

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 2: What's Five Times Four?

The walk back to the apartment took longer than I'd anticipated. We had to detour around construction twice. And not only that but I was tired.

I didn't want to think it was the poison, but rather I was run out because my regeneration had done so much to fight it off.

Jon began nattering on about different things as we walked. Separating him from the force had been the best thing ever to happen to him. He was starting, however slowly, to develop a personality of his own now.

I didn't listen too closely to what he was saying, going on as he was about building security and government matters.

"And I've begun plans for your and Rebecca's wedding, but I really do need the two of you to pick a date."

Wait... what?

I stopped dead, Jon ran flat into my back a second later.

"Jon, you're doing *what?*" I turned to him.

His face was neutral, he didn't seem to react at all to me.

"I've begun plans for your and Miss Rebecca's wedding, Tommy." He paused for a moment, then something seemed to click in his head. "Oh. I don't believe we ever did discuss it in depth, did we? The announcement of your engagement was six months ago. No one else seemed to be interested in starting the planning, and your office has been receiving inquirers daily about it, so I took it upon myself." For just a moment a spark of good humour passed his lips, "To be honest, Sir, it's more of a hobby for me right now than a job. I've had comparatively little to do since you've left the office of mayor, and it's good to have something to occupy my time."

I just raised a hand to my forehead as I turned and started off again.

"A hobby, Jon? Seriously? You're planning my wedding as a *hobby?*" I let out a long breath.

I was about to tare into him with a long, and likely not that well thought out, speech about certain things being private matters when my eyes twitched again.

Just as last time, I saw something out of the corner of my eye that didn't belong. In a world that walked on two feet, this shadow didn't.

Spinning around on the crowded street, I nearly knocked Jon back into the milling bystanders.

I didn't even know what I was doing before I was already off and running, Jon at my heels.

It took me only a heartbeat to make it to the alleyway where I'd seen... whatever it was.

There was nothing here, no footprints on the hard concrete. The only thing left was an odd, spicy scent that I couldn't quite place.

About to turn away, another flash of movement came from down the alleyway. It was far further away than it had any right to be. No one could run that fast on two legs.

Without even thinking about it, I fell to my four legged stance. I almost never ran this way, but it was my only option for catching up with the shadow.

Well, that didn't work.

On all fours, I got about two steps before I had to put weight on my wounded left hand.

At least I didn't scream this time.

The arm wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before, but it just couldn't support weight. My entire limb felt like it had the consistency of boiled fat.

I went down face first on the pavement. Thankfully, before I could pick up any speed.

"Sir!" Jon was at my side a moment later, pulling me quickly up into a sitting position and propping me against the wall.

All I could see now was the dog's back. He stood before me, surveying the now empty alleyway and trying to place himself between me and anyone, or anything, that might be poised to attack.

"I'm okay, Jon." I huffed out a breath. "I just thought I saw something and forgot my arm can't hold weight."

"Be that as it may, Sir," The dog pulled a radio from one of the countless pockets on his uniform, "I believe it best if we wait here until your full guard arrives."

I groaned and set my head back against the wall.

The rest of the journey back was, thankfully, uneventful. I took the time to flex my arm and try to get some strength back in it. By the time we made it to the apartment it almost felt back to normal. That, and the papercut on my finger was nearly gone.

"I can make it from here, boys." I dismissed the cops as I stepped into the lobby. They didn't seem to want to go, milling about outside the building, but the only one to follow me in was Jon.

"Thanks for being there, Jon." I patted my friend on the shoulder, "I just hope this isn't a sign of things to come."

He nodded sharply. "Agreed, Sir. I'll be in my office if you need me." He narrowed his eyes, "And, Tommy, you *will* tell me if anything of note happens, won't you?"

"Sure, Jon." I sighed. "Why wouldn't I, you're my bodyguard, eh?"

Back up on the third floor, I unlocked the apartment door with the key that Jon had discretely palmed me. There was no one home, Rebecca must be out on the town.

A stack of letters had been pressed under the door, but these one's looked more conventional. I guess my courier dog hadn't been able to find me while I'd been in hospital.

Far more gingerly this time, I opened the paperwork. Government form, government form, government form, bill.

You know, I'm almost starting to envy those people who's post consists of junk mail.

Picking out a report at random to read, I was somewhat disappointed.

It was a police report, though not directly from Sayer. Apparently unrest was on the rise in the

city.

I was just about ready to start banging my head against the wall.

The report read that things had been good all winter, at an all time low, but they've started up again in just the last couple of weeks. We were still *okay*, but we were no longer *good*.

Wonderful. Everything I'd worked for, fought so hard for and we were just going back to business as usual.

Fighting to keep myself from falling into a funk, I read the rest of the paperwork. There was nothing of interest until I got to the last letter.

It was from the expedition the police force had sent to Edmonton. I didn't envy those dogs. The entire operation had been done on the hush, only the police involved. And few if any of the cops had experience working outside the city, likely so much as tracking across the mountains.

Edmonton had been an... interesting experience for English, Rebecca, Jon, Amstys, and I. Frankly, I think we'd found what caused the Cataclysm. And then proceeded to break it.

