roofed houses sat, illuminated in fiery orange against the night sky. There were no cherry trees, but Teal could barely bring himself to care. He was somewhere again.

Beside him, the old lantern lay in pieces on the grass. He leaned over and placed a quivering paw on the cold stone. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered. It was all he could bring himself to say. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you...’

Dragging his broken shoe behind him, he hopped down the rocks, breaking into a shambling run as the natural curve of the hills brought him back to solid ground at a break-neck pace. Before he knew it, he was laughing into the night sky, holding his arms out and gliding past wisps of bushes that whipped by. It felt like it was a lifetime ago since he last laughed like that. He’d missed it.

He skidded on patches of bare earth, kicking pebbles in the air, and when the slopes were at their strongest, he slid along them, surfing down the long grass that tickled at his ankles.

Any normal animal would have blanched to hear fangs clacking together in the wilderness, but he couldn't have been more delighted. Around him, the egg creatures from earlier bounded through the fields, disappearing and reappearing with concentrated puffs of wind that blew through the surrounding grass. The only thing louder than their chirping was the humming of contented insects in the night time.

Teal couldn't blame them. The trees were tall, the fields were vibrant, and the air was clean and fragrant, tinged with the distant scent of burning firewood. Compared to where he'd been before, it was like a whole other world.

There was an old road nearby that carved straight through the grassland. Teal made his way over to it. The road wound all the way to the village itself, where two huge iron doors stood, invitingly ajar.

Even from this far away, he found his ears pricking up to hear the sound of heavy cartwheels turning, and shop vendors hawking their wares up and down the streets. Strangely, he heard no cars, and try as he might, he couldn't make out any power lines on the horizon. In fact, he didn't see anything more advanced than a few wooden watchtowers, but it didn't bother him. Come the morning, he would have much to do. But for now, he just needed somewhere to rest.

He passed a wooden sign on his way down, one of several makeshift signs on the road that had been crudely hammered into the ground. 'Anzen,' it read, pointing ahead. Maybe Teal had found safety after all. He patted the sign as he went by.

A piercing horn sounded up ahead. It came out of nowhere, wailing away like a warning siren. Teal dropped down and did his best to cover his ears, folding them in on themselves. If he didn't know any better, he would have called it a war horn. It didn't seem to be stopping either. It just went on, and on, and

on. From his crouched position, he stared into the distance and watched small dots descend from the wooden towers and make for the village.

After what seemed like an entire minute, it trailed off abruptly. It seemed to take most of the sound with it. The cart wheels had all stopped. There was no laughter now. Just the soft rustling of grass, and the chattering of fangs behind him. Then, the death rattles started. Teal gulped and slowly turned his head.

The creatures were all racing down the fields, stumbling along on their stubby legs. The larger ones vanished almost immediately in flashes of blue light, but the smaller ones were left to fend for themselves, chirping obliviously. Something was chasing them, something emerging from the rocks. It rolled down the hills like shadow given form, melting over the grass and dripping down from the boughs of the trees.

In seconds, it had already swept across entire meadows, leaving nothing in its wake but wilted crops and a dead, smoking plain. And the worst thing about it all? It was as silent as the grave.

Teal couldn't look away. He tried to take a step back, but his broken shoe caught on a stray stone and he fell to the ground. The fall seemed to break the spell. He scrambled backwards in the grass, his claws throwing clumps of dirt up into the air. Pure animal panic shot through him. He may not have understood what was going on, but he knew death when he saw it.

Somehow, he managed to stumble to his feet. Without wasting another second, he turned tail and bolted down the road, making for the village. Every other step turned into a leap as he tried to compensate for his missing shoe heel. Behind him, death rattles were ringing out, but he dared not

look back.

Only a few fields from the village, he came across a lone farmer tending to the crops. It was the first animal he'd encountered since before the crash. Everybody else had already fled. A woven basket sat at his side, home to four soil-encrusted green onions and not much else. 'Run!' Teal called as he raced by. But they didn't seem to hear him.

'Something's coming!' he yelled again, but the farmer's head stayed low beneath their wide-brimmed straw hat. They were occupied, their hooves brushing back and forth over the dirt.

Still running, Teal looked back at the lone figure bent over the earth. Directly behind them, the shadow was sweeping the land like a wave. There was an acrid, sulphurous burning in the air that was only making it harder and harder to breathe. It was so close now. He could have thrown a stone and watched it dissolve into ashes. And yet his heels were already digging into the dirt. He raced back into the field without hesitation.

'Hey, you! We've got to get out of here.' Teal grabbed their arm, knocking the hat from their head. Underneath the enormous hat hid a short, startled goat, who looked to be about Teal's age. He peered up meekly, and Teal saw that his right horn was missing, only extending an inch or so from his head. The white robes he wore over his lily-white wool were as plain as could be, complete with a few ears of wheat through his sash, and yet on his hind hooves, there sat a pair of modern-looking trainers.

'Ow, I'm sorry. What did I do—?' the goat started. But the moment he saw Teal, he stopped dead. His wide eyes drifted down to his jacket. 'Oh gods, you're new. You're like me.'

'Sure I am,' Teal grunted, pulling him up by his arm. The goat stood at least a foot shorter than himself. 'Now run for your life, and if we make it out alive, we can have a nice chat

about it.'

'But the onions...' The goat groped towards the basket with his free hoof.

'The world's got plenty more onions,' Teal said, pulling him along the road. His broken heel caught on a loose clump of roots, so he kicked the shoe off in frustration. Already, he was moving faster. 'There's only one of you.' Teal tried to break into a run, but the goat stopped him dead. He wasn't moving at all. He just stood there, staring out at the encroaching wasteland before them. Petrified. 'Come on!'

