

THE PATHFINDERS



P.13

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: I'm Getting too Old for This..... 1

Chapter 2: What's Five Times Four?..... 18

Chapter 3: Why I Stopped Being Mayor..... 34

Chapter 3: Why I Stopped Being Mayor

Waking the next morning, the sun was shining down through the clouds, illuminating us with patches of light and shadow that shifted endlessly.

Reaching out with my tongue, I licked the inside of Rebecca's ear. She giggled and rolled over.

"Awake already, Wolfy?" Her voice was groggy.

"Yeah, Babe. Couldn't sleep."

It took her a moment, but a yawn and a stretch later she was propped up with one elbow on the pillow, looking at me.

"What is it, Tommy?"

I let out a breath, "I spoke to Jon yesterday. He's already trying to plan our wedding."

She laughed. "He *what*? I thought that was off when you left office."

I nearly fell off the bed.

"What? Of course not! I promised I was going to marry you and I will." Leaning forward I licked the tip of her nose. "After all, you're human and it's one of your quaint human customs isn't it."

She snorted.

"Right. 'Human custom'. It doesn't seem to take long for you folks to forget that each and every one of you is part human. Your customs are human too, you know."

"Sure, Babe." I grumped.

"But that does mean it has to be a big production, Wolfy." She fell back to the bed with a whoof of breath. "I remember some of the plans people were coming up with back when you were still in office. Gods, Tommy, you'd think we were royals the way they wanted to plan it! And the money! Hosting a wedding like what some people seemed to expect would bankrupt us."

I laid down beside her and pulled her back to my chest so I could bury my nose in her hair.

"Yeah, let's not go for that, how about? I'm happy with a simple 'I do' if you are."

She giggled and wiggled from my grasp before getting up and searching the room for some clean clothing.

"I want a little more than the sign of a registrar in some civil office, thanks." Turning, she stuck her tongue out at me while she pulled up a pair of bluejeans.

You know, even with the tongue I still didn't mind the view.

"Fine." I fell back to the mattress to stare up at the ceiling. "How about we do get Jon to plan the basics out? I'll give him a budget or something and he can get things rolling."

A moment later I felt Rebecca's lips on my forehead.

"Works for me, Wolfy. Anyway, it's a good thing you woke me up. I've got some interviews this morning. I'll see you later."

It was at least another hour before I dragged myself out of bed. The first place I headed after breakfast was Jon's office.

It was still fairly early in the morning, but I wasn't surprised to find Jon already there. If I didn't know better I'd almost say the dog never slept. I'd never seen him off duty and I didn't even know where his home was.

"Sir." He nodded to me as I stepped in the office. The dog never even lifted his eyes from the paper in his hands. "I'll be with you in just a moment." He made a few quick notes on the sheet and set it aside, giving me his full attention. "What can I do for you, Tommy?"

Sitting down heavily on the chair across from him, I levelled the dog with a stare.

"We need to talk about my wedding."

He gulped slightly. "Yes, Sir. As you're aware, I'm already receiving inquiries regarding where and when it will occur. In fact," A slight chuckle escaped him, "I've even had to begin a file – a rather large one – of people requesting invitations. It seems, Tommy, that every person who has so much as shaken hands with you is attempting to acquire an invitation. It's even gotten to the point that several people in the community have begun bragging that they've already received theirs."

"What? No. Absolutely not. Jon, what were you thinking, giving away invites?"

An honest smile spread across his face.

"I haven't had to think at all, Tommy. I haven't given out *anything*. I've refused to even discuss the event or respond to any inquirers. I have, however," He reached down and brushed his claws on the cuff of his spotless shirt, "Taken the liberty of... speaking to the individuals who claimed to have received invitations. They are no longer making those claims."

Did I see a hint of a predatory smile cross his lips ever so briefly.

"I knew I could count on you, Jon." Reaching out, I patted his shoulder. "But I do have a request of you."

He cocked his head. "Sir?"

"It's a personal one." I leaned back on the chair. "Only if you think you can handle it without affecting your other duties. I *would* like you to help plan the wedding. The gods know where I'd be without you, Jon. You're the only one who can seem to see more than two feet beyond his nose. And this includes me. Rebecca and I just want something easy and simple, but I doubt that's what the world will let us have. Do you think you can handle it?"

There was no smile to his lips when he nodded, but the dog's eyes danced.

"I'd be happy to, Sir." Pausing for a moment, he rolled the words around on his tongue, "I'd be honoured to, Tommy."

"Great." I slumped back against the seat. "That's one less thing I'll have to worry about. But," I wagged a finger at him, "I don't want to end up in debt over this. I don't know how much a decent wedding costs, but I don't want to end up poor."

Jon shook his head as he began shuffling through the papers on one side of his desk. "That shouldn't be a problem, Tommy. No small number of people feel indebted to you themselves for your work in the rebuilding. I have more than a few companies who would be happy to provide their services either for free or cost."

Snorting, I got ready to stand up. "Figures you'd have this all planned out already."

"There is one last thing, Sir." Jon raised a hand to still me. "I intercepted a runner earlier this morning. He'd been sent by Sayer to fetch you." I groaned. "I felt it was a good idea to turn him away, allow you some sleep."

