

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 4: Across the River and Through the Woods

For perhaps the first time in months I woke up before the sun.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but... Okay, that was a lie. There were a dozen reasons why I couldn't sleep, but it made me feel better not to pin them down.

Rolling out of bed, I took a look through the window. The sun was still down, but I could see the faint glow of the morning not far away. Beneath me, the streets were almost empty, even of police dogs.

"Babe," Turning, I gave her a gentle poke, "Feel like going for an early morning walk?"

I didn't get much from her but a mumbled complaint, but I'm nothing if not persistent. It only took me about ten minutes to get her out of bed.

"This better be worth it, Wolfy." She began questing around the still dark room for clothing. I handed her what she'd worn yesterday. It had been sitting on the floor beside the bed. "It's dirty, Tommy." She pushed it away.

I shrugged as I held it to my nose and took a sniff. "It's not that bad, Babe. And anyway," I smiled, "It smells of you." I presented them to her again.

She rolled her eyes and took them.

"Some days I think I know you, Tommy. Others I realize just how different we are." She slid into the clothes. I noticed they had a different sound than when she slid into freshly cleaned fabric. The sound was less harsh now, more natural.

"You look great, Babe." I reached forward to nuzzle the side of her neck. She laughed and pushed me away.

"Where are we going, anyway?"

I shrugged. "Out. Away. I just want to get out of the city."

She scowled and looked at the clock.

"There won't be anyplace open to get breakfast and we're all out," she said.

Taking her hand, I led her from the room. "Don't worry about it, Babe. I'll find you something when we're out of the city."

She was already unhappy at being forced up at this hour, now she looked downright annoyed.

"I really don't care for raw meat, Tommy. You know that."

I wasn't exactly surprised to see Jon down in the lobby. However, it was of note we encountered him as he came in through the front door. He was still straightening his uniform. I guess he must have to sleep sometime.

Looking up, a smile split his lips as his tail wagged.

"Sir, Ma'am. I wasn't expecting to see you two up so early."

Rebecca scowled at me as we stopped to talk.

"Couldn't sleep." I said.

Glancing out the front door, I could see the backs of no less than three police dogs.

"Uh, Jon, is there anyway you could get us out of the building. We want to go for a walk and I'd rather not have an entourage."

He thought for a moment, a slight frown pulling at his face. "But, Sir, the city hasn't exactly proven safe as of late..."

I sighed. "And when was the last time it was *safe*, Jon?"

"Point taken." He nodded with a soft grin. "I believe a guard has been placed in the back garden since your last outing, but I should be able to distract him for a few minutes. You will, however, be on your own after that."

I laughed. "Won't be a problem. We're heading out into the forest. Thanks."

He nodded. "You're welcome, Tommy. And," He raised an eye ridge, "Good hunting."

Jon was good to his word. A few moments later he called the guard in the back garden in for a morning briefing. That gave Rebecca and I enough time to slip over the wall and out into the alley.

Not that Rebecca was happy about having to climb a brick wall first thing in the morning.

"How do you do it, Wolfy?" She whispered after I helped her down the far side.

I ran my claws lightly down her back. I doubted she could even feel them through her leather jacket.

"Call it a racial advantage, Babe. You folks have things you do well, we wolves have ours."

She just rolled her eyes.

The journey to the edge of the city wasn't exactly easy, or straightforward, but both Rebecca and I had enough experience avoiding the police that it should be doable.

Or at least that's what I thought at first.

Either I was getting old or the cops were getting smarter. Turn after turn we had close calls as the dogs passed not feet from us.

Stalking down yet another alleyway, I had the distinct feeling that I'd just dropped the ball.

It's hard to describe the itch of being watched, but I had it.

Turing, I had only the time to push Rebecca away before a shadow dropped on me from a nearby fire escape. It came as silent as a wrath and clamped around my mouth before I could even yell.

"Hiya."

The only thing I could see were golden eyes.

I was just about ready to start cursing a blue streak when English let go of my mouth.

"What in all the gods' names are *you* doing here?" I whispered.

Beside me, Rebecca picked herself up off the ground. She was just about ready to club English over the head before she recognized him.

All she did was sigh and say, "I should have guessed."

The lion laughed, reaching a hand to help me up.

"I could ask what you're doing out here too, Mate." I saw the flash of perfect white teeth as he smiled. "One of my employees saw you sneak off and told me about it as I happened to be in the area."

"*Happened to be in the area?*" I mocked.

"Hey," He shrugged, "I don't pick where the Shellas live. Alice just happens to have a condo in the neighbourhood."

I rolled my eyes.

"So you and the lass could use a hand getting out of the city?" He asked.

I was about to answer when Rebecca stepped up, pushing me up against the wall.

"The 'Lass' is still looking for breakfast. I think that was promised."

I smiled and licked the finger she had pressed against my chest. "We'll figure something out, Babe."

It was English's turn to roll his eyes.

"So how about I help get the two of you out of here before you kill me with an overdose of cuteness."

"Hey! I am *not* cute!" I took a swipe at the lion but he stepped out of range.