The fact that English and I had spent some time as humans and Rebecca as a cat not withstanding.

Anyway, according to the paper the expedition had only just arrived back in the city last week.

Putting down the paper, I left the apartment and went to go find Jon. This couldn't wait.

About an hour later I had the lead dog from the expedition with me in one of the small offices tucked away on the main floor of the apartment building. I'd thought about taking him up to the apartment to talk, but I didn't want to make my space into a workplace again.

It was just the two of us in here, I'd had to chase Jon off. I wanted to make sure I could talk to this dog one-on-one, without anyone else interjecting or overhearing.

"Inspector Aspen, was it?"

The dog nodded. I was surprised to see a smoothness in his motions. The German Shepard looked almost exactly like Jon. Both their bodies were near identical, like they were brothers. The only obvious way to tell the difference between them was the small amount more brass on this one's shoulders.

"Yes, Sir. Inspector George Aspen. I was the commanding officer in the special detachment on operation Phoenix."

Again I could hear it, but more to the point I could see it in the man's motions. I had no doubt this dog had been as rigid and stuffed as any other police officer just a few months ago, but his time in the woods had smoothed out those sharp, institutionalized edges, made him... well, for lack of a better word, *human*.

"Can you give me a report, George?" The dog didn't even start when I called him by his first name. That alone was proof that he'd mellowed.

The man shrugged. "Everything is in the report that I'm sure you were given, Sir."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. I'm not looking for the official line, George. I want to know what really happened. And you can start with the name 'phoenix'."

A slight smile slipped to his lips.

"I didn't pick the name, Sir. But the theme of the mission was to learn more about the Cataclysm. To see if it could be possible to understand it, perhaps even control it. Our mission, Sir, was to learn all we could, see if perhaps we could turn back some small measure of the damage that had been done to the world."

I shook my head. "Not exactly a small order, eh? Please tell me you're not stupid enough to believe you could pull something like that off."

The hint of smile on the man's face grew. "No, Sir. Not quite *that* foolish. The goal of the overall mission was to control the Cataclysm. But the aim of my particular expedition was simply intelligence gathering. To blaze a permanent trail from V-town to Edmonton and further document any dangers that were encountered. The, ahem, debriefing from Constable Oaks, yourself, and Mr. English suggested that you ran across some extraordinary circumstances."

I could see him blushing under his fur.

"How did you manage to get all the way out there?" I asked. "I thought you cops weren't really that well prepared for operating outside the city. I know Jon wasn't."

The dog narrowed his eyes a small measure, his ears pulling back slightly.

"We wouldn't have made it alone, Sir." There was a slight strain in his voice, "We were less than a day out of the city when we were... waylaid. The six men in my expedition were encircled in the middle of the night and... informed that there was a change of plans."

I sat forward on my chair. The silence of the room seemed close around us. "What happened?"

The stress on the man's face grew slightly, then melted away as he took another look at me.

"The hunters, Sir. We were unexpectedly met by a party of six hunters. They were led by a female wolf by the name of Lucy. I believe you know her."

Groaning, I sat back. I could just see where this was going. Lucy was my cousin. The daughter of my uncle Griss, the hunt master.

"She insisted that they join us, Sir. I was, ahem, in no position to argue. It was made plain to me that if I should refuse I would not be continuing on."

Yep, that sounded like the hunters.

"They joined us for the journey, and I don't feel ashamed to admit to you, Sir, that I was happy to have them. Without the hunters we wouldn't have survived a month, particularly after the onset of winter."

"But anyway, Sir, we did make the journey over the mountains with relatively few problems after meeting up with our contacts Renfru and Ornthi." The dog shuddered a little bit when he mentioned the computer. "Then we continued on to your encounter in Calgary."

It was my turn to shudder when he mentioned Al-Sedextrus.

"There was no one left there, Sir." I let out a breath that I hadn't realized I was holding. "We started by sending forth our female officers to investigate the area, but they found no living people. They did find the compound you described, but it's been abandoned."

You know, I could have cheered.

"From there, Sir, we moved north through Red Deer. The citizens of that town were pleased to see us, willing to trade."

That was no surprise. Now came the real question.

"What did you find up in Edmonton?" I asked.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "Everything is detailed in the report, Sir. There was, ahem, little to be recovered. None of the systems we worked on appeared to be operational."

I tried to hold back a growl from my voice.

"I'm not interested in what you wrote in the report, George." Reaching forward, I set my hand on his. Not aggressive, but my motion into his personal space was obvious. "I want to hear it from your lips. What did you find?"

"We found banks upon banks of computers, Sir. Most of them corroded by the acid that had pooled on the floor."

That matched with what I remembered.

"Were you able to salvage *any* of them? Even a single one of those computers could create

enough of a disturbance to affect reality in a small area.”

Again he looked away. His voice was little more than a cough when he spoke again.

“No.”

I think I just got my answer.

“Fine.” I cleared my throat, “Were you able to recover any information about the people who had gotten there before us? If I recall correctly, I think they were from Ottawa. Have we been able to open any communications with them?”

The dog looked relieved to be talking about something else.