Closing my eyes for a moment, I shook my head. "Thanks. Did he say what he wanted?"

Jon's face was stoic, but I could just see him wanting to roll his eyes. "No, Sir. But it is Commissioner Sayer. I think we can both make a reasonable guess what he might wish to discuss."

Stepping from the front door of the apartment building, the police dogs were already in formation around me. We set off without a word.

It's been a while since I last had to go to the police HQ. I'd had to take trips here ever couple of days when I'd been mayor, but I made a point of avoiding the place now that I was my own man again.

Oh well, one could only avoid the most powerful dog in V-town for so long. I may not be the sharpest tooth, but one does not ignore a summons from Commissioner Sayer. It tends to be bad for one's freedom of movement.

The police headquarters was completely rebuilt now, having been one of the first buildings in V-town to be completed. Its simple red brick walls were almost calming. One would never think it was possibly the largest structure in the city.

The floor plan took up a whole city block. That in itself wasn't all that interesting, a lot of buildings were that large, city hall for example. But the Police HQ took the *entire* block. There wasn't even enough room for a patch of grass to grow between the walls and the side walk.

The building rose an even three stories. And there wasn't a single window to be seen in any of them.

This wasn't like the Storm Front building. That one had been designed with a balance of function and livability. The Police HQ was a working building. Comfort didn't come first, or second. I doubt it was even in the top ten.

However, the most notable part of the building wasn't what one could see. The three floors that thrust up were relatively public, offices and waiting rooms, holding cells and such.

It was the floor upon floor that were dug deep into the earth that no one knew about that always left me shivering.

English and I had gotten an unexpected whirlwind tour of them some time ago.

I'd gone back a couple more times as mayor, mostly to make sure they'd been shut down.

Back then I'd only been aware of three levels of sub-basements. Now I knew there were five.

The sun was warm on my face as I walked down the street. I shivered.

There was only one obvious entrance to the building. A simple, single wooden door in the middle of the front wall.

I noticed at least a dozen police dogs as I made my way to it. They all stood in shadows and doorways, watching the crowds pass. They never even so much as nodded to me.

Opening the door, I was met with exactly the same waiting room as I'd seen a year and a half ago when I'd first come here.

The room was relatively small. A few benches here and there, and a single lineup that lead to a row of police dogs at a counter who were helping the public.

Was it just me or was the line longer than usual?

The que of people stretched almost out the door, and it wasn't moving all that fast.

I couldn't make out what the complaints were – they'd designed the acoustics of the room too

well, but no one sounded happy.

It took me over an hour of waiting to get to the front of the line.

I could have jumped the que, I'd done it before as mayor when I'd been in a rush, but I was happy to wait now. Perhaps I'm just a little bent, but I liked being treated like a normal person again – and being stuck in a que was one of the things normal people did.

Stepping up at last to one of the police dogs on duty, she hardly even looked up at me as she shuffled the paperwork in front of her.

“What can I do for you, citizen?”

Leaning forward on the spotless oak desk, I tried to take some of the weight off my feet. I'd forgotten just how sore they could get when I was left standing.

“Is Commissioner Sayer in?”

The dog still didn't look up, but she started slightly when I said that name.

“I'm sorry, citizen, but I am not permitted to report on the status of the Commissioner. And, in any event,” She finished straightening her papers, “The Commissioner does not take drop-in visits. I'm sorry. Is it possible I could help you?”

I chuckled. “Sorry darling, it's the Sayer I wanted to see.”

She started again when I addressed her, finally looking up.

I knew what she saw. A scruffy brown furred wolf stood in front of her, a week or more overdue for a brushing, the cream of his belling lightly stained with blood from this morning's breakfast.

“Would it help if I said that Administrator Taggert is waiting for him?”

That got things moving along a bit quicker.

It still took a few moments for them to call an escort for me. It wasn't that the police were worried about be sneaking around the place, but *everyone* got an escort. All the hallways in this building looked identical and not a single door was labelled.

I think the cops navigated more on scent and muscle memory than anything else.

Unfortunately for them I'd spent enough time here to learn the basic layout of the place.

They asked me to wait just within the door behind the reception room. I did, like a good little boy. For about forty-five seconds.

Once the coast was clear I made off down the whitewashed hallway.

If memory serves it should be a left, a right, then a straight through to get to the short term holding cells...

Or was that a left, then a right...

Never mind, I was here.

Pushing open the door to the holding cell room, the guard on duty startled.

He had good reason to. The cells, while not as frighteningly full as they had been immediately after the quake, were still noticeably fuller than they should be.

“At east, Constable.” I waved a hand at the dog as I passed by. He was about to get out of his seat and confront me when I passed him by.

I wasn't sure if he recognized who I was or not, but he didn't stand. That was one ability I'd picked up while mayor. It was trivially simple to get most people to obey you when you simply *acted* like you were already in charge. Folks, especially canines, tend to respond to that.

And it didn't hurt that I'd had the hunter's alpha to help train me. My father had a lifetime of experience in tricks like this. I'd been able to pick a few of them up.

