

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 1: I'm Getting too Old for This

“Out of the way!” I nearly tripped over a rat out in the alleyway. She was doing nothing more offensive than hanging up her laundry. It was I who burst upon the scene, nearly trampling her and sending her washing all over the dirt streaked pavement.

And the fact I couldn't see for a few moments, my eyes obscured by someone's tighty-whities, *did not* help.

“Sorry!” I called back as I skidded around the next corner.

Her reply wasn't so civil.

Bugger. Where in all the nine underworlds was I? I'd made a left at the last intersection, then a right... or was it another left? I was so freaking lost in this endless maze of alleyways that I could just as well be up in Richmond for all I knew.

And that was *not* a good thing.

Tongue out and panting, I spared a quick glance behind me as my black claws skidded around another hairpin turn between these cracked and sagging red brick buildings. There was barely enough room between them for the alley, my shoulders were nearly brushing the brickwork.

I may not know where I was, and I may not know where I'm going, but I knew for a fact that I *did not* want to stop running.

The hunter couldn't be more than a dozen strides behind me.

I charged through this man made maze sounding like nothing so much as a steamroller, the hunter was whisper quiet behind. I couldn't even hear so much as footfalls over my racing heart, but I know the hunter was there.

I'm a wolf, my name's Tommy.

Another few strides and I came face first to a brick wall. A dead end.

Bugger.

What now?

A quick look at the walls that surrounded me on three sides, they were all typical pre-cataclysm human construction. Sturdy and well weathered, the brick rose up a good five stories. A quick hop on my part and I was able to hook my worn claws into the cracks.

This was not fun. I really need to go on a diet when this is over. Hanging from your fingers is

bad enough, putting all your weight on what amounts to your fingernails is even worse.

Then try climbing on them.

My knuckles felt like they were just about ready to seize up by the time I even made it so far as the second floor window.

It was good enough for me.

The room inside was empty, likely had been for decades. I didn't even need to kick in the glass of the window, it was long rotted out.

A wiggle to get myself through the narrow frame and I was inside. Turing, I spared a quick glance back. I couldn't see anything, but I'd swear one of the shadows was moving.

Yep. No natural shadow could *loom* like that.

Off and running again, the room in here looked like it might have been a nice place. Once. There was nothing left now.

I had to move more slowly. The floor in here creaked in a way that did not leave me feeling all that comfortable. The fact I could all but play a symphony with the different sounds coming up from under me was not a good sign.

Pressing forward, I stepped through the bedroom I was in and to the main part of the apartment. The door to the hall was up ahead.

Giving the handle a yank, the rotted wood of the door came away in my hand, leaving a gaping hole where the handle had been.

Tossing the useless chunk of wood aside, I stepped out into the hallway.

It was better out here. Not a lot, but by some measure.

The apartment had been completely abandoned, the rest of the building was only *mostly* abandoned.

There were lights in the hall, though only perhaps one in five of the bulbs above me cast even the faintest glow.

Starting forward, I could hear the floor of the apartment groaning behind me, far louder than I'd ever been able to make it.

I didn't see another soul until I'd dashed down the stairs to the main floor. Taking the steps four at a time, I was just lucky I didn't fall face first to get a too-good look at the pattern on the carpet.

There were a couple of folks in the main area here, an oni and gnome of some sort. I didn't look at them, but they seemed to be interested in me.

They pointed and yelled my name as I ran by, but didn't offer to help. I was little more than a sideshow attraction.

Shouldering the heavy front door open, I was back out on the street. This wasn't exactly one of the busier parts of V-town, but I was back amongst people again. Worked for me, might give me enough cover to slip away.

Yeah, and fish would fly the day I escaped the hunter that was on my tail.

I got about two steps down the front walk before my left foot tried to fly out from under me.

What the bugger?

Black ice. Gods, this was just my day. It was still late spring. Most of the snow and ice was already gone, but not all apparently.

I'd almost forgot about it. I'd already shed my winter coat. After the long, cold winter we'd just had, I was ready for summer.

Fighting for balance, my other foot slid forward over the same patch of ice that was already causing me trouble. It took everything I had to get back under control.

Gods, I'd climbed the Rocky mountains – and fallen off them – I didn't want to meet my end

slipping on a sheet of bloody *black ice*.

Okay, breathe, breathe. Got it.

No sooner had I pulled both feet firmly under me again then I was off and running. I didn't have any time to spare if I wanted to be able to walk away from this.

Picking up speed, sprinting down the middle of the road, I heard the door to the apartment building boom open again behind me.

Heh. The hunter was getting slow. I'd only lost a second or two, but I was pulling away again.

Another few paces and I reached out to grab the corner of a building, using it to help me pull around the sharp turn.

And nearly ran face first into one of V-town's finest.

Bugger!

The cop almost looked as surprised as I was. I'm sure he wasn't expecting to see me here, this wasn't exactly one of my normal haunts.

With a stuttering motion he reached up to touch a finger to his upstanding black canine ear.

"Afternoon, Sir."

I didn't even waste a breath in rebuking him for calling me 'sir'. Then again, the dogs called everyone that, whether they'd been mayor of V-town or not.

Casting a glance over my shoulder, I could see the dog watching me curiously as I peeled away. A moment later a shadow fell over him. A large one.

The dog simply looked up and said, "Good afternoon, Sir."

Down another side street and I was once again, you guessed it, in an alley. Bugger. How do I manage to do this? I have a sense of direction, I've lived in V-town all my life.

