

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 5: Civilization Isn't Always Civilized

The next morning came, for once, right on schedule. Gods, I've got to get me one of these beds. I don't care how much it costs, I've never gotten such a good sleep.

Man, I'm in a good mood. Why was I here again?

Oh yeah.

Well, there goes my good mood.

Getting up, I rolled off the bed and set my feet gently on the plush carpeting of the room. I sunk in.

Stepping up to the window, I took a look out into the long shadows of the morning. Far below I could see people running back and forth. It was already well after starting time, the roads weren't clogged with rush hour.

And standing still between the everyday citizens of V-town I could see the brown and blue spots of the police dogs.

Letting out a sigh, I turned and stumbled my way into the bathroom. I hadn't a chance to visit in here last night. Now I regretted that.

The only thing this place was missing were solid gold facets.

Hitting the hot water tap on the shower I was immediately met with a stream so hot it nearly vaporized my fur. Oh, I *like* this place.

A few moments later I had the temperature just right. Unlike most showers, the taps on this one had lots of play, more than enough to get *exactly* the temperature I wanted. And it stayed that way after it was set.

Lifting my head into the warm stream, I closed my eyes and let the water beat down onto me. The pressure slowly began to relax my muscles. I wasn't sure how long I stood there, but by the time to turned around to give my back a chance she was there.

Rebecca had pulled off all her clothes last night when we climbed into bed, but I'd been too tense to take advantage of our regal surroundings. Now she stood before me completely naked.

And I was just relaxed enough to start getting interested.

She stood on the other side of the clear glass shower door from me, watching. A gentle smile crossed her lips.

"Feeling better, Wolfy?" I could barely make her out over the sound of running water.

I let my mouth hang open. Turning, I made a point of putting my back to her as I began washing, paying a little more attention than was strictly necessary to my hindquarters.

I heard the door click open behind me. There was more than enough room for the two of us in the shower stall, she didn't even crowd me as she pulled the door back closed.

"Glad to see you decided to join me, Babe." I still didn't turn towards her.

Her hands came up to rest on my shoulders. I jumped slightly when she began massaging, but it didn't take long for me to melt into her.

"Oh, Babe," I took a deep breath, but nearly drowned myself when I got a nose full of water.

"Aren't I supposed to be the strong one here? You're the lady. You should be the one all aflutter about someone trashing our home, not me."

She stepped forward, pressing herself against my back. "Don't worry about it, Tommy. When have I ever been maternal and emotional. You've got your instincts, I've got mine. I've had to walk away from my life more than enough times. It's not what you have, it's *who*. We're still together. That's all that matters."

"Babe," Turning, I wrapped my arms around her, "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Leaning in, I took her through a long kiss before breaking off, both of us panting for breath. "Though I wouldn't mind a trade. They can keep the apartment if we can keep this suite."

She laughed.

I didn't bother saying anything. We stood under the shower long enough for me to become waterlogged by its strong and steady stream.

There was one price to be paid for the extravagance of my extra long shower – drying off.

Jon must have let them know who was going to be taking the room for the night. They'd triple stocked the towels for me, plus adding another one for Rebecca. I still left them all sopping.

I did run across something I'd never had the opportunity to play with before. A fur dryer.

Something like a super oversized human style hairdryer, it was a set of nozzles fitted into the wall. All I had to do was stand in front of it and hit a switch. Or at least that was the idea.

Now I know why they'd never caught on.

Not only did the gods forsaken contraption nearly blow me away – it sent me skidding back, my claws leaving scratches in the wood floor – that, and I think I managed to cause a minor brownout in part of the city with the amount of power it used. I was happy to turn it off as soon as I was able to claw my way back to the power switch.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I was looking about as clean and fluffed as I've ever managed. I even took the opportunity to use some of the fur conditioners they had stocked. I never used them before, thought them too goddy, but I needed something to make my fur lay flat after that dryer.

"Wow, Tommy." Rebecca stepped up to me, running a hand down the fur of my arm, "You look good. We need to sleep here more often."

I laughed as I reached down to kiss her. I couldn't help but smile, myself. My fur was so puffed out I must look nearly twice my size.

Rebecca, on the other hand, did not look so good.

Don't get me wrong, I'd taken my time and made sure she got washed up nicely while we spent our time in the shower. There wasn't a speck of dirt anywhere on her – I checked.

Her clothing, however, didn't keep up.

I'd hardly ever seen Jon wear anything but his police uniform. Now I knew why. There must be

enough clothing left at the apartment to put together something decent, but Jon hadn't been able to do it.

Yesterday's walk Rebecca had been in a light red leather jacket, heavy bluejeans, and a shirtsleeve white tee shirt. They were all sweat stained and wrinkled now.

Jon had chosen to replace them with a neon green jogging shirt and a pair of red, silk-like dancing pants. And I would just bet the Jon had forgotten to bring any underthings. I decided it would be prudent *not* to ask.

"You look, uh, ready to go, Babe."

She rolled her eyes. "We'll certainly turn heads, Wolfy. All the women will want to steal you away, and all the men will think I escaped from an asylum."

"It's not that bad, Babe," I reached down to nuzzle her neck, "If anyone can pull it off, it's you."

We didn't have much to worry about on the walk back anyway. The police dogs that clustered around us the moment we stepped out the suite door pressed so close that I doubt anyone could see us. I tried to stop at the front desk of the hotel, but my guard pressed us onward.