'I'm sorry,' he said, his words beginning to slur. His legs were knocking together like reeds in the wind. 'Run...'

Teal spun him around and stared him right in the eye. The whites of his eyes were showing. 'I am,' he said. He grabbed onto his wrist. 'Are you with me?' The goat didn't respond, so he asked him again. 'Are you with me?' The irises of his eyes slowly drooped back down. When they recognised Teal, the pupils widened. The goat blinked back.

It was good enough for him. Teal tore down the road, dragging the goat with him as best he could. 'Whatever you do, don't look back!' The goat stumbled along, running like his body had already given up. Behind them, the woven basket slowly melted underneath the encroaching shadow. The onions had already wilted into soot.

Up ahead, the heavy doors began to shut, announcing themselves with a series of deep, metallic screeches. Paper talismans were plastered all over them, rustling together as they slowly swung to a close. Teal were close enough now that he could hear the panicked voices of the animals within. They were too close to fall now, at the final hurdle.

'Hey, we're still out here!' he yelled. But they continued, scraping loudly against the ground. 'We've got to go faster if

we're going to make it,' he muttered to the goat. 'Can you speak Sakuranese?' The goat just stared at him. Teal turned back to the road and starting shouting again. 'Please, if you can hear me, keep them open! We're still out here!'

The right door hit the centre with a hefty thud, but the left one drew to a tentative halt. It stopped a few feet shy of closing off the village completely. That was okay. A few feet were enough.

To his infinite relief, the goat finally seemed to snap out of his daze and find his footing. They were getting closer and closer with every second. They might even make it, provided they didn't look behind them. Knowing how close they were to oblivion would be enough to stop anybody in their tracks. But it was so quiet. He had no way of knowing whether their next step would be their last.

When the end was quieter than the rustling of grass in the wind, how could you tell when it was coming for you? Teal realised too late that he'd already answered his own question. You'd know from the silence. The total, abject silence. And behind the two of them, he could hear nothing.

Two lookouts were stationed at the top. Though he was too far away to make out their words, he knew exactly what they were arguing about. The door couldn't be more than twenty paces away. He gritted his teeth and counted them down in his head. Beside him, the goat's teeth were chattering as he muttered his way through a long list of apologies.

Twenty, nineteen, eighteen...

By the time he came to ten, the left door had started moving again. But it couldn't close. Not now. They were already halfway there.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...

The lookouts were still arguing furiously at the top, but it

hadn't stopped the heavy iron door, which continued its slow swing. If it closed before they could get there, they were dead. It was as simple as that.

Five, four, three...

The door was only open a crack, but that was all they needed. Teal reached behind himself and threw the goat ahead of him. He gazed back, astonished and wide-eyed as he landed on the other side between the iron doors. They were still open, Teal told himself, even when the left door was inches away from clashing with the other. They were still open, but not for much...

Two, one...

Longer! Teal leapt after the goat, throwing himself sideways in the air. His arms and legs grazed the iron bars, but somehow, he managed to make it through. The instant he crossed the threshold, the door was slammed shut and bolted behind him. Inside, the village was in a panicked uproar.

For a while, it was all Teal and the goat could do to lay in a heap on the road, panting quietly amid the madness. Both seemed to be in disbelief that they were still alive. 'Sorry about that,' Teal said. Rolling over, he slowly picked himself up.

'Sorry? You saved my life,' the goat replied.

He helped him to his hooves. Aside from a little wobbling, he seemed to be okay. 'In that case, you're welcome.' Teal looked around, breathing heavily. The sound of bells rang out somewhere in the distance. 'Look, what was that thing? And what is this place? The lack of cars is one thing, but it looks like it's never seen an electric bulb before. You don't happen to have a phone on you, do you?'

The goat just shook his head. He looked terrified. 'Why did it have to be me?' he mumbled to himself. 'It could've

been anybody else. Anybody.’

‘What? What is it?’ Teal was so confused.

The goat stared him up and down, seemingly fixated on his tattered shoes, jeans and jacket. Then, he looked him in the eye for the very first time. ‘You really don’t know?’

‘Don’t know what?’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Sorry about what? Look, what’s going on here? Why can’t you just tell me? I only came here because I needed help. I have to get back home. Something... happened.’

‘I know,’ the goat said. His voice grew heavy, and he had to look away, his ears drooping down. ‘It’s the same thing that happened to all of us.’

‘What do you mean?’ Teal asked. But part of him already knew.

The goat tried to speak several times, but every time he opened his mouth, he gulped like he was swallowing his words. Eventually, he took a deep breath and shook his head. When he looked back up, there was a renewed focus in his eyes. He walked up to Teal and tried to put a conciliatory hoof on his shoulder. Each word hit him like a thunderbolt.

‘I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. But whatever happened to you, you didn’t make it. You’re already dead.’

Author's Note:

'Thank you...'

Thank you for reading Chapter Four of *The End Where It Begins*! I hope you enjoyed the start of Act Two! Keep your eyes peeled for Chapter Five, which is coming soon!

This book is free, published online exclusively at www.t-larc.com, and there will never be any pay walls or barriers to entry. As a result, if you'd like to support me directly, it'd be awesome if you could chuck a [Ko-fi](#) or [PayPal](#) tip my way! It keeps me drinking tea and eating sandwiches, and I'd greatly appreciate any donations that you feel like sending!

But if not, that's cool too! You're already supporting me by reading and enjoying my stuff, so thanks a ton! And if you'd like to support the project in other ways, share the link, spread the word and get a conversation going on social media! Fan art and fan theories are both welcome!

So what are your favourite characters and scenes? Which secrets have you spotted, and what do you think is going to happen next?

Until next time, stay safe, stay kind, and as always, stay hydrated!