Guess I'm just better at being the hunter than the prey.

Okay... this was starting to look familiar. I think the whole chase started somewhere around here.

Yep. Ten minutes and I've done nothing more than run in a complete circle.

Glancing up, I was startled by a flock of pidgins taking flight from the rooftop up ahead. I must have spooked them.

Not pausing for breath, I kept running down the alleyway. It had been wide enough before, more of a street really. Now it was nearly so narrow that I'd have to start walking sideways soon.

Hey, not that that's a bad thing, it might just force my hunter to go a different way.

Bugger. No such luck.

The hunter's foot falls had been near silent before. They weren't so now.

He must be getting tired, sloppy.

Now that I held my own breath for a moment I could hear him panting, even from this distance, his massive lungs drawing in rough breaths.

All I had to do was keep up this pace for a couple more minutes and I should be home free. Even if he could track my scent he'd be far behind me.

Chalk up another win for canine endurance. We may not be quite as fast as felines, but we can keep up the pace.

Another sound came from above. I was right below where the pigeons had taken off from. This one was less of a rustle, more of a slide click.

I let out a breath and rolled my eyes.

I was right back where the hunt had begun. Right back where I'd begun running from the *two* people who'd started after me.

Oh bugger.

I didn't even get the chance to raise my hands before the batta-batta-batta of a rapid fire gun cut the air.

I guess I should be glad the person behind the trigger couldn't aim. The first half dozen shots went wide, far to my left, staining the red brick a bright blue, but they came closer by the second.

The alley was far too narrow for me to duck aside. It was only a matter of time before I was caught.

Looking up, could see the sun glinting off the grey gunmetal. From the corner of my eye I could also see the golden streak of my hunter.

The lion made one last lunge through the narrow alley, trying to get to me before the shots did.

He missed by *that* much.

I was cut down by the shots, dyed a bright blue across my brown fur an instant before his hands closed around the scruff of my neck.

The shots didn't stop, they continued to rain down, washing the both of us in neon.

That was all English needed. The lion fancied himself a thespian. Though I'd never really seen him get up on stage I knew for a fact he could ham it up with the best of them.

Screaming out in mock pain, the lion threw himself to the ground, shoving me out of the way, and began the longest, most dramatic, and frankly overwrought death scene I've ever had the misfortune to encounter.

He'd put first year drama students to shame with his hack job.

"Woe! Oh woe is me, I am killithed!" With one last howl he dropped to the ground in a heap.

The shots stopped for a few moments before starting up again, seemingly doing their best to pound him into submission, and, more importantly, silence.

"Uh, Babe," I glanced up to the roof far above, "I think you can stop. He's dead."

There was just the faintest of laughter trickling down.

"I don't think so, Wolfy. This is pay back for a *long* time."

From my feet I heard a deep chuckle roll forth. "She better take it for all it's worth, Mate. I don't plan on giving chances like this too often." One paint pellet hit a particularly sensitive spot. A high pitched yelp escaped his lips before the blue rain finally ended.

Reaching down, I gave the now pastel lion a hand to his feet.

"You better hurry. I think she's out of ammo, we need to get out of here before she reloads."

He laughed. "How about I do one better, Mate?" I glanced over to him, "A distraction."

It was my turn to yip as he once again grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. This time hoisting me in the air, he forcibly tucked my arms and legs in until I was little more than a furry ball.

"Uh, English, what--"

"Sush, Mate. You'll throw off my aim." He reared back, still clutching me under his arm.

This was going to hurt.

I had just enough time to tense up before he turned and threw me like a shotput. English had done something like this once long ago, back on the Diamond Dice.

I'd had nice soft water to land in then. This time, not so much.

The lion must be starting to feel his age, his throw wasn't as strong as I expected. That's not to say he didn't send me flying, only that he barely managed to leave me scrambling at the tiles on the roof of the three story building.

I guess I shouldn't be complaining, at least he hadn't missed and splatted me flat into the wall.

I could hear my claws scratch for purchase as I searched for anything I could to keep myself from slipping down. Have I mentioned that I *hate* climbing. Scaling the sheer face of a building is for

a feline, not a wolf like myself.

I almost made it when my grip slipped.

Oh bugger.

I don't care how in shape I was or wasn't, I didn't feel like falling three stories onto hard asphalt.

I was less than a second from freefall when a soft hand slipped around my wrist.

"Need a little help, Wolfy?" Rebecca's face slid into view.

I rolled my eyes.

"Babe, when have I ever said no?"

Rebecca, being a human, didn't exactly have the upper body strength to hoist a guy like me up on her own, but her grip did stop me from sliding any further as my feet scrambled blindly for a toehold.

Sending a few rock chips flying as I pushed myself up, I could hear English cursing below from the onslaught. Somehow I didn't feel sorry for him.

One last push and I was over the edge and on the roof of the building. Not even trying to stand straight, I did more of an undignified roll to get to safety. I could feel the gravel and tar chips and they ground into my pelt.

It was only then I heard Rebecca laughing.

Opening my eyes, I could see her squatting down next to me.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

Reaching forward, she tweaked my whiskers. "I didn't realize just how good these paint pellets were, you've been dyed pastel blue."

I managed to work up a growl from somewhere, "And it's all your fault. Ever heard of conserving ammunition? Or not kicking a downed man?"