"Constable Oaks has taken care of the arrangements, Sir."

I shrugged. Well, that was good. Though it did leave me feeling a bit out of it. I never liked having money spent on me without knowing where it came from. And last night could not have been cheap.

About fifteen minutes later we were out in front of the apartment building. I say 'out' because there was a line of police dogs in front of the doors preventing anyone from entering.

We weren't the only ones there. Not many other people lived in the building these days, most having been run off during the quake or when the Open Party was headquartered here, but there was a dozen or so.

Each and every one gave Rebecca and I dirty looks as we stood off to the side. Yep, it was all our fault.

"Mate!"

Turning, a familiar golden form came through the crowd of people towards me. He parted folks before him like the red sea.

"English!" I waved. "What are you doing here? And better yet," I glanced up at the sun, "What are you doing up? You're almost never awake this early."

The lion's eyes narrowed for a moment before a smile spread across his face, "Come, Mate. Don't you remember? I'm part owner of that flat of yours. I cosigned on the lease. And, if I remember correctly, I paid the first month's rent, eh?"

I grinned. "Okay, I'll give you that. But why'd you come?"

He leaned up against the wall next to me. "Mate, somethings I just have to look into personally."

"Sir!" The next voice to break through to us was just as familiar as the last one. A moment later Jon came out from the lobby of the building. The line of dogs parted to let him through but held fast to keep anyone else from slipping in.

"Jon, got any good news for me?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, Sir. The inspectors are still working. They've finished with your personal rooms, but are still reviewing the rest of the building."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Let's get in there and have a look ourselves."

Jon pulled back a step. "I'm sorry, Sir, but we can't. Procedure is that all non-force personal

remain outside the building until all inspections have been completed. I really can't let you in. I'm sorry."

"Jon," I could feel a growl growing in the back of my throat, "You..."

I didn't even get a chance to fully start before English stepped up in front of me, "Listen here, dog! That's *my* property up there! You've got no excuse to keep me out!" His British accent had gone into overdrive. After a few moments I could hardly make out what the lion was saying. Jon stood firm though. The dog's eyes were narrowed, but he didn't give an inch.

I almost didn't notice as English's hand slid behind his back and began slowly pushing Rebecca and I towards the nearby alley.

None of the police dogs were guarding the alley. They were all too intent watching the showdown between English and Jon.

Rebecca and I silently slipped away. With each step I could hear English's voice growing. Now I *knew* he was making a show of himself.

The brick wall to the back garden was just as tall and hard to climb as it had been yesterday. I did, however, get the opportunity I watch Rebecca as she slipped over in her new clothing. Those dancing pants didn't hide much.

Landing as silently as I could in the garden, I was happy to find it deserted. Looks like the guard they had begun posting here had been moved to the front line.

Sneaking into the building, we kept to the back stairs, staying away from any windows as we worked our way up to the third floor.

There was a guard at the top of the stairs, but he was easy enough to avoid by coming in the back way. He seemed to be more involved in carrying equipment away than standing guard anyway.

Steeling through the open apartment door, Rebecca was tight to my heels.

For a moment I was almost ready to breathe a sigh of relief. The door had been intact and still on its hinges. Perhaps Jon's account of the situation had been overblown.

I had to clamp my hands over my mussel to keep from screaming obscenities once I got a look inside.

Pretty much the only thing missing was blood smeared across the walls.

The entire apartment was a disaster zone. Whoever had gone through here had been methodical in their destruction. Every piece of furniture was snapped and broken, be it chair, table, or stool, until there was little but firewood left.

The carpets had been ripped up and slashed, the hard wood floors scratched and gouged with tools. Every cabinet and shelf had been emptied onto the floor then torn away and thrown across the room.

They'd even gone through the refrigerator and pulled everything out, smearing it across the walls.

Holding Rebecca's hand, I walked into the bedroom.

The sheets and mattress had been ripped and shredded. More than that, I could smell what had been done.

There was a large, still wet, yellow stain in the centre of the bed. It had been urinated upon.

To a human such an act would be barbaric, little more. To a canine such as myself... it was a challenge. A slap in the face.

I could smell the scent of the man who had left his mark here. He'd covered my bed with his scent, marking it as his own.

The claws of my free hand began to cut into my palm as I clenched my fist.

"Tommy, what's..."

Turning, I placed my hand on Rebecca's shoulder and led her out of the room. It was all I could do to keep from growling.

A wolf had been here, one of my own kind. And he'd left his message in no uncertain terms.

Stepping out into the main room of the apartment, I could smell his scent here, everywhere. I had to focus my eyes upon the door to the hallway and just keep walking.

We were two strides from the door before a shadow loomed up to block our way. It was canine.

Dropping Rebecca's hand, I lashed out at the form before it made it around the door. My claws raked through cloth, fur, and flesh.

I could smell the scent of blood mingling with the tainted scent that came from my apartment.

I growled, a full fanged snarl coming to my lips.

I didn't get the response I was hoping for.

A high pitched yip and the form fell backwards out into the hall. I followed after it in a single leap.

Laying on the ground, arms raised to cover his vulnerable face and throat, was a police dog.

I took a deep breath, fighting to pick up the dog's scent over the musk the intruding wolf had left behind.

It was Jon.

Bugger.