I didn't venture close to the cell bars, I wasn't that stupid. Rather I went to the coarkboard on

the wall next to them. That's where the cops kept the rap sheets on everyone in the room.

I don't really know how to read these things, but I was able to pick out phrases like 'aggravated assault' and 'property damage over one-thousand'. Most of the charges could be anything, but at least they seemed legit. That was all I needed to know.

The officer was still watching me suspiciously as I turned to leave the room. "As you were," was all I said.

There were a few catcalls from the people behind the bars as I left, but I didn't bother to listen to them.

Back in the hallway, I couldn't keep the smile from my lips as a dog came running towards me, out of breath.

It wasn't often that you got to see a police dog with even so much as a single hair out of place. Some days I almost thought of it as a challenge to find new ways to get them worked up.

"Sir!" He paused for a moment to gasp in a breath, "I... you... you didn't wait in the assigned location."

I felt a touch of pity for the dog. He looked young. He likely wasn't used to dealing with people like me.

Reaching out, I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. I just went for a wander. Do it all the time." I grinned. "You found me fast. It takes most dogs at least a couple more minutes. You're good."

I wasn't sure what tales Sayer was spinning about me these days, but the dog straightened and beamed like I'd just given him a commendation.

"Thank you, Sir." He had to pause for breath again. "Commissioner Sayer is waiting for you. Shall we?"

The rest of the journey up to Sayer's office was quiet. We didn't see another soul as we made our way down the endless hallways, and I was sure my escort was taking pains to keep me away from any more *interesting* sights.

Stopping in front of yet another unmarked door, I could already tell we'd reached our destination. The police were fastidious about keeping their den clean, yet I could still pickup Sayer's scent.

He didn't smell good.

Opening the door without a knock, I stepped in to the outer office. My escort stayed behind in the hall, pulling the door closed behind me.

I got hardly more than a glance from the dog working reception.

"The Commissioner is waiting for you, Administrator Taggart. Please go right in."

The police were the only ones who ever referred to me as 'Administrator'.

Stepping into Sayer's inner office, I was surprised to see another dog.

It wasn't Jon. I'd never seen *this* man before. He was seated next to Sayer and slightly behind. He was holding papers before the elder dog's face for him to read.

The moment I got a good look at Sayer it became obvious why the other dog was required.

Sayer was a white pelted Great Dane. He's always been tall and thin, looking ghost like. His health had been declining for over a year now, but he'd still been doing alright last I saw him.

That wasn't the case any more.

The fact I could count his ribs through the fabric of his uniform pretty much said it all. That, and the fact he didn't even so much as shift his weight when I entered.

The only thing that moved on the man was his head.

He nodded to the dog beside him and whispered something as I sat down. A moment later he raised his voice, though it was still hardly over a whisper.

"That will be all, Lieutenant. You are dismissed." There was something in Sayer's voice that I'd never heard before. It was soft, but in more ways than one.

The police dog departed a moment later, leaving Sayer and I alone in the near silent office.

For a handful of heartbeats the only sound was that of my breathing.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Taggart."

I shrugged and tried to work a smile to my face. "Don't mention it, Sayer. It's been a while since I've come over to see you. What's it been now, a couple of months?"

"Seventy-four days, Mr. Taggart. It's been seventy-four days since you stepped down from your position as mayor. That was the last day you came to see me."

I coughed slightly and looked away. I hadn't realized that Sayer had *quite* been keeping that close track. But then again, it would be just like him.

"So, what can I do for you, Sayer?" I tried to keep my voice light.

The dog moved for the first time since I'd entered the office. I could hear his joints creak from here. Slowly leaning forward, he laboriously raised his hands to rest them on the desk. I could see the strain in his eyes as he did even that.

And that was the odd thing about the dog. Every motion was a battle for him, every breath a struggle, but yet his eyes were still bright.

When Sayer had first pressed me into the position of mayor I'd wondered if his old age had affected his mind. Now I knew for sure it hadn't. The dog's body may be failing, but I had no doubt this old Dane could still run rings around me. His eyes were still clear, calculating.

"Mr. Taggart," He took a shallow breath, "I'd like to ask you what orders you have given Constable Oaks."

I tried to fain innocence. It wasn't hard. It took me a few moments to even remember that I'd asked Jon to look into anything for me.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about," I replied.

"We caught the Constable down in the research library. He was accessing shelves of books that haven't been touched in decades. And," The dog narrowed his eyes, "He refused to discuss the topic with us when we confronted him. He wouldn't say who had given him his orders, but you are the only person he would ever follow above *me*."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat. Jon had refused to answer a question from Sayer? That was almost unheard of for a police dog.

But on the other hand... I let out a breath I hadn't even realized I'd been holding.

"Don't worry yourself too much about it, Sayer. Jon just got a little overzealous about a personal request I gave him. I was looking for some history books on V-town and the surrounding countryside. I'm trying to get back into history now that I have a little spare time. I asked Jon to keep it quiet so that folks won't be hounding me. He must have taken my request for privacy a little too literally."

The dog closed his eyes for a moment, but otherwise didn't move. I couldn't even see him breathe. He could just as well be dead for all I knew.