"What about me, Mate?" English's voice came from the street below, "How do you expect me to get this off my pelt? I look like an ageing hippie who got stuck in the tie-dye machine!"

Rebecca stepped away from me, poking her head over the edge of the building.

"Looks good on you, English. Anyway, the dog who gave it to me said the paint should just wash out."

There was an unsatisfied grumble from below. A moment later it was followed by a hail of rock chips.

Rebecca squeaked and backpedaled from the edge. Worked for me, that brought her in range of my grasp.

Reaching out, I snaked an arm around her as I sat up, pulling her into my lap.

"So was it worth it, Babe? All this effort the cops have put into helping you arm yourself and you still just seem to be spraying bullets."

She made a face as she settled into my lap, squirming slightly as she got comfortable.

"I still don't see why *I'm* the one who needs it, Wolfy. It's you that had all the death threats, not me. Anyway," She turned her head slightly, glancing back at me, "I've got my knives if I need to defend myself, just like you have your claws. The only reason the police department is pushing this on me is because they think that guns are the ancestral weapons of humans or some nonsense like that."

I chuckled and pulled her closer.

"Something like that, Babe. But you can't deny that it puts you on fairer terms when we play like this. Left to your own you'd never be a match for English or I."

"Is that so?" I could hear a mischievous chuckle work its way into her voice. "I don't need to be able to fight toe to toe with anyone. That's what I've got you for, *Wolfy*. I've domesticated you to do that for me."

"If you say so, Babe."

Anyone else making a crack about domestication and I would have had harsh words for them. Rebecca... not so much.

"Mate, Lass, are you two going to stay up there all day and leave me down here?"

I'd been settling into a nice cuddle and English's just had to break it up.

Stifling a yawn, I looked over at Rebecca before turning back to the street below.

"We'll be down in a second. Meet us on the other side of the building with the fire escapes."

English must really be tired. I could hear the click of his claws on the pavement as he walked away without a word.

"Shall we get to it, Babe?" Reaching out, I helped Rebecca off my lap.

She paused for one last moment before moving, seeming not to want to give up her living pillow.

It wasn't until I stood up behind her that I got a good look at the world around us.

Up on the third floor, we were on one of the tallest structures in the area. Not many buildings were left in V-town that climbed to more than three floors. That gave us a commanding view of the city beyond.

It was... less than inspiring to say the least.

Not that I could say anything against it, but V-town still had a lot of rebuilding left to do.

More than two thirds of the buildings standing were like this one, built by the humans before the cataclysm. They stood the test of time, but the years did still leave their mark on them. Much like this building and the one I'd raced through, they were dilapidated.

Our knowledge of buildings these days wasn't up to what they'd had before. It took everything we had just to keep them standing.

The remaining one-third of the buildings in V-town, they were a whole 'nother matter.

There had been a whole lot more of them before the big earthquake last year. That had taken most of the newer buildings down to nothing more than piles of rubble. The structures that had sprung up in their place, I'm happy to say, were a little bit better built than those we'd been constructing before. Fire Chief Hamish had made sure he'd had something to say about *that*.

But that's a thought for another time. Rebecca in hand, I crossed to the far side of the roof, making sure not to trip over the loose gravel. It was rough on the pads of my bare feet, but I was long toughened to such things now.

"After you, Babe." I mock bowed to her as I stood before the ladder.

She smiled and flicked my nose as she passed by.

You know, it was only after she started climbing down that I realized I did it wrong. If I'd been smart I should have gone first. That would have given me the opportunity to look up.

To make sure she didn't slip. Yeah, that was it.

English was waiting for us on the ground. The lion was still pulling at his blue fur, looking honestly distraught.

"You sure this stuff is going to wash out, Lass?" He tugged again at a tuft on his shoulder, as if trying to pull the very colour from it.

Rebecca smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"Relax, English. I got the gun and dye from the police. This is what they use for live fire exercises." She laughed. "When was the last time you saw a blue fured cop walking the street?"

English's hand finally came away with one last tug.

"Guess you're right, Lass. They wouldn't use anything that stains. Would be against regulation for any of them to dye their fur. It would be conduct unbecoming a police officer." He pulled a face.

Reaching down, he pulled the gun from Rebecca's hands as we started walking.

"So this is the toy is it, Lass? Doesn't look like much."

I had to hand it to him, in the lion's hands the gun looked like little more than a child's toy.

Then again, English was easily twice my weight, and I had a good thirty or more pounds on Rebecca. In English's hands *everything* looked like a toy.

About the only thing English seemed to know about the gun was to make sure to keep the pointy end away from his face. Other than that he turned the rifle over and over again. Inspecting it.

"Was this made by us, Lass? The quality looks too good to have come from any V-town foundry."

Rebecca shook her head as she gently took the weapon back and double checked the safety. "No one really knows where it came from to begin with, but we do know for a fact that it was made before the Cataclysm. No one's been able to make a decent gun since then. That's why they're so associated with humans."

"Hurmph." English grinned as he put up a fierce front. "Having a little toy like that would change the whole bounty hunting business. Anyone could be a bounty hunter then, not just the biggest or the fastest. And imagine what it would do for efficiency if we didn't have to do the chase every time?"

Stepping forward, I circled an arm around Rebecca, pulling her closer.

"I'll take the world the way it is, buddy," I said. "If we started having any measure of these things showing up it wouldn't just be the bounty hunters with them. The criminals would too." I shivered. "And I've been shot too many times to ever wish that."