The realization cut through the fog in my mind like a hunter's claw. In an instant I could see what I'd done. A long, bloody gash ran down the front of Jon's ribcage. That same blood was dripping from my own hands.

"Jon! I'm sorry!" In a heartbeat I was at his side, pillowing my arm under his head and searching vainly for anything to bandage over his wound.

"Tommy," His voice was strained, but not angry, "I do believe I asked you and Rebecca to wait outside."

A half hour later and we'd gotten Jon down to his office on the main floor. He still moved somewhat stiffly on account of his new bandage, but he seemed relatively unharmed.

"A flesh wound, Sir." He shrugged as he sat down behind his desk, "At least you managed to miss the scar from my bullet wound. That would have hurt a great deal more."

I'd already apologized a dozen times. The dog shook them off.

"Now you see why I attempted to keep you from the scene, Sir. The police service has had decades of experience in recording the different species' reactions to events such as this. Your territorial response is not unexpected. In fact, dare I say, I believe it to be exactly what the perpetrator was attempting to elicit."

"Great," I sat down across from him, resting my elbows on the desk while I idly tried to wipe his blood from my hands, "So I'm a pawn again, am I?"

"If you wish to look at it that way, Sir."

Rebecca was by my side, in the only other seat in the room. "So it's safe to say this wasn't just a random break-in then? Who would want to do this? I could see it when Tommy was mayor, but why now?"

Jon looked slightly embarrassed. "We don't yet know. We do know that the break-in occurred some time between eight and fourteen hundred hours yesterday. The perpetrator was able to sneak into the building and perform the act unnoticed. There were few dogs at this location at that time as you two had left the area." He cleared his throat. "We won't make that mistake again."

I waved him on.

"But, Jon, why? I don't make decisions anymore. There's no reason to go after me. Max is doing all the headlining now."

Jon shrugged. "We shall simply have to ask the wolf when we apprehend him."

"Or the humans." I added.

"Pardon?" He raised an eye ridge. Hands flying across the desk, a moment later he had a notepad at the ready.

"Or the humans who were with him." I repeated. "Your investigators must have noticed. There was too much damage for a single person in there. There were at least a couple of humans with the wolf. The wolf was careful to leave most of the scent, but humans were definitely there too."

Pulling a sheet from his desk, Jon skimmed over the reports. "Tommy, are you sure? No human scents were noted by the investigators." He cleared his throat, "And they are the best we have."

I rolled my eyes and forced a wan smile to my face. "Jon, I guarantee it. I've spent more time among humans than any canine in the city. And besides," I glanced over to Rebecca, "They may have just mixed it into her scent. I know who should been in the apartment, they don't."

"Point taken." He began writing in his notepad.

I was just about to excuse us from the office when a thought came to me. "Babe," I turned to Rebecca, "Could you give us a moment?"

She looked up to me, brow furrowing, "Tommy, what is it? No secrets."

I forced out a breath. "Don't worry, Babe. It's nothing to do with that. Sayer just wanted me to pass a message on to Jon."

She groaned and levered her way from the seat without another word. She was more than familiar with Sayer's attempts to get Jon to move up in the force.

I waited until the door clicked closed behind her... and for her steps to fade in the distance, before I turned to Jon.

"Jon, Sayer and I had a bit of a conversation a couple of days ago."

The dog's ears pulled back tight to his head. I couldn't see it, but I'd bet his tail was wrapped around his legs.

"I apologize, Sir... Tommy. I was overambitious in my research efforts. I didn't realize until it was too late that I'd been discovered."

I waved him off. "Don't worry about it. It was a favour, nothing more. I took full responsibility. Sayer won't bother you about it." My words didn't seem to help much. "Can you at least tell me what you discovered?"

He perked up slightly. "Yes, Sir. The records going back that far are slim, they predate the formation of the force, but I was able to extrapolate a general time line."

"The process of driving the Class Fives from V-town began almost immediately after the Cataclysm, no more than a year. The ratio of humans to non-humans at that time was far closer to equal, almost one-to-three. Society was able to adapt – somewhat – to the new existence of Class Ones, Twos, and Threes. But, I'm sorry to report, it was not so for the Class Fours and Fives. They were driven from the city."

"There is little information on what came next, but I can assume there was a large number of deaths. Those who fall in the Class four designation were not overtly suited for independent survival. Class Five's, however, had slightly greater chances. While there has been no effort to expunge their existence in modern V-town... they are seldom mentioned or encountered."

I raised a claw to idly scratch at my ear. "That kind of dovetails into my next question, Jon." I let out a long breath, "I was mayor for almost a year, but only when I last talked to Sayer did I find out about something that has been, as you say, *expunged* from V-town's history."

Jon cocked his head to the side, looking at me curiously.

"What are you talking about, Tommy?"

I narrowed my eyes. "The history of the police force."

Jon didn't exactly freeze, but I could see a reaction deep in his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," His voice was strained, "But I can't talk to you about that. Please, don't pressure me. I made an oath to hold my silence. I'd... I'd tell you if I could."

Reaching out across the scuffed and worn wooden desk, I set my hand gently on Jon's.

"Don't worry about it. I already got the story out of Sayer. All I need is for you to confirm he's not playing me."

I gave a quick retelling of the story Sayer had given me. Jon nodded at each and every part.

"So it's all true? He didn't leave anything out?" I asked.