"Whatever you say, Mate. Just give me a few minutes and I'll get the dogs out of your way. That should give you a clear run down the avenue. Just keep going straight and I'll do my best to distract them."

He was gone a moment later.

"Uh, Babe," I took Rebecca's hand as I edged up to the mouth of the alley, "What do you think he means when he says 'distract'?"

She didn't get a chance to respond before I heard the *clang* of something heavy falling. A moment later it was followed by the sound of running feet.

And just on the edge of perception I could hear a particular feline's deep laughter.

The rest of the run was easy enough. Every time the dogs began to get their act together something new would go wrong. It was never enough to cause any danger, but it was always enough to get any self-respecting officer's fur rubbed the wrong way.

Heading north towards the Lion's Gate bridge, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being watched again.

At first I thought it was nothing more than English waiting in the shadows for a chance to cause some more mischief, but I could tell he was some ways away with all the sounds of commotion.

We stopped a couple of times as I tried to let our tail overshoot us, but whoever it was they were just too good. In the end I had to accept that I was either being hunted by someone much better than I, or my instincts were misfiring.

With the amount of stress I'd been under the last few days I'd just as soon say it was the second choice.

The Lion's Gate bridge was as I remembered it. Where much of V-town had suffered in the recent quake, the bridge seemed unharmed.

That wasn't to say it looked *good*. The bridge was over a hundred years with little to no maintenance. There were sections of roadway missing and support cables had snapped here and there, dangling down into the waters far below. Good thing it didn't have to support the same weight it used to.

I paused for a moment to look out over the waves to our west. There was no reason to be in a rush now – the police wouldn't follow us onto the bridge unless something was truly wrong.

"What are you looking at, Wolfy?" Rebecca rested a hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged as I reached out an arm to pull her closer. The cool Pacific air ruffled my fur.

"Not much, Babe. Just looking out at the ocean. Makes you wonder what's out there."

She laughed. "The Vancouver and Salt Spring Islands. I thought you'd know that, Tommy. You can see them from here. That's where I was born."

"Not that, Babe." I took a deep breath. "Further than that. Across the ocean. Makes you wonder what things are like over there. V-town is the only city on this coast. Makes you wonder how the rest of the world turned out."

She laughed and pulled at my hand. "You're getting philosophical again, Tommy. Time to get moving. I want off this windy bridge. It's cold."

I didn't really have any plans where to go. North Vancouver hadn't even really been my destination, it just happened to be the direction English had opened up for us.

If you thought Vancouver itself was damaged and run down, it had nothing on North Vancouver. At least there were still people living in Vancouver proper, *trying* to keep it up. North Vancouver didn't even have that.

That was something akin to a graveyard, the bleached and weather battered bones of buildings poking up here and there. This wasn't the forest I'd been hoping for.

We found a small stream the lead inward from the coast. Following it, it meandered here and there. It wasn't easy walking, but it was a faster path than trying to pick our way across the torn and cracked streets.

I only realized where we were after we'd almost passed it. The stream took us only a few hundred yards from the school where the humans had camped out on their way to Horseshoe Bay.

"Hey, Babe, let's go have a look."

Rebecca didn't even realize where I was leading her when I tugged on her arm.

She stopped dead the moment she saw the building.

"Tommy, I don't want to be here," she whispered.

Turning to her, I stopped pulling.

"What's wrong, Babe? I thought you'd be interested. It's just..."

"Tommy," Her voice was weak, "I know it's when we met, but I lost a lot of friends back then. I... I really don't want to be here." She turned away, heading back towards the calm stream.

"Yeah, Babe. That's okay. I'm sorry."

A few moments later we were back next to the stream, working our way through North Vancouver to the forests beyond.

Trying to lighten the mood, I searched through the vegetation that spread around us. It was still early in the year, but the occasional fruit tree was already weighed down.

"I promised you breakfast didn't I, Babe?"

Reaching out, I plucked an apple from a nearby tree. It was still maturing and not yet fully ripe, but looked edible enough.

"Since when have you picked up the urge to go vegetarian?" she asked, lifting the apple from my hand.

I shrugged. "Since I met up with you. And don't use the 'v' word, Babe. It's a dirty word around my father."

She laughed and stuck out her tongue at me before taking a bite from the apple.

I pulled down another fruit from the tree and turned back to her. Just in time to get a mouthful of half chewed apple in the face.

"Gah!" I wiped myself clean with the back of a hand. "What?"

She tossed the apple over her shoulder.

"It's sour. They're not ready to be picked."

I raised an eye ridge as I took a nip of the fruit in my hand. It wasn't exactly sweet, per say, but it wasn't *that* bad.

"Don't see the problem, Babe. How about you try this one."

Lifting my index finger, I pulled my claw down the fruit. It wasn't enough to slice it in half, but it made a clear boundary.

"You eat one half and I'll eat the other."

She looked at me sceptically.

"What are you, trying to be romantic?"

I grinned and leaned forward to kiss her.