English forced a fragile looking smile to his lips before reaching out a hand to settle on my back. "You know I didn't mean it like that, Mate. Just idle thoughts, that's all. Anyway," He glanced up the road, his smile becoming real, "We're almost there."

Looking up, I realized where we stood.

"Café Bristol?" I couldn't help but chuckle. "Don't you eat anywhere else?"

He tried to put up the act of being offended. "Mate! What kind of business man would I be if I patronized other restaurants? I've got to keep them in business."

'In business' was right. I'd hardly ever seen anyone but English here, but the lion alone seemed to eat enough to keep the place in the black. I doubt the restaurant would have survived if he hadn't bought it.

Stepping up to the wrought iron table, the same one we always did, we hardly got a chance to sit down before the waitress hopped up.

"Afternoon, E." She smiled and leaned forward on the table as she set out some cups. I noticed that she leaned forward a little more than was strictly necessary. And that her top was cut a little lower than health regulations likely allowed.

Rebecca shot me a glare, but I was more interested in watching English oogle than I was at looking myself.

"You're normal, E?" The waitress asked.

"You bet, dear." He glanced over to Rebecca, "And don't forget to bring something bland and flavourless for the Lass over here. She still can't seem to get her pretty little head around raw meat. There's no accounting for taste."

Both Rebecca and the waitress rolled their eyes in perfect unison.

"I can understand that, E."

A moment later she was off.

We hadn't even had a chance to settle into the drinks that the waitress had set off, water for

Rebecca and I and the obligatory tea for English, before a shadow crossed the table.

Looking up, I knew before I even saw him who it was.

Only police dogs moved like that.

“Good afternoon, Sir.” He bobbed his head down in a swift, hard motion that would have been curt for anyone else. For a police dog it was just part of the job to make every motion perfect. “I have a packet of papers for you from Mayor Maxwell.”

Sighing, I reached out for the locked box he held. Taking it from the dog's hands, he reached into his pocket and unlocked it for me.

'Mayor Max'. That wasn't a phrase that I'd expected to hear even just a few months ago.

I'd won a... contested election race last fall to become the official mayor of V-town. Max had been my running mate back then.

I hadn't really wanted the job, but Commissioner Sayer of the V-town police had been more than adamant that I take it. By hook or by crook.

I'd won a clean race to make him happy, hung around for a couple of months to make sure everything went well, then abandoned the post to Max, a man who was a far better person for the job than I.

Well, that was the plan at least. I'd gotten the first bit down alright, but hit a snag when I tried to resign.

I hadn't thought Sayer even had the lung power anymore to yell. It appeared he did.

The top cop in V-town hadn't been so happy to hear of my plans.

A lot of arguing and a little bloodshed later and we'd come to an understanding. I wasn't mayor anymore. My official title was new 'administrator.'

I was the administrator of V-town. I didn't have any real powers on paper. The position was completely superficial, a figurehead. Something like a governor general.

And it also meant that I was above the mayor.

Opening the box the sat on the table, I rustled through the papers within. Nothing that really required my immediate attention.

Some new laws to sign my name to in order to put them in force, a few status updates. Just another day in paradise. At least I didn't have to make any policy decisions these days.

Snapping the box shut, I pushed it aside as the waitress came back carrying two heaping platters of food. I didn't know how she managed to carry those things, they looked to weigh as much as she did.

“Here you go, E.” She leaned forward again as she sat the platters down. Too bad the lion was more interested in the food than he was her.

The food hardly touched the table before he dug into it. Both Rebecca and I were experienced enough to know that no matter how hungry we were you don't get anywhere near a lion's food until he's good and ready to let you.

Finally feeling brave enough to nip a claw forward, I made away with a piece of raw, dripping beef. It squished between my fangs just the way it was supposed to.

Rebecca was better off. She was able to grab hold of some bread, something I'd never seen English ever take an interest in. I was sure it was put there for her benefit alone.

“Uh, Sir?” The police dog at my shoulder broke in.

Was he still here? I'd thought he'd gone back after delivering the box.

“Yes?” I turned to look at him, leaving, with an effort, my meal behind me.

“I believe there is a message in the delivery that you should read right away.” He coughed slightly, looking away, “I was asked to being an immediate response.”

Sighing, I reopened the small box, taking a longer look at the papers within while the sounds of English eating just feet away tried to distract me.

Let's see here... bill, bill, building plans... what's this?

Down at the bottom of the box was a handwritten letter from Max.

Wiping my hands on my fur before pulling the letter out, I read it slowly.

It was Max alright, I recognized the oni's handwriting.

He was asking me to come back to the job as mayor.

It didn't take long for me to understand why. It may be Max's writing, but it wasn't his words.

Max didn't use terms like 'civic duty' and 'needs of the city'.

I could just see Commissioner Sayer looking over Max's shoulder, dictating to him as he wrote.

I glanced up to the police dog that stood motionless beside me, his face was blank.

Tucked next to the letter was a blank piece of paper and a pen.

"They really want an answer? Right now?"

The dog didn't even blink. "Yes, Sir."

From beside me I heard a chuckle. Rebecca had read the letter over my shoulder.

"They really do seem to want you back, Wolfy. I guess being Mayor in all but name isn't good enough for them."

Letting out a sigh, I set the paper down on the table, taking pains to keep it free of stains, and lifted the pen.

What to write?