“You have a good memory, Sir. You're correct. What little we could find on them suggests that they were indeed from Ottawa. The, uh, capitol of Canada. So far we've been unable to raise them on any form of long range communications, but you'll have to excuse us. It's been a long time since we've tried to talk to anyone via wireless long range, and no one is really sure how.”

I smiled. A real one this time.

“That's alright, George. Just pass a message along will you?”

He looked up, ears perking.

“Tell whoever's in charge of the communication effort to contact Ornthi at Kicking Horse Pass. I'll bet you he... it can tell you everything you need to know once you identify yourselves as the V-town police.”

I let the cop go a few minutes later, after doing my best to grill him for any more information about the Edmonton computers. He was unusually cagey. I'd never had one of the police baldfaced lie to me before and I could tell you for a fact that he didn't enjoy it.

Heading back up to the apartment, I was starting to get hungry. It was well past lunch now and I'd missed eating while I'd been laid out in the hospital.

Opening the door to the apartment, I didn't notice it for almost ten seconds I was so intent on food.

The scent of someone else.

My fur bristled out almost before it hit me. Someone was here. In *my* home.

One foot in the kitchen, I stopped dead, breathing deeply through my nose.

There was *someone* here.

The scent wasn't right. I hadn't smelt something like this in a long time.

It wasn't a person... not quite. It almost smelt more like the prey I'd hunted while out in the forest.

The scrape of claws on linoleum caused my head to spin around.

There was... a dog?

No, wait. 'Dog' wasn't quite the right term. This was a real *dog*, four legs and all. Not a dog like Jon or the police. A real one.

He looked something like the old golden retrievers from before the Cataclysm, just rougher and more unkempt. He pressed himself back into the corner of the room as soon as he realized I saw him, trying to hide in the shadow of a cabinet.

It took everything I had to force my fur back down and keep the growl from my voice when I spoke. This was *my* home, but I needed to find out why he was here before I ripped him nose from tail.

“Uhh... hello, boy.” I wasn't sure how I was supposed to address a dog, I can't say I've ever seen one in my life, I thought they'd long died out. The only place I'd ever seen them was in my books.

“What are you doing here?”

Slowly going down to one knee, I reached out a hand towards him. He was still a good four

feet away, but he sniffed me.

I was just about to move another inch forward when he bolted. Wow, that dog could move.

In the span of a heartbeat he was almost past me towards the still open apartment door.

Lunging to the side, I was able to grasp one of his hind legs as he flew fast. I had to be careful that my claws didn't cut into him.

A yip and the dog stopped short, thumping down on the apartment floor well short of the door. He lay there for a moment before coiling around like a snake to bite at my hand.

He was fast, but now we were back into my element. I may have never hunted dog before, but I'd hunted most other things on four legs.

I let go an instant before his jaws closed around me, shifting my grip to his now conveniently located neck.

He yipped as I tightened my fingers and tried to pull away. It was a reaction, motion made without thought. Exactly what I wanted. Letting his pelt slide through my fingers, I adjusted my grip to right behind his jaw. I could feel the pulse of his frantic heart now.

I almost thought I had him when he switched tactics. Rather than pulling back again and helping me choke the life out of him, he lunged forward.

The dog's maw slammed in my gut, sending the air whooshing from my lungs. Not for the first time that day I was laying on my back, wondering what had happened to me.

On the bright side, it was little better for the hound. I rolled onto my elbows to see him staggering back and forth, shaking himself and trying to clear his mind.

Reaching out, the only thing I could grab was his tail.

Now, speaking as a guy with one of his own, grabbing another fellow's tail is a bit of a dirty move, somewhat akin to kicking a man in the crotch, but it was the only thing I could reach.

That got another yip out of him as he took off, dragging me behind.

Oh bugger.

I'd been doing pretty good so far at keeping the battle contained, but that changed in a hurry.

Up on the counter he jumped, pulling me along behind. I wouldn't usually have all that many cooking implements, preferring my food raw, but Rebecca was picky about such things. The first appliance to meet its end was our mixer. The dog kicked it off the counter with a back paw, sending it crashing to the floor. He likely didn't even notice.

Next was a set of mixing bowls, then soon after some flatware.

And that was just the start.

"Alright, *that's enough*." I was pissed off enough now to give up on fighting clean and give his tail a savage yank. It wasn't enough to pull the darn thing free, or even cause any major spinal damage. But it got his attention alright.

The dog turned to snap at me again, but all he got for his trouble was my fist squarely in his wet black nose.

"Yip!" The cry was less of an inarticulate sound now and more of a word. What came next were definitely words from the dog's mouth, though I'd just as soon not repeat them.

Huh?

The dog's tail slipped from my limp hands. What in all the gods' names was going on here? He was a *dog*. Dogs don't *talk*.

The only thing that kept the mutt from escaping was the fact I was standing squarely in the kitchen doorway, blocking the only exit. He backed up in the far corner of the room and began whimpering, trying to nurse both his tail and split nose at the same time.

"Okay, you're going to tell me what's going on. *Right now*." I levelled a glare at... whatever it

was. I was just starting to work out an idea.