"Nah, Babe. If I were trying to be romantic this would be melted chocolate spread." I let my tongue hang out. "I'd much rather share *that* with you." I paused for a moment, as if thinking, "Or licking it off you. Yeah, that would be better."

We waited until we found a nice place to sit by the edge of the river. The grass was short and the earth soft. Rebecca took off her boots to dangle her toes in the water next to mine.

I took a bite out of my side of the apple and handed it to her.

She looked at it doubtfully before taking a bite of her own. A large one, she must be hungry.

The expression on her face didn't exactly tell me that this apple was much better, but none the less she forced it down.

"It's still not ripe, Wolfy."

I laughed as I took the apple from her.

"It's not that we have a whole lot of choice, Babe. It's what nature provides, eh? Kind of how the two of us fell together." I took a bite, chewing slowly as I looked down into the waters that flowed between us. "Would you have picked me if it hadn't been for the exodus, Rebecca?"

She stopped dead. For a moment I couldn't even hear her breathe. Then, with an effort she pushed it aside.

"What do you mean, Tommy? Of course I love you."

"That's not what I asked, Rebecca." I pressed the apple back into her hand. "I asked if you would have chosen me if the humans of V-town hadn't been hunted down to the point of near extermination. If you hadn't been forced into hiding."

She took a slow bite of the apple, staring down at the same point in the water between our feet as I did.

There was no denying that we were different. Even something so simple and mundane as our feet brought it out plain as day.

My feet were furred, padded, and clawed. Digitigrade, the whole structure of my limbs were different from hers. It was almost as though we weren't even the same species.

Well, *technically* we were both still human... in a manor of speaking. She *was* human. I was human derived. We weren't alike in any way that mattered. We were near incompatible except for the fact that we could have children.

Though all those children would be wolves. Not a single one would be truly human.

"Tommy... I love you. You can't ask me for anything more than that." Rebecca's voice was soft.

Taking the apple from her limp fingers, it was little more than a core now. I tossed it in the river. It bobbed and twisted for a moment before becoming caught in the current and being pulled away from us.

"Rebecca, please. I love you too, more than anything, but I need to know. Would you have chosen me if you'd had the choice to pick one of your own kind?"

Her eyes were hard when she turned to look at me.

"You don't know what you're asking, Tommy. Of course I had a choice. I could have any of a dozen of the men who had escaped to Horseshoe Bay. I nearly did. If you hadn't come, that's what I would have done. That's what I would have had to do. Tommy..." Her voice fell to a whisper, "I gave you up once and you came after me. For me. I won't do it again."

"Thanks, Babe." Reaching out, I put an arm around her shoulder as I pressed my leg under hers, crossing them at the ankle.

"And what about you, Wolfy?" Her voice became mischievous, "Would you have chosen me if not for circumstances?"

I fought to hold back a laugh. "You know my story well enough already, Babe. Molly was the only one before you, and she broke up with me for not being wild enough. My prospects were pretty dismal before you came along. Then afterwards..." I pulled her tighter, "Afterwards I did have the chance. And you know how that turned out."

She snuggled into the fur of my side.

"Yeah. We both know how Molly ended up. And speaking of her, we should get a hold of her and Amstys. Last I heard they'd moved in together."

I rolled my eyes.

"If you say so, Babe. Last I heard Molly ordered him to return to her apartment every night and Amstys simply did what he was told."

A half an apple wasn't much of a breakfast, but it was enough to get us going again. I had to promise Rebecca a full and proper meal once we got back.

Continuing down the river's edge, the trees seemed to close in on us. Literally.

Everything felt tighter, nearer. The feeling of being watched was back.

"Wolfy," Rebecca held me by the shoulder, "Why haven't we seen any hunters out here?"

I laughed. "The forests are a large place, Babe. You should know that after our trip across the Rockies. And anyway, this is North Vancouver. No one comes here of they can help it. Even the hunters. Folks don't like how depressing it is."

A moment later a twig snapped behind us. We stopped dead.

There was something in that sound. It had been sharp and unmuffled. There had been no effort to hide it.

Turning, there was a dog standing not ten feet behind us. The wind had been in my face, preventing me from smelling him.

It was a real dog, not a creature like me. A Class Five. I think.

There was only one way to find out.

Pressing Rebecca behind me, I lowered myself slowly down on one knee, touching the pads of my fingers to the ground.

The dog was perfectly black with brown eyes. A lab, perhaps. I never was good with all the different breeds of dog.

Now that we were on the same level I could see just how thin this creature was. I could almost see his ribcage.

The way the creature stood. That also caught my eye. He was perfectly still. His tail didn't sway, his paws didn't scuff at the dirt, and his tongue wasn't out and panting. If not for the occasional blink of his eyes focused on us I might as well doubted he was alive at all.

"Hello," I spoke slowly. Sunny had been able to speak, I could only hope this one could as well. "I'm Tommy."

He didn't say anything. Rather, still holding his body in firm check, he slowly began circling, looking at us from all angles. I had to fight the instinct to turn and prevent him from seeing my back.

It was only when he'd walked a full circle that his tail wagged ever so slightly and he sat down. He still didn't say anything.