Smiling, I started in nice clean script:

'Dear Mayor Maxwell and Commissioner Sayer,'

Pausing for a moment, I glanced back to the police dog that watched me. He was holding his breath.

'No.' I grinned. 'Sincerely, Tommy Taggart.'

Folding the letter crisply, I set it into the included envelope and licked the seal.

"Would you be kind enough to take my message back, Officer?" I asked the dog, while holding a completely straight face.

The dog's own face had dropped. It almost looked like he'd expected me to accept the job back right then and there.

English didn't say a word until the dog had gone, he just kept chewing on whatever it was that had caught his fancy.

"That was a bit of a nasty play, wasn't it, Mate?" His voice was soft, "They really do seem to want you back. They've been trying something different every week."

I rolled my eyes as I finally set into what remained of the meal with full force.

"Really, English? I thought you'd be one of the first people to applaud me walking away from the government. It gained you a partner back at Storm Front, didn't it?"

He grumbled and rubbed his narrow chin before belching.

"Mate, I was never one to egg you on to the job, but you had my full support once the race began. You may not have cared for it much, but a lot of people voted for you, believed in you. It was a bit of a bugger move when you walked away from it after less than a year, yeah?"

I settled back onto my chair and began chewing away at a bit of fat that had come on the edge of a slice of pork.

"I didn't *walk away*, English. You know that. I would have liked to, but neither Sayer nor my conscience would allow."

Rebecca was close at my side again, leaning gently on me.

“You did what you had to, Wolfy. Nobody's blaming you for getting burnt out. You'd never been mayor before. You did a great job while you were in office.”

I laughed. “Let's not ham it up, Babe. I did a decent job, an okay one, nothing more. It was the people below me that did all the work, I just smiled and shook hands.”

She chuckled. “I thought you hated shaking hands.”

I lost most of my appetite soon after. Unsurprisingly, it was English who licked the plate clean.

Heading off, we parted company. Rebecca and I to our apartment and English off in the other direction to his home at the edge of town.

I really didn't understand why he kept that place. The walk out there took a good hour. I know he likes his privacy, but that's taking it a little far.

Our walk wasn't long, but it was a nice change from my previous run to be able to stroll calmly down the wide main avenues of V-town and watch the people stream around us.

There weren't as many folks as there had been before the quake, but the streets were still full with every type of life you could imagine from wolves and cats to onis, gnomes, and avaiens. Even the occasional human could be seen.

And, I'm not unhappy to add, it was what was missing that made me most pleased. While Rebecca and I turned a few heads every now and then, we didn't draw much of a crowd. Most of that could be attributed to our lack of a police guard.

Throughout my whole run up to being mayor and my time in office I'd been nearly unable to escape my omnipresent police guard. Not that I'm saying I didn't need them with the rough ride I'd had, but it was like a breath of fresh air to be able to step outside these days without them always around me.

It wasn't that we didn't see cops about, they could be found every few blocks, and they tended to keep an eye on us as we walked past, but they weren't huddled close like a self-imposed bubble any more.

Rounding the last corner to the apartment, something tickled at the edge of my vision. A wolf's vision is unusually attuned to motion, especially anything abnormal. I couldn't help my head from snapping around, nearly sending me off balance as it did.

Rebecca squeaked as I nearly pushed her over, steeping straight into her path.

“Tommy!” She caught her breath as she saw my eyes narrow. “What is it?”

Good question.

Taking a step forward, I tried to pin down what it was that had attracted me so. There was nothing of note, only an empty alley stood before me.

Okay, that was weird. I hadn't have anything like that happen for a long time. I was long accustomed to living in the city, the two-legged motions of the inhabitants here shouldn't ever trigger me off like that.

“Don't know, Babe. Something just caught my eye. It's gone now.”

Turning, I looped an arm over her shoulder and pulled her close for a quick hug. I did my best to disguise the step I took to place myself between her and whatever it was that I'd seen.

That was the only thing we encountered as we walked home.

Seeing the cracked and plastered walls of Monroe Hall before me was a sight for sore eyes. I hadn't realized just how much English's chase had taken out of me until now. I was ready for a warm shower and a soft bed.

And there, standing just inside the front door was one of only two official remainders of my

police guard.

The lone officer stood stiff as a board and attentive as every other example of the V-town police I'd ever seen.

I nodded to him as we passed by. His voice was firm and clipped when he spoke.

"Good evening, Sir."

Up to the third floor, I waited as Rebecca pulled out the key to unlock the apartment door. I'd long ago given up trying to keep track of keys. I ended up losing them so often that I should get a discount in doors for the number I've had to break down.

Stepping in, I noticed a letter had been slipped under the door. With a sigh, I picked it up.

"Mind if I get freshened up, Wolfy?" Rebecca was pulling off her coat as she headed towards the washroom.

I waved her on, "Yeah, yeah, Babe. Though I don't see why *you* need it. I was the one doing all the running." She chuckled in response. "And don't use up all the hot water!" I added. "I still need to wash this dye out!"

She closed the door and I heard the water running a moment later. Figures. I never was able to understand why humans spent so much time cleaning themselves, both the men and the women. You'd think a creature like me with a pelt would have to spend more time maintaining it than someone with bare skin, yet she washed far more than I did.

Not having anything better to do, I sat down at the kitchen table and waited. This place was finally starting to truly feel like home. I've owned it for almost a year and a half, yet for much of that I hadn't lived here.