Opening his eyes, Sayer's voice was a touch stronger.

"So be it, Mr. Taggart. However, we do have an additional item to discuss regarding Constable Oaks."

Oh boy, here we go again.

This had been an ongoing issue between Sayer and I since I'd become mayor.

Sayer had let Jon join English, Rebecca, and I on our trip across the mountains last year. It had officially been at Sayer's request, to guard me, but Jon had been the one to insist on it.

After coming back to the city Jon had worked even closer to me. I'd had to fight for it, but I'd been able to get Jon transferred to my personal staff. He was still a member of the V-town police, but he worked for *me*.

I'd made sure that deal held even after I left office.

"Mr. Taggert," Sayer's voice whispered across the desk like the sea breeze at two in the morning, "I must insist that you release Constable Oaks from your service. We've discussed it dozens of times. I *need* him to take over for me."

I leaned back in the chair. I normally had a hundred explanations and excuses why I still needed Jon, why I wouldn't give him back. Jon not wanting to go being hardly the least among them.

Sayer had selected Jon, his nephew, as his successor to lead the police force.

Jon had tried to explain it to me once, but I never did get my head around it. Jon wasn't the next highest ranking dog in the force, far from it, but he was the only living relative to Sayer. And as Sayer had been the closest living relative to the former police commissioner, it was expected that Jon would take over the position, being promoted as necessary.

Nepotism of that level made my fur itch.

"Sayer, Jon doesn't *want* the job. How many times do I, *does he*, have to say that. He turned you down. I know that Able and Baker don't particularly want to be promoted, but I'm sure you could find *someone* to take the job."

The dog let out a long sigh, the sound could have just as well come from the wind brushing the lips of a corpse.

"Mr. Taggert..." There was a long pause before he spoke again, "Tommy, do you know the history of the V-town police force?"

I had to scratch my head a little over that one. To be honest, I didn't. I have a major in history, but I didn't know much of the police. No one did.

"Can't say I've ever run across that particular text book, Sayer."

"It's not surprising. We go to extreme lengths to ensure that as little information as possible escapes these walls. The inner workings of the police department are not secret, but they are... private. The citizens would not have the same degree of confidence in the service if they knew our whole history."

A slight tingle ran down my spine.

"But you're just a police force. There's nothing magical about that, right?" My voice was rough.

"Not in and as such, Tommy." He closed his eyes. "The police force you see today has a very limited connection to the Municipal Police Department of Greater Vancouver, that which we replace. There are few records remaining from the time of the Cataclysm. I can tell you little of how the original force fared through that time, but our internal records begin about seven years after."

"The force that started at that time was little more than a loose collection of individuals. Some of them had previously been employed as police officers. Most hadn't. They came together with the goal of rebuilding society."

He took another deep breath, then let it out in a huff.

"Or at least that was there stated goal. There were all manner of species in the newly formed V-town Police Service. They were of all types and creeds, but they had one thing in common. They all wanted to control the city."

I cocked my head, but didn't say anything.

“The force numbered about two-hundred at that time. They chose to make their base right where we sit today, downtown V-town. That was not a proud time in our history. There are few public records of those years, and that's the way the force plans to keep it. For approximately five years the V-town Police Service was the defacto power in the city. And it was not a benevolent organization.”

“While there is no doubt that civilization improved under its watch, it did so only in ways that the Service allowed. They were not public servants, Tommy. They were masters.”

“It was at the end of those five years that V-town began to expand. V-town was not a pleasant place to be, but it was better than the wilderness. And the service made sure that no other settlements sprung up to challenge it.”

“Among the people to migrate to V-town were two lines of dogs. Their names have been lost to history, erased by their own humility, but they did a single important thing. They, every man and woman, joined the Police Service.”

“It was a simple enough matter. The police were willing to take any who were capable, and the dogs were. What the existing officers didn't expect were just *how* good.”

“In under ten years the new lines had taken over key positions in the Service. Not only that, but every one of their children who came of age also joined the service. By the time the original officers realized what was happening it was too late.”

“The purge came approximately fifteen years after the Service had been formed. There were enough dogs in its service now that they could wrest control. In a single night very near every officer who was not of the two dog lines was charged with corruption and jailed.”

Sayer opened his eyes now, staring straight into me.

“The two lines had also taken over most of the judiciary system by that point, the judges. In less than a week almost all of the two-hundred founding members of the V-town Police Service were executed for their crimes.”

“In that swift move the service changed. It was now under the control of the dogs.”

I gulped.

“Those two lines of dogs have remained almost completely unchanged to this day, Tommy. One line, the more common, are German Sheppard. They form the bulk of the force. The second line, the Great Danes, form the upper power structure.”

“I, Tommy, am the last of the remaining second line. That is why I command the force.”

“But what about Jon?” I asked.

Sayer shook his head almost imperceptibly, “My sister, Oaks's mother, did not agree with the service's hard stance on keeping the lines apart. She was a fine officer, and she married a fine officer, but together they were removed from the force.”

“Jon Oaks may not look it, but he carries both lines of the service man and the flag officer. He is one of the few, possibly only, men who can lead the force.”