"Uh, Tommy," Rebecca whispered in my ear, "What's going on?"

Oh bugger. I'd forgotten to tell her about the Class Five that had broken into the apartment. Quick as I could, I brought her up to speed.

I had no doubt that the dog listened to each and every word as I spoke, but he never interrupted.

"And you were going to tell me this when, Tommy?" Rebecca looked about ready to smack me.

I shrugged and tried to smile. "Sorry, Babe. The time just never came up. I wasn't expecting things to happen this fast."

A coughing sound came from the dog. When I turned back to him his tail was wagging and his mouth lay open in an easy pant.

"So... you are real." The dog's words were rough, even rougher than Sunny's, almost to the point of being unintelligible. There was a grinding sound between each syllable like he was rubbing the insides of his throat together.

I smiled. "What were you expecting? We'd be fairytails?"

He raised an eye ridge for a moment, apparently not familiar with the term.

"No.... no. You are alphas for a large pack. Expected you different. Not normal like real people."

"Alphas?" I asked, but I got no response.

"I'm Black." He stood up, "You follow me."

And with that he turned and was off.

The walk took the better part of an hour. It was easy enough for me to follow the dog as he slipped in and out of the undergrowth, and not much worse for Rebecca with her travelling experience.

That, unfortunately, gave her enough time to quiz me on what I'd been doing the last few days.

It's not as though I like keeping secrets, but having them forced out of me is even worse. I got cuffed about the ears a good half dozen times before I was done. Though it did feel good to get the burden off my chest.

Our journey finally came to an end at the foot of the mountains where the remains of the city pushed up against the rocks. There was nothing obvious here.

Black barked once. The sound sent chills through me. I'd heard police dogs, and other dogs, bark often enough, but it didn't sound like this. When someone back in V-town made a sound like that it was tinged with their humanity. This sound was almost pure. Closer to the howls of the true wolves back in Edmonton.

For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then a dog poked his nose out from a crack in a building a few feet off. I never would have noticed the opening by myself.

The face was yellow furred. That of Sunny.

He blinked a few times in the light, then his eyes locked on me. It's hard to judge a canine look of surprise without being able to see the tail, but he had obviously not been expecting to see me.

A moment later the retriever was out and happily padding towards us, his tail wagging.

"Tommy! Good to see you." His voice was clearer now, smoother. Like he'd been practising his speech. "Was not expecting you."

I smiled, being careful to keep my teeth covered. "And I wasn't expecting to be out here. We were walking and Black found us."

Sunny cocked his head. "No. If you came out of city you were looking for us. Why else would you come from your pack?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "I'm *not* the alpha, Sunny. I used to be the mayor, but I'm not anymore."

The dog cocked his head further, until it was almost at a ninety degree angle from his body.

"No... Tommy is alpha. We watched you for a long time. You move like alpha, you speak like alpha. Your family is alpha. It does not matter. Mayor, not mayor. You are alpha."

I sighed and threw up my hands. "Fine. Whatever you want."

The coughing sound came again from Sunny. "Good. As it should be. Come. Let us meet with the rest."

With that both dogs turned from us and began walking uphill, into the mountains.

Oh bugger but I'd forgotten just how hard mountain climbing was. We were still on nothing more than the foot of the giants and it was already hard going. We weren't following a road this time.

And as hard as it was for me it was even worse for Rebecca. She hadn't exactly been planning to be out doing things like this when I'd shoved her out of bed this morning. Not only was her footwear all wrong, but she was wearing too heavy a leather jacket.

"Come on, Babe." I reached a hand down to her and pulled her up a difficult patch. "I'm not about to let you fall behind."

She rolled her eyes. "That's easy for you to say. You can just fall down on all fours and scramble over this like they do. I don't have that option."

Leaning in towards her, I whispered in her ear, "I wouldn't do that, Babe. Not with them here. And I'd never leave you behind."

I locked arms with her and didn't let go.

We had to be getting close to Capalino Lake by now. I'd never been over here, it was further inland than Horseshoe Bay, and far higher. Turning, I caught a glimpse back through the trees. I could see North Vancouver spread out beneath us like a map, and in the distance Burrard Inlet. Beyond that, lost in the fog, was V-town.

Another fifteen minutes and the dogs ahead of us came to an abrupt stop. There was nothing of note here. I couldn't see evidence of any camp. There was no fire pit, no buildings, nothing.

Taking a deep breath, I was wrong. There was something here. Scents. I could pick up the scent trails of our two guides, along with two other dogs. That, and I could smell the blood for countless small animals. Chipmunks and pidgins. This was their camp.

From a small crack in the ground a form struggled out. The cave opening was hardly enough to fit her.

She looked like a husky. Slightly smaller than the two males we'd already met, her white coat was blotched with dirt and dried blood.

Sunny walked up to the dog and they sniffed each other. There were no words exchanged between them, but there were sounds. And I couldn't make out a single one of them.

At long last the female stepped towards us. "Snow." The word came from her throat like a baby crying, far higher pitch than it should be. She didn't say anything else.