First I'd been forced out to Horseshoe Bay with the humans the previous winter, then I'd only been back a day before leaving to explore Edmonton for the next six months. It was only after that, when I'd returned after the quake and started my run as mayor that I really begun living here with Rebecca.

And most of that time it had felt more like a prison than a home, hemmed in as I'd been with police dogs and civil servants.

The last couple of months I'd finally been able to move beyond all that to make this place *mine*.

There were no more scents of countless people having passed through here, only me, Rebecca, English and a few other trusted friends.

Leaning back against the chair, I let out a sigh. Yep, I was home at long last.

I was just about to relax when the ruffle of paper broke my mojo. The bloody envelope.

It was odd to get mail like this any more. I had a normal mailbox down in the lobby, and most government papers came via police dog. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had a paper slipped under my door.

No matter. It was just as likely another government document that some bureaucrat had forgotten to slip in with the others.

Ripping the unmarked brown paper envelope open with a claw, I had to fight with it a bit. Whoever had sent this had certainly sealed it up tight. It took a good couple of yanks before it finally split open.

There was only a single sheet of paper inside.

Reaching in for it, I pulled back in shock a moment later.

"Ow! Bugger!" The edge of the paper was sharp, it cut the callused pad of my finger.

Sucking on my stinging papercut, I reached in again, more gingerly this time with the other hand, to pull the paper free.

It was blank.

I rolled my eyes.

“Gods save me from bureaucrats.” Whoever had gone to all the effort of sending me this single sheet of paper had forgotten to even write their message upon it.

Pulling my injured hand from my lips, I was happy to see the wound had already sealed. I was born with regeneration, a nice little quirk of being a wolf. About one in a thousand of us wolves have it, and I just happened to luck out. All that remained of my papercut now was an angry purple line down the middle of my finger, and that would just as likely be gone in a couple of minutes too.

Tossing the paper and envelope in the trash can, I got up and walked to the bathroom door.

“Hey, Babe, you almost finished in there?” I could hear the shower running on the other side.

“Just about, Wolfy.”

A smile crept to my lips. “How about a hand? I could always wash your back. And you know I'm going to need the favour returned to get this dye out of my fur.”

She laughed.

Opening the door, I stepped into the thick steam of the bathroom.

The next morning came soft and easy.

I was getting used to this 'work when I want, as I want' lifestyle. Partnering with English made me more than enough money to get by with my meagre needs, and partnered with my salary as 'City Administrator', I hardly even needed to do even that.

It was the sun that woke me up, shining through the bedroom window. I never pulled the blinds when we went to bed for this very reason. Bugger the alarm clocks, I'd much rather be woken up by the sun.

Rebecca lay beside me on the bed, curled up against my stomach, a double fistful of my fur held firmly in her hands.

“Morning, Babe.” I reached out with my tongue and licked the tip of her nose.

She giggled, still asleep, and rolled over, letting go of me.

Getting up as quietly as I could, I hung around only long enough to write her a note.

I felt like bounty hunting today. The run with English yesterday had gotten my blood pumping and I could use a good hunt.

“Ow.” My finger stung in the middle of writing the note. Looking down, the cut from yesterday was still there. If anything it looked worse. I don't think *green* was a good colour for a scab.

Whatever. I wasn't about to start worrying about it just yet. My regeneration had managed to deal with far worse than a papercut. If it could pull me together after falling off a mountain it could deal with this.

The walk to the SF headquarters wasn't that long, but I took a slight detour on the way to pickup breakfast. Takeout first thing in the morning wasn't the greatest idea, but I hated hunting on an empty stomach.

The SF building had been all but completely demolished during the quake last year, but you'd hardly know that looking at it now.

The heavyset three story structure was all but completed, and from the outside it looked near identical to the previous one.

The front steps were the same ones that had been on the old building. They were worn and cracked now. Not as smooth and shiny as the first time I'd climbed them, but they had personality now.

The outside of the building looked pretty much the same as it had before, but that familiarity

didn't extend to the inside.

Last time there had been a fancy lobby here, complete with water fountains and benches. Not so much now.

There were a couple of reasons for the change. One, it had taken every penny English had to get Storm Front back up and running – that hadn't left much for luxuries – and two, the old lion wanted to make a statement.

Last time English had taken a hands off approach to running Storm Front. He'd been one of it's biggest owners, but he hadn't involved himself in much other than the hunting, leaving the corporate image and higher level decisions to an executive board.

That had gotten us in trouble to say the least.

The front desk to Storm Front now was clean and utilitarian. Stepping in the front door, I was met with little more than a midsized room with some hard benches and a service counter.

The only people who generally came in this entrance were those looking to place a bounty, and they were rare. Ninety-nine percent of the bounties were straight from the government.

Waving to the man behind the counter, I walked up to a small door set in the far wall. I didn't need a key, it was unlocked.

Storm Front didn't believe much in locks these days – other than on the holding cells – few people were suicidal enough to storm a building full of bounty hunters.

The hallways back here were cramped and bordering on unfinished. Not to mention a bloody maze.

I'd been in the building a dozen times and I still got lost. That was why I came in through the front door rather than the employee entrance. It was a shorter walk to the stairs.

I was just about ready to admit that I'd gotten myself turned around again when I rounded yet another corner.

“Yipe!”

What the bloody...

I had to keep myself from bursting out laughing. It looked like I was toe to toe with a giant grey fuzball.