Jon didn't even bother to think. "No, Tommy. Not even about me." He shrugged. "We're dogs. We feel a compulsion for order. We're not leaders, we don't want to be. We don't make the laws, we simply enforce them. That's what makes us happy. We've had generations of breeding to ensure the compulsion."

"And that doesn't frighten you?" I asked, "The thought that you're born, *made*, for a job with no control of your own?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, but when he opened them again I could see no conflict in his face.

"No, Tommy." His voice was calm. "Does a nail feel anguish and terror for being hammered into a piece of wood? Do you," He paused for a moment, choosing his words, "Do you feel disgust at your urge to hunt, to howl," He smiled. "To lead? You may not like to admit it, but you are an alpha. Do you hold it against your father for handing that compulsion down to you?"

I almost laughed, but not quite. "I'll give you that one, Jon."

I left Jon's office a short time later and headed back up to the third floor. Rebecca was nowhere to be seen. I hadn't the slightest where she'd gotten off to.

I didn't even make it to the still open door before my pulse began to race.

This was my home. I knew I was playing straight into their hands, but I just couldn't help feeling violated that someone had managed to enter without retribution.

I tried to make it to the windows to open them, to let the fresh air in, but I couldn't.

Turning, I ran from the room. I couldn't seem to move fast enough. The scent of the foreign wolf clung to me, hiding in my fur. It was enough to drive me mad.

Exploding from the stairwell and out into the lobby, I turned a few heads as I fell to all fours. The police line was just starting to let everyone else in, and my sudden appearance had broken their nicely ordered procedure.

"Mate!" I saw a flash of gold as I raced past. English reached for me, but I was already well past him, out the door and down the street.

The force of the wind in my face felt good. Like I was alive again. Running like this was useless, I knew it, but it's what my body wanted. And just this time I was going to listen to it.

People flashed past as I rocketed down the centre of the street, straight as a beam of sunlight.

Right now I had nothing to worry about other than getting one foot in front of the other fast enough to not end up diving snout first into the asphalt.

The breath was burning so hot in my lungs that it hurt. Then, a moment later, I had something much more painful to think about.

It happened so quickly that I didn't even realize what was going on at first.

The pain didn't start in my leg, it began in my nose as I lost my footing and went sliding across the road.

What in all the gods' names...

Then the full brunt of the pain slapped me flat across the face.

Yeah, I screamed. This is starting to become a habit.

Looking back the way I'd come, I could see a splatter of blood on the road behind me, showing right where I'd been hit. It was a good twenty meters distant.

And further back I could see English racing my way, followed by a pack of police dogs.

Glancing down at the throbbing pain in my leg, I could see plain as day, a bullet hole in my thigh.

And seeing it made the pain all the worse. The shot hadn't been all that powerful. Not even enough to tare through my flesh. I could see the hot glistening of metal deep in the wound. The slug was still in me.

"Mate!"

Snapping my head up, English was coming right towards me. He never even slowed down as he scooped me off the ground.

Carrying me almost like one would a baby, he kept sprinting until we reached a turn in the road and the cover it provided.

"Tommy, are you alright?" He glanced down at me. I must have been looking out of sorts. He didn't even wait for an answer before preparing to set off again.

"Mr. English," A heartbeat later a police dog was standing in front of us. No, not just a police dog, Jon. "Give us Mr. Taggart."

From behind Jon a half dozen other dogs fanned out.

A growl grew in English's chest. "*Not a chance in hell.* He's wounded. He needs to go to the hospital."

"Agreed." Jon's voice softened a half measure. His eyes met English's.

And a moment later we were off again, I still held in English's arms.

The cat may be a champion sprinter, but the ride was not smooth. And it didn't help the lightening that seemed to be growing in my leg.

I think I passed out after about two blocks. It was nine to V-town General.

Waking up again, I near immediately wished I hadn't when the pain slapped me hard across the face like a boat oar.

"Doctor! The anaesthetic isn't working! His body is neutralizing it too quickly!"

"Then turn it off!" came a female voice, "It's just making things harder anyway."

I tried to flinch as what felt like a pair of hot pokers sunk deep into the flesh of my leg, but I couldn't move. The world around me was faint and indistinct, but it felt like I was being held down by a dozen or more straps.

"Bullet..." I tried to murmur, but the words came out as little more than a slurred mess.

"To the gods with it!" The doctor's voice came again, "His body is trying to metabolize the poison. It's moving through his body on the regeneration!"

A moment later another fresh wave of pain hit me. Now it felt like *everything* hurt.

No. 'Hurt' was too calm a word. More like 'screamed with the million voices of the dead as they were ripped throbbing from their graves'.

Yeah, that was a closer approximation.

It was only then I noticed they'd threaded a thick cloth between my lips. It was for the best.

Otherwise I likely would have bit off my tongue.

I came to again. The pain had died down to a background humming buzz. I still couldn't move. The extraordinary pain was gone from my leg, but it seemed to have spread out and settled down across the rest of my body.

Lifting my head, I couldn't move it more than an inch or so. They'd strapped it down too.

"Keep still!" The hiss came from somewhere outside of my limited vision. "Nurse! Sedate him if he won't keep still!"

"But, Doctor, the anaesthetic doesn't..."

"Then hit him in the head!" Came her terse reply.

That was when I decided to stop struggling.

Not that it mattered much. A few moments later I felt a needle jab me in the upper arm and I was out again.

For a moment the only thought that came to mind was 'white'.