"I'm Tommy. This is Rebecca."

Snow simply nodded and circled us, sniffing.

"So... them?" Another voice. This one came from the trees behind us.

I turned abruptly to face the newcomer, in the process I startled Snow who leapt away with a

yip.

There are few dog breeds I can recognize right off the bat. Rottweiler is one of them.

All the dogs we'd seen so far were smaller than me. I wasn't exactly large at one hundred sixty pounds, but they all made me look big. The rottweiler... not so much. He had to have at least twenty pounds on me.

"You alpha?" His voice was almost as clear as Sunny's. But where the other dog had a happy, laughing quality about him, this one most certainly did not.

I shrugged, though the motion was likely lost on them. "Yes."

"Gold."

I nodded at him. "Nice to meet you, Gold." These dogs may be able to speak, but it was difficult to read them. Their motions and expressions were different from a wolves', either a Class Three or a real one. "What can I do for you?"

Sunny stepped between us, blocking eye contact. "We are here to meet you, Tommy." He wagged his tail, but the motion seemed forced. "We come long way, from Powell River. We live there. Many of us."

"Another city?" It was my turn to cock my head, "But I thought the police..." I had to cut myself off before I kept talking. My discussion with Sayer had been the only thing I'd kept back from Rebecca, with the promise of covering it later in private.

Gold snorted, a growl tinged the sound. "We know your police. They are shadows of what we are. We are real. They are not." He tried to walk around Sunny, but the other dog moved to keep himself between us.

Gold lashed out at Sunny's hindquarters, but the smaller dog was able to leap away just in time to avoid a nasty gash. He still, however, kept himself between us.

"We wish to open..." Sunny had to pause for the word, and when it did come the sounds were heavy on his lips, "Diplomatic with you. Do you know how to do this?"

I laughed. "Sure, Sunny. Diplomacy. We can do that."

Sunny was about to say something when a growl came up from behind him.

Gold swiped at him again, this time contacting and sweeping the dog's rear legs out.

"I don't like you." Gold's voice was low. "You don't smell right. You're not one of us. We shouldn't have to grovel to you. You're the alpha? Prove it!"

Taking a slow breath, I grabbed Rebecca by the wrist and pulled her behind me. I could feel one of her hands going to the blades she kept concealed in her jacket.

"I'm not here to fight you, Gold. You want to open diplomatic relations, I'm happy to help. And I'm not the alpha. I'm the... former mayor."

"Mayor, Alpha, same thing. You're the boss. But you don't act like one." The dog raised his lips. It was harder to make out his words now, but the message got through obvious as blood on white linen.

"*They* want to be diplomatic. I'm not here for that. Powell River is large. Powerful. We have over a thousand people. We don't need to play words with you! You're the alpha, they're yours? Fight for them!"

The dog sprung at me, it was all I could do to push Rebecca to the side as I stumbled back.

She pulled one of the knives from her jacket as I yelled, "No. This is mine."

I was happy to see that Sunny and Snow stepped between Rebecca and I, but to protect her.

Gold was my only pressing concern now.

It was obvious why they'd brought the rottweiler with them. The dog was fast, and a natural fighter. The odd bit was the breed itself.

I've known rottweilers before, Class Threes like myself. They're large creatures, but some of the gentlest dogs I've ever encountered. Gold wasn't like that.

He lunged forward at me. I stumbled away, my back coming up against a tree. The dog snapped empty air where I'd just been.

A grim smile slipped across my lips. Reaching forward myself, I swiped my claws through the air. As planned, the dog pulled back just in time with a yip.

Gold might be a prized fighter amongst his own kind, but I doubt he'd ever fought with someone like me. Someone who walked on two legs. He may have the advantage of stability, but I was more agile and with better reach.

Gold pulled back a few steps, eyeing me. Circling to the left on the rough, uneven ground, he tried to work his way up on the slope, to get above me.

I didn't give him the chance. This was good for me too. The extra space got us away from Rebecca and the other dogs. I didn't want them to have to get too good a look at me when the true battle broke out. Right now we were merely testing each other's defences.

Gold telegraphed his motions like someone had put up a placard behind him. He was lightening quick when he moved, but it didn't do any good when I knew what he was going to do as soon as he did.

That still didn't make the battle easy. He struck forward first with his claws, then pulling back and preparing himself, with his teeth.

I wasn't too concerned with the teeth. I'd be in trouble if he managed to get them around me, but he knew that biting me would leave his face open to my own claws. He could do good damage, but I'd win once I gouged his eyes out.

"Fight like an animal, you weakling!" He taunted, pulling back out of range.

I laughed. "Like an animal? That's an odd way of putting it. What, don't you have any humans up in Powell River?"

All I got for a response was a growl as he lunged forward again.

He forgot himself this time. Snapping forward with his jaws, he brought his face well within range of my hands.

He pulled back with a pained yip when I lashed out at him with a single claw.

I was careful not to do too much damage. My black claw traced a line down his mussel. This was no paper cut. I gouged deep enough to nearly cut right through his lip.