Graham stood before me, the papers he'd been carrying now drifting slowly to the ground. His one remaining arm was clasped firmly over his heart like he was trying to keep it from beating straight out of his chest.

The leopard's fur had fluffed out so much he looked like a plush toy.

“Tommy?” His voice was breathless as he fought to calm down.

I grinned as I stooped to collect the scattered papers. “Yep. How's it going Graham? I haven't seen you in months, since before the building was finished.”

He leaned against the wall, a smile spreading across his lips. “It's good to see you again, Tommy. Are you working here again? I thought you were still with the government.”

I rolled my eyes as I handed him back his papers. He clutched them tightly.

“Not really, Graham. I'm the 'administrator' now. It's more of a ceremonial position.”

He cocked his head. “Really? Last I heard you were the mayor's boss. Not a law gets passed without your signature. Everyone keeps saying what a great job you're doing. It's still your government, isn't it?”

Backing away now, I began glancing around for the stairwell.

“Not really, man. I'm just helping out every now and then with the PR, nothing more. You'll have to excuse me...”

The cat sighed and tucked the papers under his arm before opening a door, “English's office?”

This way.” He pointed down an identical hallway.

“Oh. Yeah, thanks.”

Heading off down the hallway, I had to ask myself why they didn't label any of these doors.

“Mate! Good to see you. All rested up from yesterday?”

Stepping into English's new office, the bunny receptionist who had led me here turned back towards her desk.

“Good enough, buddy. You got a hunt for me?”

Glancing around, there was little in the spacious room but the walls.

English sat on a simple wooden chair behind an even simpler desk. There was a bank of windows behind him, but other than that the room was unadorned.

Well, other than the stacks of paper that seemed to have collected in the corners.

Picking up a sheet, I gave it a quick glance. It was a purchase order for some bounty hunting equipment.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, Mate.” English was behind me in a heartbeat, pulling the paper from my fingers. “I should read 'em. That's what got me in trouble last time. I try, Mate, I really do, but they bring this stuff in by the box. No one could read it all.”

I rolled my eyes. “You do realize who you're talking to? I'm the fella who managed to keep afloat running *the government*. Don't talk to me about papers.”

He laughed.

“And if memory serves, Mate, you weren't all that happy about the reading either.” He yawned and bent over backwards in a stretch, nearly touching his heels. “But on to more exciting things. You want a hunt, Mate? You've got one. How does a bank robber sound?”

To be frank, it sounded like a lot of work.

The robber was a bear, and a big one at that. He'd managed a smash and grab at one of the banks yesterday and the Storm Front scouts had traced him back to his hideout this morning.

“Stop!”

The bugger had managed to get past us back at his apartment. Now he was making a break for it down the side street.

“I got him.”

English was somewhere behind me, having taken the brunt of the bear's attack when he pushed past us for the street.

Despite his size this guy could move. It took everything I had to close on him.

A leap and I was on his shaggy brown furred back. It almost seemed like he didn't notice.

“Alright, I said *stop!*” Not having much of any other options, I clubbed the bear on the side of the head with my fist.

That got his attention. He staggered to the side when I hit him, falling off balance. That was enough for me to throw my own weight with him and pull him from his feet.

Scrambling away, I had to fight to make sure I wasn't underneath him as he went down. The guy was big enough to snap my leg.

Letting out a breath, I wiped my brow as I pulled the cuffs that hung from my belt.

“James Urson, you are being arrested for the robbery of a V-Town collective...” Bending forward, I snapped one of the oversized cuffs over his wrists before he had time to collect his senses, “You are being brought to...”

I never got a chance to finish. Reaching down to snap the other cuff, my arm went numb.

“Gah!” A second later a shot of pain ran up as the cuff I'd been holding fell to the ground with a clank.

The bear took the opening for all it was worth.

Rolling to his feet, he whacked me on the side of the head with his uncuffed hand and began running.

I was no longer in any condition to follow him. Not only was my arm useless now, but I was seeing double as I tried to pick myself up from the asphalt.

“Never worry, Mate. I got this.”

A heartbeat later English's golden form leapt over me, racing after the bear.

The quarry almost made it to the next corner before English was upon him. They went down in a tangle of limbs and it was less than a second before I heard the click of the other cuff.

A moment after that the bear's rough voice ramped up, cursing out the both of us.

“You okay, Mate?” English asked once we'd dropped the man off at Storm Front for processing.

I was still rubbing my arm, trying to get any feeling back in it.

“I'll be okay, I think.” I hadn't hurt it in the chase. The only wound on it was the papercut from yesterday. And, oddly, it looked no better.

“Let's have a peek, Mate.”

One could never accuse English of being overly sensitive to personal space. A moment later he had my arm in his grasp, running his hands up and down it.

“Dude! Back off.” I tried to snatch it back, but he held tight.

“You can't feel when I do this?” He brought his fingers together in the fleshy part of my elbow.

“Nothing.” I shrugged with my other shoulder.

The lion set his lips in a straight line.

“Mate, you're going to a doctor. Now.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It's nothing, I'm sure. I'll just sleep it off.”

Taking me by my good arm, he dragged me out to the street and towards V-town general.

I've said it before, and I'll say it as many more times as it takes. I don't like hospitals.

Well, I've met few people who do, but hospitals always give me a bad feeling. Not the least of the reasons is the smell.

No matter how much they clean, these places always smell of sickness and death. Makes sense, you don't come here if you're feeling good. That alone would be enough, but the endless cleaning solutions they use to try and keep the place antiseptic have scents all their own, and they make me nauseous.