“And more than that, Tommy, he must come to lead *now*. There is little time left. I was only partially trained in the ways of command, and I fear there is little time for me to pass what I know onto him. Jon *must* lead us. It is not my legacy that I speak of here, Tommy. It's all of V-town. The police force has been able to keep order for over a hundred years, with one noticeable lapse. If the service falls then so will the city.”

“Could you see that, Tommy? Everything we have both worked for – we are not so different – watch it crumble to the ground as the races begin fighting again?”

My head was spinning. I'd never heard any of this before. How could none of this have ever reached the history books?

“Sayer,” I had to force the words out, “Are the police responsible for the school curriculum?”

The slightest smile slipped to the dog's lips. "You are thinking, Mr. Taggert. No, we are not responsible for what happens in the city schools. But," The smile grew, "We do have some small degree of... influence. We've always made it plain that we have no interest in the subject of history. Unsurprisingly, that particular subject sees little funding." His face pulled. "And I don't mind saying that your initiatives as mayor caused us no end of trouble."

I had to grin at that one. Reforming the schools had been my number two priority after the rebuilding.

Standing up, I forced myself to step away from the dog.

"I'll ask Jon again, Sayer. That's all I can promise. He knows all this... doesn't he?"

The dog nodded. "Of course he does. He could not be groomed for leadership unless he knew." He paused for a moment as I backed away. "And, Tommy, I can be sure you won't share this with a soul, can't I?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "As long as you don't give me a reason to. And," I turned to him, "As long as you let Jon finish his research. Deal?"

Sayer didn't say a word.

Turning, I was through the door in a heartbeat, and out into the hallway in another.

The unmarked, whitewashed walls of the Police HQ looked far more sinister to me now than they had just a few minutes ago.

I found them far too tight and constricting.

I hadn't thought much of the seemingly omnipresent police officers while I'd been walking to HQ, but my eyes lingered on each and every one of them now.

Just how much did the average dog in the street know about the organization it called master? I knew for a fact that every one of these dogs, to a fault, was deeply loyal to the department.

And I also knew, thanks to my time as mayor, that the police department was a mostly independent part of the government.

It took its fair share of money from the taxes, accepted a few vague guidelines and more or less kept to itself.

I couldn't help but wonder just how many things the department had its hands in. I knew that Sayer had personally manipulated the bugger all out of me... what else had he done?

The number of cops slowly dropped off the further I walked from HQ. It was only now that I noticed my honour guard hadn't formed up on me when I set foot on the street.

Whether it was an oversight – unlikely – or a specific direction by Sayer to keep me from freaking out, it did make me feel at least a little better. A cocoon of police dogs watching my every step was the last thing I needed right now.

I was most of the way back to the apartment when I took a quick shortcut through an alleyway.

Something didn't feel right...

Following an instinct, I leapt into the shadow of an overfilled garbage bin. Not only was I obscured from sight, but its overpowering stench hit my scent.

Less than a minute later a form raced past. He paused for a moment at the end of the alley, searching for a trail.

It was a wolf. One like me. His fur was a muddy red and he wore a red windbreaker.

Stalking from behind the bin, I moved up behind him. I was no more than a pace away when he took off in a direction, seemingly at random.

I didn't have far to follow him before he dived into another alley parallel to the one I'd just been in. He put his nose to the ground here and grunted happily when he picked up something or other.

That was fine for me. It gave me the opportunity to jump him.

The wolf went down in a heap under me. It wasn't even a challenge to keep him there, he hardly fought.

It wasn't until I had him immobilized that I realized why.

This man wasn't hunting me. Or at least it wasn't likely. The lightening bolt embroidered on the back of his red blazer was all I needed. The fact the words 'Storm Front Bounty Hunters' were sewn underneath it made me blush.

I had a jacket just like this back in my apartment somewhere.

"You want to let me up, dude?" The wolf asked, voice tired.

Getting off him as quickly as I could, I took a couple of steps back to make sure I was out of reach. Even if this guy was on my side I still didn't want to leave myself wide open.

"Uh... sorry, man." Was all I could stammer out.

He stood up and tried to brush himself off. It didn't do much good. The filth of the alleyway was already ground into his jacket.

"You do realize you just lost me a contract?" Oddly, the wolf didn't sound as annoyed as I'd expect. I would have been a little more pissy if someone had just jumped me.

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

The wolf turned from me, surveying the far side of the alleyway. He let out a humph.

"Well, that cuts it. He's already gone." Turning back to me, he cocked an eye ridge. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep up to you without being seen? It's like you purposely take the worst routs you can find."

"Me?" I cocked my head, "You were following me? I thought you had a bounty."

The wolf rolled his eyes as he turned and began walking off.

"Of course I do. How do you expect me to hunt down your assassin if I don't follow *you*?"

I didn't even get another word out before he was around the edge of the alley and into the street again, out of sight.

There was a contract out on the person who was hunting *me*?

What in all the gods names... that wasn't the way the police worked. And even then, almost no one knew about my attempted poisoning.

I had just enough time to get myself all worked up over the rest of the way home.