No legible words came from him now, but I had no doubt they were obscenities in his own language.

He came at me again, faster and more frantic this time.

Slipping in lower than I was used to, one of his own claws reached out to score a jagged line across my gut.

Much like his wound it began to bleed immediately.

Unlike his, mine began healing.

The wound wasn't that deep. I hardly even noticed it as my regeneration began knitting the edges of the cut together. It would likely be gone in ten minutes.

I was readying my return strike when I noticed Gold had gone completely still. He was staring at the quickly disappearing wound.

A single word escaped his lips. It wasn't even so much of a word as a rough equivalent translated into his own language.

"*Wendigo*."

"Huh?"

I glanced down, when I looked up I could only see the dog's tail as it disappeared between the trees.

My chase reflex kicked in and I'm not ashamed to admit I fell to all fours and raced after him.

Now Gold and I were on near equal terms. We'd both spent time out in the forests, chasing and running from all manner of creatures.

Gold was fast, but I had the genetic advantage. He was a true canine, body made for running like this, but I was a wolf.

He was – or had been – domestic, shaped by the humans for their own needs. I was pure. I was born for the wilderness.

Leaping a fallen tree trunk, I could hear Gold splashing down in a shallow stream on the other side. That sound was all I needed to adjust my course to slam down atop him.

The landing was pretty soft, for me, if a bit boney.

For Gold, however, it wasn't so pleasant.

My weight was enough to take his legs out from under him. He began trying to scramble away, but I reached out to wrap my hands around his neck.

There's a good reason that the pre-Cataclysm humans put collars on their dogs. Trying to keep a hold of someone like this was like trying to wrestle with an eel in a vat of marrow jelly.

A heartbeat later Gold twisted around, trying to snap at me.

Ah, this is what I was more accustomed to. His body might not be what I was used to dealing with, but now he was starting to act more like one of my normal bounty hunting targets.

He snapped with his teeth, but I was faster. All I had to do was keep my arms straight and he couldn't reach me. The fact he'd never grappled with someone like me gave me all the advantages.

The sounds that escaped his lips were little more than incoherent wailings to me, growls and whimpers. One thing was unquestionable, he didn't want to be anywhere near me.

"Let me go, demon! I won't be one to play with a wendigo!"

Huh?

I tried to question him, but he wouldn't even so much as acknowledge me.

Guess he really wasn't the best one to have sent on a diplomatic mission like this.

He didn't give me much of a choice. I let go of his neck with one of my hands just long enough to give him a good cuff over the head.

It hardly stunned him.

Now I was really regretting underestimating him. Gold got just enough leverage now to sink his teeth into the wrist of my free arm.

Fire lit up and I'm not ashamed to say I screamed. I could almost feel his teeth coming together in the middle of my flesh.

That was it.

Letting go my other hand, it took everything I had not to gouge out his eyes with my claws. Instead I brought down my fist with all the force I could find, easily twice what I'd originally hit him with.

This time he went out like a light.

And now *both* my hands hurt.

I sat there in the high forest, waiting for my body to heal.

I hadn't realized just how far Gold had been able to run. I called for Rebecca but no answer came back. There was an uneasy rolling in my gut when I thought about her being left alone with the dogs, but there was nothing I could do until I was healed.

Gold, who still lay beside me like a log, he was a whole 'nother problem. What in all the gods' names was he talking about when he called me 'Wendigo'?

I'd had enough people call me a devil before, but that was mostly during my political career. Folks could come up with all kinds of fun names for you then.

Wendigo was, if I recalled correctly, something like Sasquatch to the native people, a bit of a demon. Why he was calling me that I didn't know. Perhaps he'd just never encountered someone with regeneration.

It didn't matter now. About a half hour of waiting and I was healed up enough to set off. All that extra work on my body's part left my stomach growling, but there was nothing to do for it here.

Throwing Gold over my shoulder, I made sure to check he was still good and out. I wouldn't want him waking up while slung over my back.

The walk back to the Class Five's camp was a bit of a rough one. Not only was it a longer way than I'd thought, there were no visual signs to guide me. Following a scent trail is easy enough if you're walking on all fours, but it's a bit of a problem if you're on two feet and unable to bend forward lest you overbalance.

At long last I was able to stumble back. It was the sound of Rebecca's voice that lead the me the last part of the way.

"You could have stopped him!" Her voice wasn't shrill, but she definitely sounded concerned.

"No. Gold leads. He's alpha of the expedition. We follow or we leave. We do not fight. Only alphas fight." It was Sunny.

Pushing aside the last branch in the way, I stepped into the clearing.

"I've got your *alpha* right here," I said.

Pulling Gold from my shoulder, I set him on the ground. He came down a little harder than I intended. Thankfully, he was still breathing well.

"Tommy." Rebecca nodded to me as I stepped up. She didn't run into my arms like a frightened princess, but simply nodded to me and smiled. She'd had no doubt.

"Babe." I smiled back as I stepped over to her.

