

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 6: A Cross, A Circle, and An Arrow

No one bothered to wake us the next morning. For that I was grateful.

Waking up on the hard floor wasn't the greatest for my back, but I'd been through worse. What made this home was Rebecca in my arms beside me.

Letting her sleep, I rolled over and took a look at my leg. I'd taken all the bandages and splints off it last night to give it a chance to heal. My regeneration seemed to be back up and running now. I wasn't a hundred percent, but neither did I have any gaping holes in me.

Taking a tentative step or two, I was able to walk again. I couldn't exactly dance the tango yet, but I was getting there.

And, to mark the occasion, I now had another scar on my lower half. Gods, I was getting to be nothing *but* scar tissue.

I still had the silver line on my hip, but now I had a big round scar on my lower leg to compliment it. Add to that my ring scar and I was going to be as grey as my father soon if I kept this up.

I was just about to head out into the kitchen to see if there was a single scrap of food that had survived my cleaning when Rebecca woke.

"Hey, Babe." Hobbling over to her, I leaned down and kissed her nose.

"Morning, Wolfy." She wrapped her arms around me. "I see you're back up and walking."

"Getting there, Babe." A moment later I was back on the floor, laying next to her.

"There's something we need to talk about, Tommy." With those words my sweat ran cold. "The wedding is getting closer."

I just sighed. "I thought we were letting Jon deal with that."

She gave me a poke. "This is *our* wedding. I like Jon too, but I'm not about to marry *him*."

"I should hope not. That's my job." Reaching out with my tongue, I lapped her cheek.

"But that means we need to get this over and done with." Her face brightened, "Oh, and I almost forgot. I found the wedding dress! Looks like our intruder didn't go deep enough in the closet to find it. It's still intact."

I couldn't help but pull a face. "That's... great, Babe."

"What's wrong, Tommy?"

"Nothing." I pushed to my feet, gently pulling her along with me, "Let's see if we can find anything to eat."

We just about made it out the apartment door when a knock came.

That was just plain odd. Few people knocked on my door. Most couldn't get past my police guard, and those who could generally barged straight in.

Opening the door, Jon stood at attention before me. Next to him was a man. A human.

"Sir," Jon nodded at us, "Ma'am. I've continued plans for your upcoming wedding. This gentleman," He nodded at the human, "Is one of many to offer his church and his services to you at no cost. I'll leave the three of you to get acquainted."

Turns out the human was Reverend Hampshire. He was a short man, and thin. The fact he wore all black except for a line of white around his neck made him look even thinner.

"So when can I book you for the service? As the two of you are already living together I assume you'll want it as soon as possible." His thin and reedy voice left me scratching at my ears as he pulled a small black book from his pocket. "My next opening is tomorrow afternoon if you can prepare yourselves in time."

"Whoa, wait. What? We haven't even decided exactly how we're going to handle this!" I was about to step in, but it was Rebecca who spoke quicker than I.

The priest's eyes snapped up.

"Pardon?" There was enough in that single word to fall like a stone into a still pool.

Laying a hand on Rebecca's shoulder, I kept my voice calm as I spoke.

"What she means, Reverend, is that we're still planning what we want. We're being pulled in a huge number of directions by seemingly everyone in the city. We're just not ready to commit at such a short notice."

He humphed. "That's all and well, but you two *are* living together. I could understand two *wolves* living as such, but you, my dear," He turned to Rebecca, "Are a lady. We need to make this proper."

"This *is* proper." The venom in Rebecca's voice was enough to make me pull back. "We don't need your blessing, Jim." She levelled the man with an icy stare. "We've known each other for how long, Jim? I've never once attended your church and now you want what?"

"It's nothing like that, Rebecca," He was rushing for words now, stammering over himself, "I just want what's best for you..."

"Reverend," Stepping forward, I placed myself between the two of them, "Thank you for coming to see us. Please, leave what information you can with Jon. He's helping us plan. We're honoured that you've come to speak to us." My voice fell as the man seemed to prepare himself for another outburst. "Goodbye."

A moment later I had the door firmly closed between us and him.

"You okay, Babe?" I leaned back against the door. "I've never seen you do that before."

She took two steps away from me before turning back and leaning against my chest.

"You wouldn't say that, Tommy, if you'd known me before we met." She paused for a moment, "Or if you saw me when we're apart." She let out a long breath. "It's just that I know Jim. He's a nice enough person, but he's always been trying to make me follow his human-only church. I guess he just saw this as another opportunity."

I snorted. "Human only, Babe? In that case he must be expanding his horizons."