I was staring straight up at a painted white ceiling.

I'm not sure how long I lay there before I finally moved. And even that, in the end, wasn't truly of my choice.

I sneezed.

The action was enough to knock me out of some measure of the stupor I was held in.

Now there was more to my world than a white ceiling. I was in a hospital room. I couldn't see much of it without moving my neck, but I could feel the bed under me and the light linen sheets pulled up to my chin.

It wasn't long after that I began to itch.

I couldn't quite make out the sensation... it felt like it came from a hundred miles away, through a thick fog, but my lower left leg itched.

I sat up.

Well, perhaps it would be better to say I *tried* to sit up.

Clenching the muscles of my gut, I tried to pull into a sitting position. That got me all of about six inches before I fell back to the bed gasping, a white foam on my lips.

It felt like every single muscle on my body had been cut from me, run through a tenderizer, then sewn back on by a half blind, one armed seamstress.

Moving again this time, I took it a little bit more slowly. Rolling gingerly to my side, I pushed gently up to a sitting position.

Even then I ended up light headed for a moment, colours and scents running rampant before my eyes.

Not that it mattered much, there wasn't anything to see.

I was alone in a small, single hospital room. There wasn't much in here but the bed, a door, and a window. There weren't even any machines or monitoring equipment.

I tried to strain my ears to pick up any sounds, but the room was too well insulated. I couldn't even hear anything through the window.

Pushing up from the bed, I managed to make it to a standing position before realizing something was wrong.

Looking down, my leg didn't want to bend properly.

No surprise, really. It was swaddled in a bandage that ran from my ankle to knee, nearly doubling the size of the limb.

And of course, the itch that bothered me was squarely in the centre of it, well out of reach.

Stumbling forward a few steps, I made it to the window without falling flat on my face, though it was a near thing. I was happy for the windowsill to take my weight.

Can't say I've ever had the opportunity to take in this particular view before. I had to be on the top floor of the hospital, up four or five stories. My eyes wouldn't focus enough to make out the people who ran back and forth on the street far below.

Running my tongue over my lips, I realized how parched I was.

Turning, I expected to find a jug of water sitting in the bedside table. No luck. There was no water, and no table. Quite literally, there was no furniture in here but the bed.

Gritting my teeth, I leaned on the wall as I made my way across the room to the far side. It was only a few steps, but it felt like miles.

Turning the handle, I was surprised to find it locked.

What in all the gods' names?

I hardly had the strength to pound on the door. The best I could do was a few pathetic scratches with my claws.

I wasn't exactly ready for the results I got.

A moment later the door swung outward with a faint gust of air pressing into my face. I nearly went tumbling to the floor.

Next I looked up there were two other people in the room with me. I didn't recognize either of them.

Well, it would be hard to recognize *anyone* with what they were wearing. Both were covered head to toe in plastic. Now *that* had to be expensive. Plastics were rare these days. More than that, the two of them seemed to be breathing from hoses that they dragged behind them through the now open door.

Peering out, I could see that there was only a small room past my door. It was closed off by another, more substantial looking portal.

That was about all the sightseeing I got. A moment later the two people had me by the arms and were carrying me back to sit on the bed. They were gentle enough, but there was something in the way they moved. They were scared. And not just for me.

The next hour was not the most pleasant in my life.

I think I gave about a dozen blood, fur, and saliva samples. Each offering was carefully packaged away by my attendants.

The two didn't say much. I could tell they worked for the V-town General, but little beyond that. I really wasn't in much of a position to say anything, my throat felt like someone had taken a hot nail to it, and it was hard to make out what they said behind their masks.

I was able to make clear my need for food and water. They promised me something when they were done.

They were bloody liars.

Happy once they'd gotten their samples and put me through a physical, the two workers slipped back through their pressure sealed door, pulling their tubes behind them, and locked it tight.

Leaving me once again all alone and none the better off.

Having nothing better to do, I dozed off.

When next I woke I felt a fair bit better, and far, far more hungry.

My regeneration must be working overtime. I wouldn't bet against me being able to out eat English right now.

It was with considerable surprise I found I still couldn't put any weight on my wounded leg. I didn't know how bad the wound was down there, but my regeneration should have healed up just about anything by now.

Sitting up, I was just struggling to my feet when the door opened again, a gust of stale air hitting me square in the face. It made my eyes feel dry.

I was pleased to note that this time the two people who walked towards me weren't wearing body sized condoms.

"Mr. Taggart?" One of them said, a female mole.

"Yes?" I rolled my eyes. "I'm assuming you already know who I am. If you don't then we're in big trouble."

She smiled. "We're here to discharge you. The doctor has given you a clean bill of health."

"Really?" I glanced down at my leg, "I don't feel so healthy. I can't even walk."

She chuckled. "You shouldn't be complaining about walking when you're lucky to be alive."

She reached out to help me up a moment later. I took her hand gladly.

We didn't get far. Out into the hospital proper, the two took me across the hallway into a doctor's office. For once I didn't have to wait to see the doc.

"Hello, Dr. Manson." I settled myself gently into the chair. She looked tired, dark circles under her eyes and her hair in all directions. "Care to tell me what's going on."

Despite her dishevelled appearance she was grinning ear to ear.

"It's good to see you again, Tommy."

I snorted. "Yeah, it's great to be here. But back to my question..."