Her hands instantly came up to trace the now almost invisible scars that Gold had left, but she didn't say anything.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

Rebecca pulled me down by her side and possessively put an arm around me.

"They say they still want to negotiate," she whispered, "But they don't exactly seem to have a lot of... experience dealing with outside groups."

"No kidding." I rolled my eyes. "Fine," I raised my voice and turned towards the remaining three dogs, "I'll take your message back to V-town. Until then you're welcome to stay here or come see me, but you need to follow our laws while in the city."

Sunny cocked his head. "Why not answer now? You're alpha. You make decision. We talk now."

I shook my head. "V-town is a big place. I'm not the only one. We have to make decisions together. I'll try to have a team sent up here to talk to you and get things started."

Sunny nodded. "As you say." He cleared his throat, an odd sound coming from a truly canine body. "You have disposed of our alpha. That would make..." He paused for a moment, as if asking me permission to continue, "Me alpha of the expedition."

I shook my head. "He's not dead, Sunny. Only knocked out. He should wake up before too much longer."

The dog laughed, the others joining in a moment later. There was a trace of nervousness to their motions but not too much.

“No, Tommy. He has lost a battle. He is no longer an alpha. That would be my job now.”

“Fine.” I waved a hand as I helped Rebecca to her feet, “Do what you want. Just don't let him attack anyone in my city.” I paused for a moment as I reflected on my words. I guess it really was still *my* city after all.

Holding Rebecca close, we picked our way down the steep slope. I needed to be away from these people. They made me uncomfortable.

There weren't a lot of ways back into V-town from here, so we walked back over the Lion's Gate bridge. That meant that we had to pass through Stanley Park. Worked well enough for me. There were always some street venders here selling snacks of one description or another.

It was a good thing Rebecca was with me. I'd been in such a rush to get out of the apartment this morning that I'd left my belt – and all its pouches, including my wallet – next to the bed. Rebecca was a little smarter. She had her money permanently stashed in one of her jacket pockets.

The vender we ended up buying from was parked next to Lost Lagoon. His oversized stall specialized in, and I quote, 'Deep Fried Everything'.

He lived up to his advertisement.

There was a big vat of hot oil held over a gas burner. We picked out our treats and he plunged them into the oil until they ended up with a golden brown crispy coating.

I was never one for such things, but it caught Rebecca's attention, and there is something to be said for junk food after a long walk.

Rebecca picked out some odd concoction of fried dough, but I got a little bit more adventurous and ended up with deep fried chocolate ice cream.

There really was no other option. The moment I saw chocolate on the menu I couldn't resist.

“Careful, they're hot.” The warning was well given, but not heeded. I managed to burn my lips before breaking through the new crispy coating on my treat to get to the ice cream beneath.

Rebecca laughed as she juggled her 'O' shaped dough from hand to hand.

I wasn't really sure where we were going now, but I led her west, towards the coast. I wasn't really quite ready to head home yet.

The sun was getting ready to set over the ocean. I hadn't realize it was so late. Our trip to the Powell River camp had taken all day.

Finding a seat on the beach, we were alone, not a single person in sight. Stanley Park was a popular place, but it was on the edge of V-town. Not that many people came this far out.

The day's warmth was still in the sand as I settled down, scratching out a trough for my tail. Rebecca was close by my side. We both had to fight to keep stray grains of sand from our food as the wind brushed them about.

“Today was a bit of an odd day, wasn't it, Wolfy?” Rebecca took a bite of her food. The smell of fresh baked dough was enough to cut through the sea air.

“Yeah, Babe.” I let out a long breath. “Can't say I really saw that coming. Babe, do you think this is what I was meant for?”

She looked up from beside me, rolling her eyes. “Tommy, what do *you* think you're meant for? You've already been a hunter, bounty hunter, explorer, *and* mayor. What more do you want?”

I barked out a laugh before covering my mouth. The laugh was nothing like what the dogs had made, but the bark felt too close.

“I wasn't wallowing, Babe. I'm serious. Do you think this is what I'm for? Mediator? I've had

to run between the hunters and the police. Done the same between the citizens and the government, humans and non-humans. Now it looks like I'm up for it again with the Class Five and..." I laughed, "Everyone else. Who else would fit better? I'm a Class Three. I've got human trait and animal traits. Yet again I the guy in the middle who can see – however faintly – both sides."

She didn't say much.

A couple of minutes later her arm circled around my shoulders, pulling us closer.

We sat there for an hour or so. Long enough for the chocolate to settle in my stomach like a cast iron lump. I have to feed my sweet tooth, but I always regret it.

Walking into town, I wasn't surprised to see a squad of police dogs waiting for us on the first road. This was as far as they usually ventured out.

"Hello, fellas." I let them fall into formation around us without a word.

The surgical precision the officers held wasn't odd in itself, but there was something...

None of the dogs would meet my eyes. They all looked jumpy and nervous.

"Constable," I reached a hand towards the nearest dog, "Care to tell me what's going on?"

"Sorry, Sir." His voice was soft. "We have orders to bring you straight to Constable Oaks."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes, "But why?"

He didn't answer.