Stepping down the stairs to the main floor, I smiled when I saw Jon.

The dog wasn't smiling back.

"I'm sorry again, Tommy. Rebecca." He grimaced for a moment. "I seem to be saying that a lot lately. I see the priest did not go over well." He raised an eye ridge. "He came very highly recommended by the human community."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Jon. We're not even sure what we want yet."

"But I thought you wanted a traditional wedding." He cocked his head.

"Why would you think that, Jon?" I asked as he led us from the building, our police escort closing around.

His ears twisted towards me as he cocked his head further. "Isn't that the only reason *anyone* gets married these days? A common law marriage is normal enough, but I can think of few people who have opted for a full wedding. That's something that only occurs when one wishes to make a point... isn't it?"

I reached out for Rebecca's hand. She squeezed my fingers.

"Yeah, Jon. Something like that. The only reason people get married like that today is to make a statement, to set themselves apart. Frankly, I'm just not sure if that's what *we* want."

There was really only one place to go for breakfast. With the amount I was eating at Café Bristol you'd think it was the only restaurant in town.

Unsurprisingly, a particular lion was waiting there for us. He was surrounded on all sides by other diners. Looks like business was doing well.

"Mate. Lass. Dog." He nodded to us as we sat down. The rest of my police guard seemed a little jumpy in trying to secure such a busy area, but they did their best to blend away into the crowd.

I made a point of ordering big today. I didn't out eat English, but I did put my heart into it. My body was still patching together my leg and I needed the mass if nothing else.

I was just polishing away the last of my plate when a stag stepped up beside me. For a moment I didn't even notice him. He was dressed in plain, simple, rough woven clothes, I thought he a member of the serving staff.

"Mr. and Miss. Taggart?" His voice was deep and smooth, words polished to the shine of a professional speaker.

Turning to him, I set down the bone in my hand. Rebecca turned with me until the three of us were face to face.

"It's not Mr. and Miss. yet. We're still working on that." I replied guardedly.

He nodded his head. "Yes, so I've been informed. I am Caretaker Minstrel. I'm here to talk to you about your plans for the wedding."

"Oh good gods." I lowered my head to my hands. "We just got rid of the last priest. Sorry, friend, you're out of luck. Leave your name and number with Jon there and we'll see about getting back to you."

The stag cleared his throat and looked down at me disapprovingly. "Mr. Taggart. I have been sent here as a representative of the United New Churches of V-town. I *do not* simply take a number and sit down. If you are performing a wedding it *will* be at one of our churches. You *are* aware that the New Churches are the common religion for the hunters, are you not?" His voice had grown as he spoke until it reached a level that caused my police dog guards to begin closing in around him.

A discrete hand motion to Jon and the guards were waved off. "*Mr.* Minstrel," I began, "The New Churches may be the most practised religion by the men and woman who make up the hunters,

but it is not a *common* one. You may notice that neither, I, my father the alpha, or my uncle the beta, attend your churches. Thank you for your time,” I gritted my teeth, “But I now see that the New Churches are not the right fit for my marriage.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You do not know what you are doing, Mr. Taggart. The New Churches have supported the government--”

“And I’m not mayor anymore!” I broke in, “Go talk to Max if you want to play the political games! I’m out of the government. Leave me alone.”

With an effort, I turned back to my nearly finished meat, raising a bare bone to gnaw on.

“Do not turn away from me, little wolf! I have not finished with you. You and your pet human *will* be married in the only true church of--”

I didn’t give him the chance to finish his threat. In the blink of an eye I was turned around, my claws digging into the soft flesh of the stag’s neck.

“You can say what you will about me, preacher,” I snarled, my teeth only an inch from his nose, “But you will not insult Rebecca. She *is not* my pet. Don’t forget that I am a hunter, as you so loudly liked to proclaim. I deal with the real world, not your spiritual one. Leave me be or I’ll give you cause to find out if your faith in the gods is well founded.”

The stag might out mass me by a good fifty pounds, but I threw him into the police dogs behind him like a rag doll.

Turning back to my meal, I snapped the bone between my jaws like a twig and focused on sucking out the hard to reach marrow.

“Mate,” English’s voice was soft as he leaned towards me over the table, “You sure that was a good call? Pissing off a powerful minister like that can’t be good for your long term outlook.”

I never even looked up from the shards of bone on my plate.

“This wedding is getting to be far more than I bargained for, English.” I glanced over at Rebecca. She was making a point of ignoring us. “I want to get married, but I don’t want all the extra pomp and ceremony that it brings.”