It may sound silly, but I hadn't gotten all *that* excited when I'd been first attacked. I'd been put off balance, sure, but I'd been attacked so many times over the last couple of years that it wasn't a huge event anymore.

But this... this was just weird. Well, that and the story about the police. I just really needed a couple of hours to sit back and think.

It was just getting up to lunchtime when I got back to the apartment. I only just made it into the lobby of the building when my tail fell to thunk on the floor like a lead weight.

"Sir!" Jon came rushing up to me, pressing through the crowd of people who filled the room. "I'm sorry about this, but they just keep coming. I've told them you're no longer they mayor, but the just won't listen."

Like flashbacks to a war zone, images of my days running the goverment came back to me. The endless meetings... shaking hands and kissing babies for hours on end...

"Jon," I pulled the dog to my side as I whispered in his ear, "*Get them out of here.* I'm not in the game anymore."

"I tried, Sir..."

He didn't even get a chance to finish before one of the crowd, a short rat looking man, pressed his way between us.

"Hey! I need to talk to you! What's up with all the violence lately? It's ruining my business!"

"Yeah!" The crowd behind them cursed.

"I'm not mayor anymore, folks. Sorry, I can't help." I fought to keep my voice level as I raised to a shout to be heard over them, "Try bringing it up with Mayor Max. He's the one to talk to."

"He's not the one we voted for!" Came a cry from the crowd. "You're the name that was on the ballot! I want to talk to *you*!"

Oh bugger.

Some days I hate my life, I really do.

There's a million things going for me, but it's hard to keep them in mind when I'm staring down the mussel of a mile long line of unhappy people.

And it's even worse when you know for a fact *that you can't help them*.

Not that they seemed to care much. One by one they each came to stand in front of the makeshift desk that I'd had Jon make out of the furniture in the corner of the lobby.

I heard stories about everything from minor riots to livestock going missing in the ranches outside the city.

Overall it wasn't *that* bad. People made it out to be the end of the world all over again, but listening through the hyperbole I was able to tell that things weren't to that yet. They were getting there, but things were still... okay.

But 'okay' wasn't good enough anymore. People had hyped themselves up so much on the restoration that even this minor regression left them feeling cheated and vulnerable.

Not that I could blame them. The mere thought that we could fall back into the near chaos that had engulfed the city during the race riots left me shaking.

I suppose I was able to provide one service to those who came before me. Many of these people *had* tried to get satisfaction out of the government before coming to me. Only they'd been unable to get it.

Things were still too unorganized now. One department didn't know what the others were doing. That left people pinballing between government departments, each one trying to help but being unable.

And that made people feel helpless.

I was at least able to provide some vague sense of guidance. I'd personally bet that half the advice I gave out was wrong, but at least I was able to send people in the right directions and tell them where to start to get help.

It wasn't that I did much, and it wasn't that many people left smiling, but at least the hard set lines in their faces were relaxed some measure when they walked away.

It was a bit of a trick to get it done without anyone noticing, but Jon was able to lock the doors to the lobby, preventing any more people from getting in. He let each person out after they'd talked to me, slowly cutting down on the people crowding in the room.

It was still over two hours before I made it down to the last person in line.

"And I want to know why with all this crime running rampant more people aren't being carted off to jail!"

I hadn't even bothered to open my eyes to see whoever it was that stood before me now. My stomach was long past growling, I felt weak from hunger.

All I wanted was for the whiny, nasal, nails on chalkboard voice to *go away*.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I don't know. I'm sure the police department is doing all they can. They rarely perform arrests. That's left up to the bounty hunters. They're given contracts to hunt down fugitives."

"Exactly, Mate." The voice dropped several octaves. "Why are you in here when there're contracts to claim out there?"

Huh?

Opening my eyes, English stood before me, lounging forward on the table between us.

"Hiya, Mate." He smiled.

I fell back into my seat with a sigh.

"You don't know how good it is to see a friendly face," I said. "What are you doing in here?"

He shrugged. "Exactly what I said, Mate. Finding out why my partner is sitting in here rather than out on the street with me. There's money to be made, and *I'm not making it.*"

I barely got a chance to run up to the apartment and scarf down whatever was sitting in the fridge before I was very nearly dragged out of the building by my tail.

I was surprised to note that Jon didn't follow us. Perhaps it was for the best. I had a couple hundred questions to ask him, that should be done in private.

"Where are we going, English?"

We ventured out from the nicer part of town to the rougher, rundown warehouses of the Gastown district. Not many folks lived here.

"Got a juicy little bounty on a trouble maker, Mate. Human. Thought you might like to get hands on with this one."

I groaned. "Not again. Are we back to the humans making the majority of the bounties again?"

He shook his head. "Nah, Mate. I thought of that too and checked myself. This one lines right up with the percentages. About five percent of V-town is human? About five percent of the bounties are too."

"That reminds me, English," I said as we rounded another corner to be confronted with yet more dilapidated buildings, "I ran across a wolf today. Or perhaps 'ran over' would be a better description. A red furred one. Said he was on a contract. Something about hunting a assassin."

I heard a distinct 'urk' from the lion before he slipped into the shadows between the buildings.