The end result is that I can't walk in the front doors of a place like this without wanting to vomit.

I guess being the 'administrator' did have a few perks. It let me skip the line in the emergency room. That, added to the generous health insurance that Storm Front maintained for its hunters, got me to a doctor in the click of a claw.

English had disappeared somewhere once he was assured that I would be seeing someone. He made an excuse about having to 'run the company' or something.

I'll admit I was a bit surprised when I saw who walk into my examination room. It was the same doctor I'd taken Rebecca to back in Horseshoe Bay. A human.

She didn't even look up from her clipboard when she walked in.

"Mr. Taggart? What seems to be the problem?"

"Hi, Doc."

Pausing a moment, she glanced up. A quick shock crossed her face, then she smiled.

"Oh, hello. I was wondering when I'd see you again."

I cocked an eye ridge. "Really?"

She shrugged. "Of course. There aren't many doctors that specialize in patients with regeneration, and most of them were killed back in the quake. Most doctors don't want to deal with people like you, you don't react to treatment like most people."

I rolled my eyes and smiled. "Gee, make me feel special."

I gave the doc a quick run down on what had happened to me today, the chase and the bear.

She inspected my arm, quickly finding the still swollen papercut. I told her about the letter yesterday.

"Do you still have the paper?"

I shook my head. "No. I threw it out. Why?"

She didn't bother responding, instead finding an empty needle in a nearby cupboard and prepping it.

"Uh, Doc? What ya going to do with that? I'm not so hot on needles."

She didn't even pause before bracing my arm under her armpit and pulling my swollen finger out for another look.

"We need a sample of the poison. Now."

I didn't even get a warning before she stabbed the needle in my wound and drew out a not inconsiderable amount of blood.

The rest of my arm may be numb, but that particular spot *was not*.

I think I reached high C when I screamed.

It's not exactly a manly thing to admit, but I passed out at some point around her getting the needle half full. Watching my own blood, brackish and black from the sore, slowly fill the tube was enough to knock me out cold.

When I next awoke I wasn't alone in the room.

I can't speak for other people, but waking up, the first sense that comes back online is smell. There was someone near by. I wasn't quite awake enough yet to figure out *who*, but I knew for a fact it was a close friend. Close enough that I wasn't alarmed. The familiar scent was comforting in this antiseptic place.

The next sense online was hearing. Well, that was useless. I could hardly make out a thing. If I strained I could hear a calm, measured breathing.

It took me a few more moments to get to the point where I was ready to open my eyes, by then I wasn't surprised to see who sat straight as a rod in a chair next to the table I lay upon.

"Hello, Jon."

The police dog nodded curtly in my direction. A smile never cracked his lips.

"Afternoon, Sir."

I sighed. "If you're calling me 'sir' again this must be bad."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "The toxicology reports just came back, Tommy. You were injected with a lethal dose of ricin."

"Ricin?" I scratched my head, "What's that?"

Taking a sheet of papers that were laid neatly on the end table beside him, he held them out to me. I declined to reach out for them.

"Ricin, Sir, is the single most deadly natural toxin known to exist on the planet. It's cultivated from the castor bean."

I shrugged. "You're speaking Greek to me, Jon. Remember, my education is in history, not biology."

A smile finally did slip to his lips, though it was barely detectable.

"Ricin, Sir--"

He didn't get a chance to even start again before the doctor was back, pushing a whole cart of medical equipment with her.

"What he was about to say," she began, "Is that less than two milligrams of ricin, either injected or breathed, would be enough to kill." She gave me a critical look up and down, "We found at least three milligrams in the blood we pulled from your finger. You should be wallowing in pain right now, hardly even able to move and well on your way to death. The only thing that saved you was your regeneration. It kept rebuilding your cells as fast as the toxin could kill them, keeping the poison firmly in the tip of your finger. You only even noticed when it got into your nerves."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or break out in a cold sweat.

"So I'm okay now, right doc?"

She nodded slowly. "As far as we can tell. We pulled a lot of blood from you, but it looks like you should be alright." I glanced down to my finger only to notice it was bound in a thick bandage. "Though I'd like to keep you here overnight for observation..."

"Not a chance, Doc." I tried to back away, but I'd forgotten I was sitting on a table pushed up against the far wall. All I managed to do was bump the back of my head.

"But, Sir, you--"

"No." I put everything I had into that word. It worked. I managed to pitch my voice into that commanding growl that I'd heard my Dad use so many times. "I'm not staying here. And," I levelled them with a glare, "We're not talking about this to anyone. I'm sure Sayer already knows, but no one else needs to. I don't need the public knowing that someone is stalking me again."

With that I began pushing my way out of the room.

The doc was loth to see me go, but I gave her few options. She tried to load me up with pills to take to ward off whatever poison might be left, but I pushed them back to her. We both knew my body would destroy the medication just as quickly as it had the poison.

Back on the street, I was happy to get the clinging scent of antiseptic out of my nose.

"Sir, we need to wait here for your guard," Came Jon's voice from just behind my shoulder.

I kept walking.

"How many folks know about this, Jon?" I asked as I pushed forward, diving into the crowd of people that milled up and down the street.

"Few," He replied, "The doctor, Commissioner Sayer, and myself. I was the first informed by the hospital as I am, being your personal attache, responsible for your well being."

"Fine," I let out a long breath, "Let's keep it that way."