She waved a hand. "You don't know what a lucky dog you are." I bristled slightly at the offhand insult. "That bullet that shot you was laced with the nastiest thing I've ever seen."

Reaching down, she pulled a glass jar from under her desk. Within it was a flattened slug. There was black and dried blood pooled on the bottom of the jar. Looking closely, I could just see the faintest green sheen to the bullet.

"So that's what hit me?" I asked. "It doesn't look like much. I've walked away from worse."

She set the jar gently down on the table. It made a click as it touched.

"It's not the lead the nearly killed you, Tommy. It was the coating. This wasn't just a poison."

"Huh? I thought I was proof to most things."

She nodded. "But not this. This wasn't just a poison. It was a designed toxin. I've never seen it before, but you're stupid lucky I read about it once. It's a weapon designed especially to kill people like you. People with regeneration. It doesn't directly damage your body. It changes your cells, makes them unusable. Then tampers with your regeneration to make it think that the new cells are the right ones and everything else in your body is damage."

I shivered slightly.

"But why would anyone ever make something like this? Why make a weapon that just kills people with regeneration?"

She gave me an odd look. "You're asking me? Everyone knows what a good hunter you are. Imagine if someone like you decided they didn't want to play nice."

I wrapped my arms around my chest. The chill that went through me this time had nothing to do with my wounds.

"Got it. Does this mean I've lost my regeneration?" The mere thought of being without regeneration very nearly made me physically ill.

The smile returned to her face. "No. You should make a full recovery. There shouldn't be any

side effects other than perhaps some scarring.”

I cocked my head. “Scarring? Why? The bullet would wasn't that big.”

She let out a long breath. “You're right, it wasn't. But we had to carve a large chunk out of you, remove everything the poison had spread to.”

“What?” Turning from her, I began pulling at the bandages around my leg. Only now that I looked at them again I could tell they'd been changed.

“Careful, Tommy!” The doc nearly vaulted over her desk. “There's still a lot of damage that needs to be healed.”

I had to give it to her. The bandage that wrapped around my lower leg was well applied. I had to spend over a minute unwrapping the cloth. I couldn't tare it apart. Any sudden motions sent shots of pain up my leg.

And I kept unwrapping and unwrapping.

This was not looking good.

I'd expected that it was simply a thick bandage. I'd been wrong. There were metal supports in here and a braces that clamped on. With every wrap of the bandage I went deeper. I was well past the point that my leg *should be starting*.

By the time my flesh finally came into sight it was obvious why I couldn't walk. They'd cut away a quarter of the muscle of my upper leg.

“Oh bugger.” Was all I could think to say.

I spent enough time in the doc's office to get my leg bound back up properly. It took a lot longer to set the bandages up than take them down.

And I also got to find out why I'd been but in the isolation chamber.

Looks like for all the doc's bravado, they still didn't know much about the poison I'd been hit with. For all they knew my regeneration could have mutated it into something that would affect normal people.

I think I speak for everyone when I say I'm happy nothing like that happened.

Stumbling out of the doc's office, I was quickly learning how to walk with the crutch they lent me. I felt a lot like Tiny Tim.

I hadn't much of any idea where to go from here, so I just headed towards the elevators at the end of the hallway.

I never made it.

Passing an unmarked door, it boomed open behind me. A heartbeat later I was smacked in the back. The force sent me poleaxing to the ground before I could even turn around. My crutch clattered down beside me.

“Tommy!” Rebecca. I recognized her scent even before I heard her voice.

“Hey, Babe.” Fighting to shift about, I looped my arms around her and pulled her towards me. “Miss me?”

A moment later two more sets of feet came into the hallway. One set was gold, the other was brown with blue trousers.

“Hey, English. Jon. Come to see me out of the sick ward?”

“Something like that, Mate. You've been here for the better part of a week, you know?”

A moment later the cat reached down and picked me up under my shoulders. He brought Rebecca up with me.

“Need a lift, Mate?” Turning my head, I found myself only inches from his gleaming white teeth.

"No." I kept my voice firm. "I need to walk this one off." Stretching, I reached for my crutch that still lay on the floor.

"Sir." Jon held it out to me. He refused to meet my eyes.

I made an escape from the hospital as quickly as my wounded leg would allow. Perhaps quicker. Anyone else would likely have ripped a few muscles the way I hobbled.

And it seemed that with every step we took that more and more police dogs gathered around us. There must have been a dozen or more clustered about by the time I made it to the front door.

This was perhaps the first time I didn't complain about it.

Out into the sunlight, it felt like I had to clear a pound worth of dust and chemicals from my lungs.

"English," I turned to the lion, "How do you feel about a *really* big lunch?"

Cafe Bristol was as good as ever. I think I gained about fifteen pounds. My regeneration had just about eaten every ounce of fat from my body and I needed to get some of it back.

The four of us sat at the table, English, Jon, Rebecca, and I. I seemed to be the only one doing any real eating. Even English contented himself with little more than a cup of tea and some scraps.

"Okay, here's the big question," I grunted out between the last few bites of meat on the formerly towering platter that had been brought to us. "Where in all the gods' names did they get that poison?" No one seemed to have an answer.

Turning to Jon, I asked him point blank range, "The police stockpiled guns. Do they have anything like this?"

Jon shook his head in a hard, precise motion. "No, Sir. I guarantee it. Both Commissioner Sayer and I ran exhaustive searches once we became aware of your... condition." He still didn't meet my eyes.