"Never mind that now, Mate. We're almost here. Oh, and one more thing. We need to capture him alive. The cops had it in the contract, and in bold print no less. Seems he must know something."

This particular street looked no different than any other we'd walked down. The warehouses on either side were made of timeworn brick that had been nearly dyed black from the years. And that was where the walls still stood. There weren't many buildings around here that were fully intact.

A few hundred meters on there was one structure that looked a little more sound than the rest. It wasn't until we got closer that I was able to make out the amateur patch job that it had recently undergone. There were pieces of scrap wood and metal nailed on here and there to keep out the rain and wind. From any distance it was identical to the rest of the neighbourhood.

Closer still and I was able to pick up the scents of those who had come and gone. If there was any doubt on the creditability of English's scouts they were put to rest now. The scent of humans pervaded the area.

Thankfully, I didn't recognize any of them.

Humans were odd ones. They could remember to cover their tracks, but they almost never remembered to cover their scent.

Past the point of talking, English signalled to a small side door. I nodded.

The lion must have purchased up a lock pick at some point over the last few months. He put it

to good use now.

He wasn't that skilled, but we got the door open in due time. And without the use of blunt force.

The inside of the warehouse was dark. Stepping in, we found ourselves in the middle of the open storage area.

When it came to humans I could make a fair assumption that they would be camped out in the small office at the head of the structure.

Closing on the two story set of rooms, I was proven right. Electric light spilt through the windows towards us. I couldn't make much out, but they were there.

I nodded to English as we advanced.

We were only a couple dozen steps from the office when the overhead lights snapped on.

Near blinded, I sprung for whatever cover I could find. I hadn't noticed until now that the warehouse was almost completely empty.

I could hear the sound of running feet. At least three sets.

And the clunk of heavy machinery.

This was not good.

"English?" I whispered as I blinked furiously, trying to clear my eyes.

There was no reply.

Stumbling half blinded, I didn't stop until my fingers brushed concrete.

Ducking down, I was just able to tell I'd run across a ceiling support. The first few feet were concrete, then above that it was a steel girder. Worked for me, it was just large enough to hide behind.

"English?"

Again I looked around, trying in vain to spot the lion. It took me long moments before I found his nervously twitching tail poking out from behind a flimsy looking wooden crate.

Another echoing clunk from the direction of the office and the bottom dropped out from my gut.

What *the hell* was that?

It looked vaguely like the guns the police kept in backup, only about ten times the size.

Mounted on a tripod, it was fed by a long belt of bullets.

I, as a rule, don't like guns. I liked this one even less. And that was before it began firing.

"Clear!" Someone yelled from the shadows. A moment later it felt like the world was trying to shake itself apart,

The fountain of lead that sprayed from the weapon was beyond anything I've ever seen before. It was enough to make my jaw drop and my ears bleed.

It only took a handful of seconds before the raging boom of the gun fell to little more than a dull ringing as my eardrums imploded.

Thankfully, it looked like the people running the thing didn't much know how to use it.

They sprayed gunfire all over the room, but few if any shots came anywhere near English or I. Half their problem seemed to be the recoil from the weapon. It forced their aim up with every shot. Not a good thing when they were trying to hit the two of us. We were on the floor of the warehouse while the gun was sitting on the second floor of the office.

"English?" I *think* I screamed, but I could hardly even make out my own words. A moment later I saw the lion's face pop out from behind his cover.

He was scowling. So far the only blood on him was that which leaked from one ear.

I waved a hand forward. We needed to make a run to the office before they managed to get the gun under control. It didn't matter what cover we had, that weapon could chew through anything in ten seconds flat.

He scowled again when I motioned him forward, but responded by lifting three fingers.

Two... one...

We both leapt into the open at once, banking on the faint hope that the human manning the gun wouldn't be able to bring it to bare fast enough.

The stretch to the offices was only a dozen meters or so, but it felt far longer.

We were about half way there when I felt a chip of concrete fly up to hit my heel.

I couldn't see the line of bullets that swarmed over us, but I had a vague idea where they were. No more than a few feet above my upstanding ears.

"Faster!" I gave English a shove on as I leapt and rolled off in a different direction. I could only hope that the human would follow me with his aim rather than English.

With my regeneration I could take a bullet better than the lion. Though I doubted it would do much against the hundred or so rounds a second the gun was spewing out.

Regeneration might be good and fine, but it does have limits. It still needs a beating heart, and I doubt the gun would leave that.

A line of fire lit up the tip of one of my ears as I scrambled for whatever cover I could find. Another support post. The three feet of cement at its base had seemed adequate last time, but it felt far less comforting now that I was no more than a dozen meters from the gunner.

One positive note though. I could just see English sprint into the door of the offices. Gods, that lion could move like his tail was on fire.

Taking a deep breath, I fought to make myself as small as possible behind my meagre cover. The fact the concrete was *shrinking* as the gun chipped away at its edges was not helping.

Like someone had flicked a switch, the hail of bullets stopped.

"Come out, *wolf*." He spit the last word like a curse. "You can't escape. Come out and face your death like the animal you are."

I could tell by the voice that this was definitely a human. Why in all the gods' names was a human trying to kill *me*? I'd just spent the better part of two years fighting to keep them alive.