He didn't say anything.

Letting out a sigh, I fell to my haunches, making sure not to move from the doorway.

"You're a Class Five, aren't you?"

All the people in V-town were 'classed'. It really doesn't mean anything more than our appearance. A Class One was nearly indistinguishable from a human, walking upright, hairless skin and all that. I was a Class Three, the most common, furred, anamlistic head and bipedal. This had to be a Class Five, indistinguishable from an animal.

But I thought the Class Fives were extinct. I don't think I've ever seen one...

The only time I'd seen a Class Five was almost two years ago, when English and I had been running from the police.

I let out a long breath and lifted a hand to my forehead.

"Come on," I said to him, "I know you can speak. I heard it. You might as well tell me your name. I'm Tommy."

His voice was rough when he finally spoke. It's what obvious he was unused to it, I doubt he used the English language much.

"I know who you are." The words were deeper than what I'd expect from someone his size, no more than a hundred or so pounds. "You're the wolf. Fisher told us all about you."

"Fisher?" I had to rack my brain for a moment. That had been the name of the Class Five I'd met. "Did he send you? What's wrong?"

The laugh that escaped his lips was most definitely not human. I was only able to recognize it as such due to our shared canine ancestry.

"He did not *send* me. I'm here because I choose to be. Because I volunteered to explore your strange world. I'm here to give you a message. And I have a name, you can stop calling me 'boy'. It's Sunny."

Leaning up against the door frame, I let some of the tension fall from my body.

"Okay, Sunny." I took a deep breath, "What's your message?"

He was about to speak when his ears twitched. Mine did at the same time.

Someone was running up the hall. No, multiple someones.

In the beat of a heart the dog was on his feet again, rushing towards me. I almost thought he was about to attack again when he leapt over my head. I reached for his tail, but my position left him too far away.

In an instant Sunny was out in the hallway, skidding around the corner and racing off in the opposite direction of the oncoming footsteps.

I didn't bother even standing up. There was no danger in the oncoming rush, I'd recognize those footsteps anywhere.

The perfectly measured sprint of a detachment of V-town police. And, if I didn't miss my mark, Jon leading them.

"Sir?" The familiar Shepard's head poked around the apartment door a moment later. His face was relaxed, but I could see the stress in his movements. "We heard a commotion. Is everything alright?"

I waved my hand as he stepped closer. "Yeah, it's fine, Jon. I just... ah, got a but clumsy in the kitchen here."

The dog's nose twitched as he came closer. He could smell the adrenaline of a fight, but more than that he could spell the presence of Sunny.

With a twitch of his hand he dismissed the other dogs. They left without a word or a thought. For just a moment I wondered what Jon had said to them to allow them access to my apartment. Jon was a cop, but he was *my* cop. We'd already gone through a round of split allegiances when it came to who the other members of the V-town police force would listen to when it came down to the wire. So far Commissioner Sayer had won.

Jon gently shut the door when the last of the officers had left, then took a deep breath.

That was followed by a wracking sneeze that nearly lifted him from his feet.

I grinned.

"Sir?" He didn't quite know how to put it in words. He knew that the scent the now permeated the room was *wrong*, but he, unlike I, had never met a Class Five.

I chuckled as I put my hand on his shoulder and led him to a seat at the counter.

"I said I was having a little trouble in the kitchen, Jon. I just never mentioned that there was someone else in there with me at the time."

He nodded silently.

"What do you know of Class Fives?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed as he furrowed his brow. Normally Jon had the answer to any question on the tip of his tongue. The fact he had to think about this was interesting. That would suggest that the police department hadn't had to deal with Class Fives in a long time. Long enough to remove them from their training.

"Very little, Tommy." He scratched his chin, "I know the classification exists, and its requirements, but I'm not aware of any citizens that meet them." He began ticking off numbers on his fingers as he thought. "The vast majority of those in V-town are Class Threes like us, perhaps sixty percent. Another twenty percent are Class Twos like Mayor Max, and ten percent are Class Ones as your mother is." He glanced my way, but I just motioned him on. "Then five percent are Class Fours and the remaining five percent are human."

I raised an eye ridge, "So not a single Class Five?"

He shrugged. "Not that I'm aware of. They existed immediately after the Cataclysm but seemed to fade out over the next couple of decades. The documentation from that time is limited to say the least. I'm not sure what happened to them."

I let out a breath. "I think I may have a guess."

"Oh?" He glanced at me.

"Not right now." I looked back to my newly destroyed kitchen. "Jon, I need you to do me a favour."

He didn't even hesitate before responding. "Anything, Sir."

I laughed. "Don't worry, nothing big. I just need you to do some research on the Class Fives for me, and keep it quiet. I'd prefer that no one know about it, especially the police."

He gave me a bit of a queer look but nodded his head. "Of course. May I, uh, ask why?"

I pointed a thumb back at the mess.

"Who do you think made that? I was just about to question him before you fellas scared him off."

Jon looked abashed for a moment before responding, "Sorry, Tommy. I'll get right on it."

Jon left a few moments later, leaving me alone in the apartment. Finally.