"Fine." I turned to English. "What about Storm Front? You're the biggest bounty hunters in the city."

The lion snorted. "You kidding me, Mate? I didn't even know such things existed."

"Rebecca?" I turned to her.

She just shook her head.

"Fine." I set my elbows on the table. "Who would develop things like this? Who employs the most people with regeneration?"

"The hunters, Mate." English cut in. "Last I heard just about *everyone* with regeneration worked for them, like an unwritten law."

And that was how I once again found myself at my parent's house.

I'd sent everyone else away. It wasn't that I didn't want them talking to my parents, but I needed to talk to the hunter's alpha. I needed to talk candidly, and that could be dangerous.

My police guard would not leave me. I did manage to make them wait outside however.

Knocking on the sky blue front door, I was a little surprised when it didn't instantly spring open.

A moment later I heard a crash from within the house, then some muffled cursing.

Trying the handle with my free arm, the one that wasn't draped over a crutch, I was surprised feel it turn freely.

"Mom? Dad?" I poked my nose in.

"Tommy?" My father's voice drifted from the shadows.

"Hi, Dad." Struggling slightly, I managed to get my crutch through the door. "Where's Mom?"

I still couldn't see anyone.

"She's out shopping."

I followed his voice deeper into the house, it was coming from their bedroom.

"Why are you here, son? What's wrong?"

Rounding the corner to the bedroom, I nearly ran face first into him. For a moment it almost looked as though I was staring into a mirror. He was near exactly the same wolf I was. We were both thin and skeletal, much of the colour was bleached from my fur in the low light so we both came out grey, and we were both propped up. Me by my crutch, he by his cane.

"Tommy!" In an instant he was upon me.

I couldn't tell you what happened next. All I knew for sure was that I heard his cane and my crutch clatter to the floor. Next I was in my old bedroom, still the way I'd left it, laying face up on the bed.

And I could hear a growl growing in my father's chest.

"What happened?" Was all he said.

When he spoke, he spoke as an alpha.

It took me the better part of twenty minutes to bring him up to date. He didn't say a single thing the entire time. He did, however, check my wounds. I tried to keep him from pulling apart the bandage on my leg, but I stopped the moment he growled at me.

"This is not good."

"That's a bit of an understatement." I laughed. "Dad," I paused for a moment, "I've come to talk to you about weapons."

He didn't say anything for a long moment.

At last he got slowly to his feet. "Come with me, son."

I was at a loss how we were going to get anywhere. Both my crutch and my father's cane were sitting back in the hallway, well out of reach.

Struggling to his feet, my father turned, extending his hands to me. He looked as steady as the mountains. He didn't look like an alpha, he looked like my father.

His muscles may be getting thinner, but he lifted me to my feet like I was still a pup. Throwing my arm over his shoulders, he almost didn't seem to feel the weight.

I could feel the stiffness in his body with every step, I could see his jaw clench every time he put weight down on his injured leg, but he never made a sound.

Into my parent's bedroom, he set me down on a chair. Then he turned to bend down before a trunk that sat at the foot of the bed.

It was my father's trunk, I knew that, and it had something to do with the hunters. Beyond those two things I knew nothing. I'd never seen it open once in my life, and my attempts to force the lock when I was young had gone exactly nowhere.

The storage trunk was made of the hollowed out trunk of a massive tree. It was at least two feet across and reinforced with crudely smelted iron bars. The lock, on the other hand, was not so crudely made. I'd never even been able to figure out how one was *supposed* to open it, likely so much as get it open myself.

Squatting in front of it now, my father took the lock in one hand. With a single finger extended, he pressed one of his worn and cracked black claws into the face of the lock. A moment later, with no obvious effort, it clicked softly.

"I always hoped I'd never have to open this, Tommy." His voice was as soft as the breeze outside. He looked away from me, I couldn't see his face. "This chest has always been one of the

hunters few true secrets. Your uncle Gowan and I assembled pieces of it decades ago. There is one other like it. It sits in his home.”

Shifting slightly to the side, he let me get a look at what lay within.

There wasn't much. A few glass jars and an arm full of books. It didn't look nearly as intimidating as my fathers manner suggested it to be.

Lifting out one of the bottles, there was a couple centimetres of green dust settled within.

“This,” His voice was cracked, “Is what nearly killed you, son.”

I reached for the jar, put he pulled it well away.

“There's no real name for what rests in here,” he continued. “All we know is that it's a fungus one of the hunters found almost twenty years ago. Harmless to most, it killed every man and woman with regeneration who encountered even a pinch of it.”

“Why do *you* have it, Dad?”

He raised his head to meet my gaze, his blue eyes steady. “To ensure my dominance over anyone who may attempt to overthrow me. We all need emergency plans, Tommy. This was mine in the event that I should be faced with a hunter with regeneration, but no morals.”

Leaning forward, I took a look at the other jars in the chest. Some held liquids, others powders or gels. None were labelled.

“They each serve a purpose, Tommy. Some are fatal to felines, others canines, others to everything. I've never had to use them, but they've been here in the event that they're needed.”

“Is this where the poison that infected me came from?”

“No.” His voice was hard. “And it didn't come from the forest either. This particular fungus is extremely rare. It hasn't been seen in years, and when ever it has I've personally ordered it destroyed. The sample that nearly killed you came from Goawn's chest.”