The lion just laughed. “Then you picked the wrong city to get married in, Mate. The Circle-Moon United New Churches are the single most popular faith in the whole bloody city. Bugger, Mate, they’re practically the *only* faith left these days except of the old human ones. You don’t know the pressure that they’ve been trying to lay to get you two married in this church or that church.” He chuckled darkly, “You’re just lucky they managed to get it down to a single preacher to come see you. Last I heard each and every church in the city was fighting to get you through their doors!”

I laid my head back and looked up at the cloudy sky. “And how would you know all this, English?”

There was the sound of ripping meat as the lion tore into another chunk of his breakfast.

“They’ve practically been swamping me, Mate. Folks know we’re friends, eh? They can’t get a hold of you, so they come and try to get to you through me. Heh.” He snorted, “It’s gotten to the point that I’ve had to tell the ladies at SF to turn away anyone looking for me no matter the reason.”

Sitting up, I glanced over at Jon. The dog nodded.

“It’s true. I sent out a few light announcements three days ago and have been swamped with responses. The vast majority of them have been of low quality, but I’ve been cataloguing some of those that seem more promising.”

I looked over to Rebecca. She was laughing softly under her breath.

“It was *your* idea to get married, Wolfy. This one is your fault.”

“Ain’t it always, Babe.” Reaching out, I took her hand. “Do you ever feel like just making a run for it back into the forest? We could get married by Renfru in Kicking Horse Pass and have our

honeymoon in Alberta. I hear Banff is supposed to be nice.”

That got me a smack upside the head. Though a light one.

“Not a chance, Wolfy. We already did the nature walk. I may not want a church service, but I'd rather stay closer to home.”

I just rolled my eyes and reached for another piece of meat.

Parting with English, Rebecca and I walked down the street for a few blocks before she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Sorry, Wolfy. This is where I've got to go. I've got an interview in an hour.”

“What?” I'd almost forgotten she was job hunting. “Where?”

She laughed as she turned to walk away. “Don't worry, it's just at a perfume shop.”

A moment later she was gone, leaving me standing dumbly in the street, still surrounded by guard dogs.

I didn't really have anywhere to go, and even Jon had abandoned me to head back to his office. That left me at a loss to exactly where I should head now.

Not having a real clue, I wandered until I ended up at City Hall.

They say all roads lead to Rome? Well, City Hall was in the centre of V-town and you could get to it pretty easily too.

My efforts to find where things had moved to this time were more than a little bit quicker. I was just about to get in line again to ask where Max had been moved to today when one of my guards stepped up to the files behind the reception desk and pulled it right out. The ladies there didn't even blink an eye.

“This way, Sir. Follow me, please.” The dog started off down a hallway.

“You've got a lot to learn about manners.” I told him once I caught up. Glancing across, I saw the badge on his shirt read Officer Pine.

“What do you mean, Sir?” He slowed, looking over to me, expression worried.

I waved him on, “There was a line up for information there. We're just citizens like everyone else. We should have waited.”

The dog furrowed his brow. “But we're not just citizens, Sir. I'm a police officer and you're the city administrator. We didn't break any laws by accessing the information ourselves. We're authorized to do so. The only reason all the other people stood in line is because they're not authorized to access the files directly. They need the receptionists to do it for them.”

“That's not the point, Pine.” I took a deep breath. “It's not that we *can* do things they can't. It's that we *shouldn't*. If we can bypass the reception we should use the ability to help those who are already in line, not just to help ourselves.”

Now the dog did stop, slowing as he thought. He seemed to be considering my words, but the other dogs around me weren't listening.

“But, Sir, that's not correct. We *are* helping everyone. You're the administrator. By helping you we're doing more good than helping an average citizen. Every citizen is important, but you're the administrator. Your needs take priority.”

“My needs don't *always* take priority, Pine.” I was speaking slowly, leaning up against a half constructed wall, trying to find a way to make what was so obvious to me clear to him. “I'm not doing anything important, just going to visit Max and burn some time. What I need... what I *want* is no more and no less important than what the average person wants. It might even be less important if one of the people in line was in a rush.”

A few of the wrinkles on the dog's face smoothed out. “But how would we know the difference,

Sir? What's the protocol to tell when a person of rank has a need that's lower than or equal to that of someone below them?"

I snorted. "And that, Pine, is a question that I'd love to hear you answer."

Pushing off the wall I leaned against, I started down the hallway again. The other dogs were following me, but Officer Pine had a bit of a far away look in his eyes.