I didn't much care until we took a left on Burrard Street. This wasn't right. The apartment was straight ahead.

"Constable..." I reached out to catch the shoulder of the dog again, but he shyed away.

A moment later I heard the soft fall of running feet on the street ahead of us.

It was Jon.

I was happy to see a friendly face, even if it wasn't a smiling one.

"You are dismissed. Take up your positions around the hotel." Jon ordered the officers that surrounded us as he stepped forward. Like smoke, the other dogs disappeared.

"Care to tell us what's going on, Jon?" I asked idly as I continued forward. It was likely a government matter. I'd been to the Hotel Vancouver before. The ritzy people liked to put on shows here. I was likely being drawn into yet another meeting.

"In a moment, Sir. Let's get the two of you inside." He hustled us through the front doors and into the lobby.

I expected to take a hard right at the plushly appointed reception desk and head into one of the meeting rooms on the main floor. Rather Jon walked us up the polished marble lobby, our claws clicking with every step, until we got to the main bank of elevators.

"Sir. Ma'am." He held the door open for us.

I'd admit I felt a little bit nervous getting in. This wasn't what I'd been expecting. And, in any event, I never cared for elevators much. There were fewer blackouts in V-town these days, but I'd been stuck in elevators back in my old apartment one too many times to ever feel truly comfortable.

Jon stepped in behind us and hit a button for a floor. A fairly high one.

"Again, Jon," There was the slightest growl in my voice now, "What's going on?"

He tried to look away from me, but there wasn't that much else for him to focus on in here.

"Sir... we've had a security breach." His voice was weak,

I sighed and slumped against the back of the elevator, feeling the vibration through the wall as it slowly climbed up.

"Fine, Jon. What happened? Someone break into City Hall? And for that matter, why are you

telling *me*?”

Jon's tail curled around his legs.

“No, Sir. It wasn't City Hall. The break in was to your personal apartment.” He slowly raised his eyes with an effort to meet ours. “We only found out after it occurred. There has been substantial damage.”

“What!” I would have bolted for the street if we hadn't been trapped in this blasted elevator. “Someone broke in? Who?”

Rebecca looped her arm around my shoulders. I could feel her pulling me close.

“We don't know, Sir.” Jon continued. “The best investigators in the city are currently on location looking for clues. Commissioner Sayer is taking the breach extremely seriously. I've been explicitly asked by the investigators that the two of you remain away from the apartment until the forensics are completed. They'll be working all night. I should be able to take you back sometime tomorrow morning.”

I was fuming, my teeth grinding together. That had been *my* home. *Our* home. Someone else had invaded it!

I would have turned and shredded the velvet upholstery of the elevator if Rebecca's arm hadn't been clamped tightly around me.

“We understand, Jon. Thank you.” Rebecca's voice was calm and level.

The elevator doors opened a moment later, depositing us on some unknown floor of the hotel. The hallway was nice. It should be, given this was the most expensive hotel in the city.

I didn't even notice the art, velvet drapes, or mahogany floor as I stalked after Jon. He led us to a suite with a good four dogs standing guard outside.

“I've arranged your accommodations for the night, Sir, Ma'am.” He bowed his head slightly. “I also brought a change of clothing for Mrs. Rebecca. I'm sorry to say there were few options available. I hope it is acceptable.”

Rebecca nodded as she opened the door. “I'm sure it will be fine, Jon.” She took her arm off me for a moment to clasp the dog on the shoulder. “Thanks for everything.”

The hotel suit was lavishly decked out, the only thing missing was a bottle of champagne.

I hardly noticed as I stalked forward to throw open the thick blinds. Pausing for just a moment to stare out the window, I began pacing back and forth in front of them.

“You might as well give it a rest, Wolfy.” Rebecca pulled off her boots and fell back onto the bed. She sunk a good foot into its soft folds. “It's not like we can do anything tonight. We might as well just relax and enjoy what we can. Do you know if they have room service?”

Forcing myself from the path my claws were already starting to wear in the carpet, I sat on the bed by her side. It was soft enough it almost felt like I was floating.

“How can you be taking this so well, Babe?” I reached out to rest my hand on the side of her face, just to make sure I had her with me.

“What's to worry about, Tommy? What's sitting back there that's so important to you? We've already run from the city twice. Once to Horseshoe Bay and then to Edmonton. Both times we didn't know if we'd ever return. Everything in the apartment is just that, things. You're here. I'm here. We're all safe. What does it matter if someone put some shreds down my wardrobe?”

“But that's not it, Babe.” I threw myself down on my back beside her. “Someone entered our apartment. *Ours*. My...” I rolled my eyes and smiled when I said it, “Territory.”

Rebecca reached out to grab my arm. “So that's what this is all about? The Big Bad Wolf

doesn't like having his power challenged? I thought you just spent the last two months trying to tell everyone you're *not* the alpha, *not* the mayor."

I sighed and did my best to relax. "Something like that, Babe. But it was our home."

Her voice was level, but I could feel the iron underneath it. "Then we'll make another one. And we'll find the person who did this."