"What do you want?" I called out. My hearing was already returning, but the sounds were still muted.

"Not much, wolf, just your head on a platter. Then we'll serve it up to all the turncoats in the city!"

The gun opened up again, cutting off any hope for conversation. I guess they were done talking.

I couldn't hear, and didn't dare poke my head around to take a peek, but I knew something had changed. For just a moment the gun began spraying wildly again, now sweeping the ceiling, floor, walls, and everything in between.

Then it fell quiet.

"Mate? You alright?" I'd never been so happy to hear the lion's voice.

Carefully edging my nose around the now half destroyed concrete barrier, I could smell something over the bite of gun powder and the hot burn of powdered concrete.

Blood. Human blood.

I let out a long sigh.

"You killed them all?" I was just about ready to start banging my head against the wall.

English shrugged. "Didn't have much choice, Mate. They were all armed to the teeth and not much interested in talking. I tried to knock our target out but he would have none of it."

Looking at the bloodbath that was sprayed across the walls of the gun platform I had to wonder just how hard he'd tried.

"Fine." I set down the last corpse after checking for even the faintest sign of life. "You'd better get this reported back."

"Me?" The lion's voice took a mock incredulous edge, "Why me?"

"Because," I replied, turning away, "I wasn't here. The cop's nesting instinct has already come back in full force. If they find out I was involved in this they'll never let me leave my apartment again. But, English," I turned back towards him, "Have your fellas at SF take a look at the scene first, eh? It would be good to get a frank opinion of what in all the gods' names is going on before the dogs descend on it."

English just laughed grimly and shook his head.

I made the trip back to the apartment on my own. I'll admit I was a little more paranoid this time. It's not everyday in V-town that you run across someone with a gods forsaken *machine gun*. And even less that they try to kill you with it.

Thankfully, the walk was uneventful. There were a few people outside the apartment, likely looking to talk to me, but I slipped past them without being noticed.

There was a fresh guard standing at the front of the building. He let me in without a word. I'd made sure to take the time to remove the scent of gunpowder from my fur. All he would smell was the strong brine of the ocean.

In the lobby, it was empty. Not even Jon to be seen.

Climbing the stairs to the apartment, I was more than happy to pick up a familiar scent.

"Hey, Babe." Closing the door behind me, I walked straight to Rebecca, encircling her in my arms where she sat on a stool.

I got a slight squeak out of her as I squeezed her tight.

"Wolfy, what is it?" She shifted slightly to relieve the pressure. "You're acting like you haven't seen me in weeks."

I closed my eyes and buried my nose in her hair.

"It's been a long day, Babe. How about you?"

She laughed softly. "Yeah, for me too."

Opening my eyes, I looked down at what she was working on. It was a job application form. For KDP.

"Babe..."

She let out a long sigh when she saw what I was reading.

"There's not much for it, Tommy. I don't have a lot of skills that apply well to an office job, and there's no way I'm going back to serving drinks."

"But, Babe, won't people hire you just because..."

She gave me a stern look. "No. I haven't been using your name while I've been searching. In fact," She tossed her hair, "I've been making a point of *not* mentioning it. Not many people recognise me and I'm just fine with that."

"But, Babe, KDP..."

She shrugged. "It's where you worked."

I let out a long sigh as I settled next to her. "And it was a hole. You can do better than that. And what about Hayfair and West?"

She turned from me slightly and returned to filling out the form. "You know that Hairfair is in jail, and as for West..." She shrugged, "He was cleared of all charges save for a few misdemeanours. He hasn't come to bother you since you stepped down from being mayor, right?"

I still couldn't stand the thought of her working in such a place.

“Babe, please...”

She gave me a gentle shove away. “Don't worry about it, Wolfy. I've filled out a dozen of these forms today. This is just another one. We'll worry about it if I get an offer.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

Waiting as she filled the form, my eyes wandered to a box that lay on the floor beside her.

“What's that, Babe?”

She glanced over to where I pointed. “Oh,” She blushed slightly, “The wedding dress.”

“The *wedding dress*?” She'd said it like it was nothing.

Rebecca shrugged. “Jon forwarded an offer to me this morning. One of the better bridal shops was willing to provide it for free as a 'thank you' for the rebuilding. It would have been silly for us to pass it up.”

Lifting the corner of the oversized cardboard box, I got a glance of the pure white dress that lay folded within.

And I think I very nearly got poisoned of ruffle and sequin overdose.

“Gah!” I pulled back, “What in all the gods' names... you expect to *wear* that?”

She looked over to me. “Sure, why not?”

I just shook my head as I let the edge of the box fall back into place. Now I got the full effect of the dress. Not only did it look.... but they'd also infused the packaging with some kind of mixture of oil and floral scents. I had to hold back a sneeze.

A few moments later I got another whiff of the scent and my sneeze changed. It was now a gag I was holding back. The cloying, sickly sweet scent of the dress weaved around me until I felt ill.

“It's... great, Babe.”

Grabbing the edge of the box, I dragged it into the closet by the hallway door. There was almost nothing else in there but a few of Rebecca's jackets. The box only just fit.