I'd come up here because I was hungry, now I was starving. But looking at the broken bits of mixer and plates that now carpeted the floor, I just couldn't eat until I got it cleaned up.

I'm not a neat freak, really I'm not, just like Rebecca, but it was the fact the mess had been made

by someone else, an intruder, that I couldn't leave it. It was a sign that they'd been here, broken into *my home*.

Twenty minutes and a couple of full bin bags later and I had things more or less cleaned away. We were light on appliances and some dishes, but nothing that money couldn't replace, and I had more than enough of that.

Sitting down at the counter with my well deserved side of beef, I still couldn't enjoy it. What in all the gods' names was happening? Things had been going great until yesterday!

I'd been able to get through the entire winter and most of the spring without anything funky happening to me.

Okay, bounty hunting isn't exactly a *predictable* business – and neither is politics for that matter – but I'd been doing pretty good. How did things change so fast?

Someone trying to poison me, raising unhappiness, and the return of the Class Fives. And I didn't even *do anything*!

I finally tore into the beef like it was personally responsible for my troubles. Ripping it to shreds between my fangs, I wolfed down the entire thing in seconds and still wanted more.

It was only while I was licking my fingers clean that I realized the cut on my finger was completely gone. Well, that was good news for a change. My regeneration had kicked in and gotten rid of that little problem for me. They must have done a good job cleaning the wound while I'd been out.

Standing up, I took a look out the window to the street below. People milled about in all directions. There was no sign of discontentment here. I couldn't help but wonder where the police had gotten their numbers from, though I didn't for a second doubt them.

Then the thought hit me.

I hadn't done anything to cause problems in the last little while, I've been all but divorced from the government.

I should go talk to the person who is making the calls these days. Mayor Max.

The walk to City Hall was, dare I say it, almost peaceful.

That was once I gave a slip to the dogs who were trying to guard me.

I let Jon know what I was up to, it was only fair – and good sense – but I didn't want the rest of the guards to know. Jon knew me well enough to leave me be, but I'd have to beat the police detachment off with a stick now that there had been an attempt on my life.

Walking casually out into the small back garden of the apartment complex, I took a moment to sniff the flowers that someone had planted here. There wasn't much to really enjoy yet, the growing season having yet to start, but I took the brief moment of quiet for all it was worth.

Sparing a glance over my shoulder, I took a quick hop and got my fingers over the top of the concrete wall that surrounded the garden.

Oof. I hadn't had to do this in a while. The wall was a good seven feet tall and the concrete was sealed and smooth without any footholds. It was all upper body strength to get myself pulled up here, and that was something that – to be honest – I didn't exactly have in abundant supply.

A couple of pained gasps for air and some scrambling and I managed to get my chest up and over.

Oi. I'd have to start working out at this rate. I was no better than I'd been when I first started hunting with English.

A quick roll got me atop of the wall. From there I was able to drop silently to the alley on the other side.

Crouching in the shadows, I crept towards the main roadway. I could see the cops from here. They were trying their best to look inconspicuous, but, like always, they stood out like a cracked claw. The V-town police may be efficient and incorruptible, but one would never call them *inconspicuous*.

Clad in their bright blue uniforms, they stood straight as rods around the front entrance to the apartment complex. They didn't interfere with anyone who passed by, but every man, woman, and child who went anywhere near those doors got a good long stare.

Taking a deep breath, I waited for a crowd of people to come down the street before stepping from the shadows.

First rule of not being noticed, *don't act like you don't want to be noticed*.

I walked down the street bold as day, not even bothering to keep to the side of the road. The cops never even saw me leave.

City Hall was looking good. Well, as good as one could expect considering it had been a pile of rubble not a year ago.

The old City Hall had been build in the most modern style. It had been an impressive sight, no doubt, with its towering spires and wide windows, but it had become nothing more than dust when the quake struck.

The new City Hall, built in part under my watch, was a more conservative structure. That's not to say it didn't have all the bobbles and badges that one would expect of the primary government building in the city, but they were all added on as opposed to part of the superstructure.

How the original architects had ever been drunk enough to trade security for appearances I'd never know.

Being able to mingle with the crowds of people who milled through the wide hallways was a bit of a treat for me.

Every other time I'd been here I'd been working. A loveless, drudgery of a task. And I had, every time without fail, been fully brushed out and wrapped in one of Smith's suits.

Now, filthy with street grime and still a little strung out from my time in the hospital, no one spared me so much as a second glance. I was just another brown pelted wolf among dozens of others.

There were two things that hit me when I got here.

One, there were protesters out front, something I hadn't seen in a while, and two, they'd remodelled the building again.

The remodelling wasn't a huge surprise. Without a City Hall at all the government had been in a bad way. That was why they'd moved back in as soon as possible. Folks had been working out of this building almost before the walls were up. As a result the floor plan was seemingly always in flux as folks were punted out of yet another part of the building for more construction.

I only found out they'd moved the mayor's office when I opened the door to find the woman's washroom.

Yeah. I got out of there real quick.

The longest single line in the whole place was the information booth. Made sense. *Everyone* had to come here to figure out where they were supposed to go.