“What?” There was noway my uncle would ever...

“He reported his home broken into back around the quake,” my father continued. “There was much damage and looting to his house. One of the things stolen was his chest. He reported it to me. We searched for it, but it was never found.”

My father locked up the chest soon afterwards. He asked me to stay for a while, to wait for my mother to return, but I had to decline. There was too much left for me to do.

Back on the street, with crutch firmly under my arm, I was heading home with my police detachment close by.

To say I was a little annoyed when a messenger came from police HQ would be an understatement.

Sadly, one downside of having a police escort is that I can't turn down an invitation from Commissioner Sayer.

The news must not be quite so bad this time. Sayer didn't ask his attendant dog to leave.

“Mr. Taggart.” The Dane's voice sounded like it was about to crack from old age. “I received an interesting visitor just a few hours ago. Now I may be familiar with why you asked Constable Oaks to begin researching Class Fives.”

“What happened?” I asked while scooting around on the hard chair in an effort to get less uncomfortable.

“One of my officers encountered a... *dog* entering the city this morning. He was asking for you. You were still detained at the hospital at the time, so I took the prerogative of meeting with him myself.”

I cocked my head. "Wouldn't that be more of a job for Max?"

The faintest frown pulled at the dog's lips. "I see this as a security matter. An unknown creature has entered my city. The police will deal with it. Then, if suitable, the matter will be passed on to the government."

I shivered slightly.

"Fine." I pushed my fears to the back of my mind. It would have been so much easier if Sayer hadn't told me about the origins of the police force. It left me looking at everything they did in a far more sinister light. "What did the Class Five have to say?"

Sayer glanced over to his aid who began shuffling through the papers that lay neatly on his desk. A moment later the younger dog found what he was looking for and held it up for Sayer to read.

"Yes. The *dog's* name was Sunny." He stressed that one word like the Class Five didn't have the right to be of the same general species as Sayer and his force. "Sunny encountered a wolf while roaming to the north of the city. He thought you sent him." I got a glare from the dog, reminding me I hadn't kept him fully up to date. "That caused a brief misunderstanding. It appears the unidentified wolf had been sent by another group. The wolf requested that Sunny and his detachment enter separate negotiations with them, to the exclusion of you."

I slumped back in my chair, the pain of my leg forgotten. "Wonderful. And what did Sunny say?"

Sayer cleared his throat, "It appears you made quite an impression on the Class Five's, Mr. Taggart. They refused to deal with the newcomer. The wolf became displeased with this news and attempted violence. Apparently a third individual... Gold stepped in at that moment. There was a battle and the wolf retreated when it was joined by the remainder of the Class Fives. Sunny mentioned the word 'wendigo'. Is this meaningful to you?"

"Yeah," I rolled my eyes, "It's their term for someone with regeneration. They were probably just talking about me."

"Indeed." Sayer nodded to his aid and the paper was put back in its proper place. "So it would appear we have negotiations open with a group of Class Fives."

"Yeah." I let out a breath. "I kinda forgot to tell Max about that. I should get him to send out a diplomat."

Sayer raised one eye ridge. "You needn't concern yourself. I have already been in contact with the mayor. The proper actions have been taken. What I'm more concerned with, Mr. Taggart, is this *latest* attempt on your life. The fact you've had enough that I can use that term concerns me even more so."

The conversation went downhill from there.

Sayer wanted to just short of keep me locked up in police HQ under twenty-four hour guard. I wasn't so hot with that idea.

I was able to barter somewhat with him. He'd back off a measure if I told him about the hunter's and their little medicine box.

I didn't say too much, only that the hunters were familiar with the poison and that they should talk to Gowan.

Back on the street, I wasn't surprised to see Jon waiting for me. He slipped in beside me as I staggered slowly along.

"Sir." The dog's eyes were downcast.

"What's wrong, Jon?" I asked, half out of breath as I still tried to get the hang of this blasted

crutch.

He glanced over to me. "I'm sorry."

Stopping dead in the middle of the street, I turned to look at him. "What is it, Jon? What happened this time?"

He started for a moment. "I failed you. Again. I can't even think of myself as a most basic bodyguard for how many successful attacks I've let through to you."

I rolled my eyes and shot out my free arm to grab him by the front of his uniform. A moment later I gave him a good yank, strong enough to get us face to face.

"Jon. Drop it. You're my friend, and a lot more than a simple bodyguard. You've done everything you could. I don't exactly live a low risk lifestyle, eh?"

He smiled slightly. "You could say that, Tommy... Sir."

"Keep it with the first one, Jon. Now," Pressing my crutch to one of the other dogs who clustered around us, "How about we get back to the apartment a little quicker than I can manage with that gods' forsaken piece of wood?" I threw my arm over him.

"Tommy... I'm not sure you really want to go back to..."

"Just humor me this time, eh Jon?"

A moment later we started moving again, in the direction of the apartment.

I have to give it to Jon, I nearly went loco again when I smelt the wolf in my home. This time I was able to make due with simply throwing out everything with his scent upon it.

That was pretty much *everything*.

Rebecca came home later that night with bags of takeout in her hands. I hadn't the words to express how happy I was to see her.

We spent that night laying on nothing more than a new store bought blanket spread across the now bare floor of the bedroom. I'd gone over the floor and walls with a cleaner to remove the last traces of alien scent.