Waiting my own fair turn in the seemingly endless line, I got a good look at the people who'd come to City Hall this fine day.

They ran the gauntlet from businessman to senior. It was a little surprising to see just how calm everyone was. No one made a fuss or pushed ahead in the line, everyone just stood quietly and waited their turn.

At long last I made it to the front of the line to meet the overworked receptionist who waited

there.

She was a deer, and I had to keep myself from adding 'with a caught in the headlights look'. I think she was probably somewhere on the ninth hour of an eight hour shift.

"Hello." I smiled. "Could you tell me where they moved the mayor's office this week?"

She didn't even look up at me before starting to flip through the loose leaf binder that sat before her.

"It got packed up last week..." She began flipping faster before coming to an abrupt stop on a seemingly random page. "And was reassigned yesterday." With a flick of a wrist she tossed that book aside to start flipping through another one underneath.

She still hadn't looked up when she next spoke. "Are you sure it's the mayor you want? If you're here to air a grievance or deliver a petition I can direct you to the proper office. Honestly," A tired smile worked its way to her face, "It would be quicker that way. Not many people get to see the mayor, he's got a schedule that's backed up weeks."

Reaching forward, I set a hand gently on her arm.

"Don't worry, Diane," I'd had to scrape my brain for her name, but it came to me just in time. She'd been working reception when I was here too, "I think I'll be able to get in alright."

Looking up, her eyes widened.

"Mr. Taggart! We haven't seen you in months!"

I grinned lopsidedly. "I've made a point to let Max run the show without my interference." Discretely, I lifted a finger to my lips, "And I'm keeping this visit under the radar, eh?"

She nodded meekly and smiled. "It's good to have you back, Mr. Taggart."

I rolled my eyes. "It's Tommy now."

I got my directions from her a few moments later and was off.

It was a good thing I stopped to ask. They'd moved the mayor's office clear to the other side of the building. I'd never have been able to find it myself.

And I'm guessing this wasn't its final location. Scrunched between a boiler room and some uniform storage, it wasn't all that much larger than a broom closet.

And, by the sign that had been hastily pasted on the door, the space was being shared with the assistant mayor.

A quick knock and I stepped back.

This hallway, unlike just about every other one in City Hall, was relatively quiet. I'd almost wager that was why this particular location had been chosen.

"Come in!" A gruff voice called, "Deloris, is that you?"

Turning the handle, the door screamed as I slipped through.

"Deloris?" I asked, "Don't know her, Max. Are you two timing on Kate?"

The red skinned oni glanced up from his papers with a look of confusion before recognizing me.

"Tommy!" He tried to bolt from his desk, but the little room was too cluttered with papers and boxes for him to make it more than two feet. He stopped trying to slog around the desk after a few steps and went back to sit at his chair, waiting for me to pick my way towards him.

My own journey took the better part of a minute. It was less than five strides to Max's desk, but there was hardly a square foot of free floor space in the room.

Finally making it to the chair across from him, I pulled myself up, standing on the seat and falling to my haunches to get my feet free of the papers.

"Heya, Max." The smile that covered my face was real. Max had been one of my best friends back at my old job before I met English. And the only man I would ever vote for to be mayor. "How

ya doing?"

If his bloodshot eyes were any indication, I think he was doing just about as well as I'd been in the job.

I couldn't help but feel my tail begin to wag.

Oddly though, he smiled when he spoke.

"I've got supply problems of every sort, a half dozen factions that want to pull me every which way, a dozen parts of the public service that are ready to collapse, and," He cocked an eye at me, "My boss sitting on the chair across from me, baiting me for everything I'm worth. You want your job back?" He paused for a moment, thinking, "Oh gods, don't tell me you're here because that letter worked!"

Wincing, I leaned back against the chair, almost toppling it over with my overly high centre of balance.

"Not a chance, Max. I'm just here to see how things are going. I've had a bugger of a day and just wanted to check that nothing odd is going on over here."

Max's pulled face became a little more strained as he paused to think for a moment.

"We have had a bit of an off thing for the last little while, Tommy. Reports from Sayer have warned of growing unrest on the streets."

I closed my eyes for a moment before turning to look out the small window beside us. I couldn't see anything but a few puffy clouds in a halfway clear sky.

"I know, Max. I've been getting those reports too. I was hoping that you might have an explanation for it. I haven't seen any indication of trouble." Unconsciously, I rubbed the tip of my finger where the scar was already long gone. "Well, not until yesterday."

He shook his head and was about to start into a, likely long, explanation when the door behind me bumped open.

"Sorry, Max, they were all out of sushi. You'll have to make due with a fish burger. Hey, it's all the same, right?"

Turning, I saw Dean Jameswell, formerly of the Progressive party, now the Assistant Mayor and part of the Open party, step through the door with his hands full of bags and papers. He kicked the door closed behind him without even looking up from the report in his hand.

"Hi, Dean."

I have to admit it, I pitched my voice a touch lower than I needed to, just a shade closer to a growl, just to watch him.

He didn't disappoint.

Between him and Graham, I was getting good at making cats jump.

I had to spring forward to catch the bags of food he dropped when he leapt. The fact it likely looked like I was springing on him didn't exactly help the situation.

"Breathe, breathe," I had to hold him still with one hand as I clutched the paper bags in the other. "Just breathe, Dean. It's only me."

I smiled as he forced his eyes to focus on my face. This man had been a terror when he'd been running against me in the election last year, but having a high-stress job like assistant mayor seemed to have fixed that.

"Tommy?" His voice was breathless, "Gods, I thought you were someone else."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I got that impression."

Letting him go, I opened the paper bags and pressed my head in for a sniff.

They both smelt like fish.

Sticking my tongue out I handed them back. Be it sushi or cooked tuna I never had a taste for

seafood.

The rest of the visit went a little more smoothly. Max and Dean had, government wise, everything as in hand as one could expect. Neither of them could say much for the unrest.

Max did his best to keep away from the topic of Sayer trying to get me back into politics, but Dean seemed a little more malleable to the old dog's desires.

I had to tell Dean, in no uncertain words and multiple times, that I *did not* have any interest in returning to office.

The cat looked a little put out at that.

Leaving City Hall, it was late afternoon by now. Not early enough to start thinking about dinner just yet, but we were getting there.

I took the main exit, down the front steps to the street. Mostly it was just to see the crowd.

There weren't many protesters here, only a couple dozen. They reminded me of the protesters that had been outside my apartment when I'd been running for mayor. These ones though didn't have the air of payola on them. I'd bet my two top fangs they were here because *they* wanted to be.

The interesting thing was to look at all the different species involved. There were mammals of all types, reptiles, even some oni and other mythologicals.

And each species was picketing for their own rights. All the little groups were independent, seemingly at odds with each other, yet they were peaceful enough.

One thing I did notice... there were no hunters among their numbers. There were wolves and felines, no question, but no hunters.

And that reminded me, it's been a while since I last went to go see my parents.

My parent's house wasn't exactly close to City Hall, but it was closer to here than it was my apartment.

The walk was smooth and quiet. My parents had made a decision decades ago to buy their home in a calmer, quieter part of the city. One where the tree lined streets were filled with the rustle of branches rather than the click of claws on asphalt.

Stepping up to the bright blue door of the house unannounced, I was hardly surprised when my mother opened it after only a single knock.

"Tommy!" She ushered me into the house near silently. I turned to speak to her but she raised a finger to my lips to quiet me.

Leaving me in the front room, she disappeared for a moment into the kitchen, peering discretely out the window to the back yard.

A moment later she was back, sitting on the sofa and patting the cushion beside her to encourage me to follow.

"Tommy," Her voice was hardly above a whisper as she spoke, "I'm happy you've come." She stole a quick glance back towards the kitchen before continuing, "We haven't seen you in some time. It must be two weeks since you've last come by."

I had to suppress a frown. Had it been that long?

"Sorry, Mom..."

She waved my apology aside almost before it got to my lips, "Never you mind. We know you have other things to worry about. But, Dear, it's your father."

My heart nearly stopped.

"What's happened to Dad?"

She laid a thin, pale hand on my lap, soothing me with nothing more than her touch.

"Nothing, Dear. Well... nothing. It's just that he's getting older."

The roughest shadow of a laugh escaped my lips. "We all know that. But Dad won't be one to go easily. He's the kind who'll take the Grim Reaper by the throat and try to rip the life out of him should he appear."

My mother paused for a long moment.

"That point may not be so far away."

I set my hand atop hers, trying to sound strong while inside my gut felt as cold as the top of Mount Logan.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as that... is it?"

She looked away, but not towards the kitchen this time. Just away from my searching eyes.

"It's nothing... concrete yet, Tommy. He's not really any worse off than he was last you saw him... just..."

Reaching forward, I took her, the woman who had given birth to me, raised me, in my arms. She felt so thin, so brittle.

Stepping out into the backyard, I took a moment to let out a deep breath. This had been where I grew up. The small grassy space had always had the power to relax me when I was younger.

It wasn't so easy now.

It took a concentrated effort to let the stresses of the day go, to leave them behind. I managed to do it. Almost.

There was only a single fear that pulled at me as I stepped forward. That for my father.

The old wolf was laying under the tree, in his favourite spot. Without a word I stepped over to lay down next to him.

He didn't say a single word as I settled down next to him. His eyes were firmly locked on the tree that towered over us.

After a long moment he spoke, but he never looked my way.

"Do you know this was a sapling, Son, when I planted it? I went out and bought it from a nursery for your mother when we first moved into the house. She didn't like it here back then, said it was too civilized for her tastes. Said it didn't have enough trees." He laughed softly. "Truth be told, Son, I hated it too. We'd both grown up in the forests, at the edges of the city. Neither of us *wanted* to move here, into V-town. We'd both just have likely been happy living out amongst the trees."

I turned my head slightly to look at him. His face was slack and expressionless.

"Then why did you, Dad?"

He chuckled softly before slowly reaching out to set one of his arms over my chest. It was heavy, but not crushing.

"We had you, Tommy. Well, almost. Aggey was pregnant and I knew that the woods and the streets were no place to raise a child. That was where I'd grown up, and I didn't want that for you. I wanted you to have a *normal* life." He snorted. "Looks like I failed at that, eh?"

I reached up and set my hand atop his. I hadn't noticed it at a distance, but now I could see, and feel, that his pelt was thinning. My father's perfect grey fur was falling out.

"The two of you consigned yourselves to the city for *me*?" I asked.

I could just see him roll his eyes.

"If you want to be melodramatic about it. It was just that point in our lives, son. I knew it as well as she did, but it was time to settle down and make a family. Aggey would never be the one to suggest it, the gods bless her heart, she'd never presume to force me to do something that would affect the hunters. That made it my call." He let out a long sigh. "But some days I do think about it. What

would it have been like if I hadn't bought in to the city? We could have raised you out in the forest, or even in the outskirts. How would you have turned out then?"

I laughed. "I guess we can always dream, can't we, Dad? You might have had a normal son then."

His arm went rigid on my chest. I moment later he forced himself up. That action alone was surprising. My father had long ago hurt his leg. He shouldn't be able to sit up without his cane.

"Tommy," His voice was soft, "I didn't mean it like that, Son. I never..."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "I know, Dad. I'm just kidding." Sitting up myself, I scootched forward over the grass until we were side by side, our backs against the trunk of the tree. "Dad, how are you feeling these days?"

The faintest shadows of an annoyed growl edged into his voice. "That's why you're here, is it? No one ever comes by just to see me. Everyone has to have a purpose. Gowan comes by to talk about the hunter's business, Renald to deliver supplies, now you to worry about my health."

"It's not like that, Dad. But I am concerned about you. Have you gone to talk to any of the doctors at the hospital? I'm sure they'd be happy to see you."

The slight edge in my father's voice grew now until he nearly snapped at me.

"No. I am *not* going back to the hospital. I spent too much time there when I hurt my leg and see what good they did me!"

I pulled away before the emotion snapped. A split second later he was my father again, the anger, the visage of the hunter's alpha was gone.

"I'm sorry, Son. Gowan has been trying the same trick on me for the last week."

"It's only because we're worried about you, Dad."

"Just..." He let out a pained grunt as he settled back to the ground, "Just lay here with me for a while, son. Just stay here and let me protect you again."

I left an hour later.

The sun was still in the sky, but it was starting to set when I headed back to the apartment.

I kissed my mother goodbye when I left. I wasn't sure if I'd managed to do anything, but she seemed relieved none the less.

"Babe?" I called as I pushed open the apartment door, it was unlocked.

I'd snuck back into apartment complex the same way I'd gotten out. For a moment it almost seemed that I'd had a clean operation. That was until I noticed the police dog that was now stationed by the garden door.

He simply nodded to me with no further comment than "Good evening, Sir."

Rebecca looked up from the paper she was reading as I stepped in.

"Welcome back, Wolfy. Where were you all day? You had the dogs downstairs up in a huff."

I chuckled as I pulled her in for a kiss.

"Just out and about, Babe. Had to go see the family. What are you up to?"

Glancing down, I noticed she had a set of listings in front of her. Some of them were circled in pen.

"Just going through the job ads, Wolfy."

Sitting down next to her I craned my neck for a look.

"Job ads? What for?"

She rolled her eyes. "What do you think? I need a job. I'm going stir crazy here now that you're out of politics. You don't need me to help you win any elections, and Max has a whole party to

help him. And both you and English know you'd never allow me to come bounty hunting with you. I need a job." She stuck her tongue out at me, "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not much of a homemaker."

"But, Babe," I tried to pull her closer but she leaned gently away, "I make enough for us both. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"That's the whole *point*, Wolfy. I *want* a job. You'd go crazy without your hunting, I'm no different."

Reaching out, I snatched the paper from her hands before she could pull it away. I had to turn from to her to keep her from grabbing it back.

The jobs listed in the broadleaf didn't exactly fill me with confidence.

Half of them were for construction, not surprising given V-town's current state. None of those had been circled. The rest were for more menial positions.

Dishwasher, floor washer. These, thankfully, were also not circled. Though the ones that Rebecca had picked out were little better.

"Receptionist?" I nearly spat the word. "You can do better than that!"

She pulled the paper from me before I could read off any more.

"That's easy for you to say, Tommy. You've been the mayor, not to mention a successful hunter. The last job I had was serving drinks to rich gamblers."

I growled playfully when I thought about the getup she'd been dressed in back then. That got me a gentle slap to the nose.

"I'm betting you don't want me going back to that again, and it's the only thing I ever really had experience in. That leaves me in a bit of a bind."

I huffed out a breath. "What about the government? You were working with a bunch of different people when you were with me, right? We can just get one of them to give you a job."

"No bloody way." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I had quite enough with the government already. I'm not going back there."

Grinning, I shot out a hand around her waist to pull her next to me. She squeaked slightly.

"A lady after my own heart," I whispered into her ear. "How did I ever get along without you?"

She didn't bother pushing me away.

"How should I know, Wolfy? But you'll have to find some way to manage once I get a day job."