They'd moved Max's office *again*. At least now he wasn't forced to share with Jameswell. Not that it was much of an improvement, this room was even smaller than the last.

"Tommy!" The oni looked up, nearly springing to his feet when I knocked on his door. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon." He paused for a moment to give me a look up and down. "You look good." He lowered his voice, "I heard what happened. You okay?"

Taking a seat across from him, my answer surprised me. "You know, Max, I am." A slight smile spread across my lips. I'd only just realized that the last of the stiffness from my leg was starting to melt away. "It's not something I'd want to go through again, but I'm okay."

He smiled. "Good to hear. What can I do for you, Tommy?"

I let out a breath and wiggled in the upholstered chair to get comfortable. "Not much, Max. I just came by to see how you were doing. I've had an opening in my schedule between rounds of being shot, so I figured I'd use it."

Max was one of those people who developed stress lines on his face. Looking closely at him, I for one I could tell there were fewer. Not by many, but there were fewer than last I'd seen him.

"You know, Tommy, for the first time since I took over it feels like things are starting to settle down. We're a long way from being where we were a couple of years ago, but things are starting to get back to normal." He paused for a moment before smiling. "Here, let me show you something."

Max led me out of his makeshift office and up a couple of flights of stairs to the top floor of the building. There wasn't anything finished up here, nothing more than the skeleton of the building was in place, concrete floors and a bit of drywall over studs here and there.

"This Tommy," He pointed a finger to the general layout of an oversized room. "This is where they want to put me when the place is finished."

I whistled as I stepped through where the door would be. It was hard to visualize what the area would look like when it was done, but this room had to be a good ten meters square.

"Somebody's going to get a nice office." I turned back to smile at him, "How many people did you need to yell at to pull this off?"

The oni grinned ear to ear. "None. It's what the architects came up with on their own. In fact, this is a bit smaller. I had to talk them into putting an extra office up here next to Jamewell's and mine. That shrunk them both a bit."

I cocked my head. "Oh? Who for? This is the executive floor. Did you hire someone else on?"

He shook his head and lead me through the unfinished walls to a smaller, more cozy space.

"Nope. One office is for Jamewell the Assistant Mayor, one office is for me, and one office is for the City Administrator."

I laughed out loud. "Not a chance, Max. There's no way you're chaining me to a desk again."

I expected Max's smile to falter, but instead he just shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Tommy. The office is yours to do with as you please. It can collect cobwebs for all I care."

I took a look around the space. Well, there was one thing I had to give it, it had a bloody good view.

The glass had been put in for the windows. I could see down all the way to the street. People scurried around. From here things almost looked peaceful.

"You might be interested in one thing, Tommy," Max continued, "I had a meeting with the leaders of the human population yesterday."

I just groaned. "Do I want to even ask?"

He shrugged. "They complained, as usual. Everyone complains. You'd like why. They're mad that they're not getting any special considerations anymore. Remember how we shut down all the human tracking contracts and extra scrutiny they were getting before the quake? Well, it looks like some of them got annoyed. A good percentage of them were able to bilk the government for money with all those considerations and now they're annoyed that they're being treated like normal citizens."

I laughed out loud.

"Serious? We save them from persecution and now they're pissed that they're being treated *like everyone else*?"

Max just smiled.

I would have hung around longer with Max, but he got pulled into a meeting that I wanted no part of. I ran as soon as I heard the word 'strategic'. I'd had more than enough of that during my time in office.

Back out on the street, I was left wandering again. The only problem is that wandering doesn't work so well when you've got a dozen police dogs following you. Not that they said a word. Every dog was impeccably behaved, but they annoyed me none the less.

Working my way up yet another random street, I stopped across from a church. Now I'm not exactly a religious person... Okay, I'm about as religious as a door hook, but I was starting to wonder what the inside of a Circle-Moon church looked like.

I'd inherited my religious tendencies from my parents. Neither of them had ever had much to do with organized faith. My father had taken me to church once when I was a cub, but we'd both been politely asked to leave once he started encouraging me to ask questions to the preacher while he was giving a sermon.

Thankfully, there was no one speaking from the pulpit when I stepped inside this church.

My guards looked distinctly uncomfortable as we entered. I got the feeling they were as used to being in a place like this as I was.

Taking in a deep breath, I noticed something. It was subtle, but it was there. There was another reason for the dogs to be nervous. The only scent I could detect in the air of the small church was that of my fellow wolves.

Pressing deeper, my guards slowly peeled away behind me. They never let me out of their sight, but they hung back as far as they could.

Entering the main chamber, all doubt was removed as to who this particular building was meant for. The great wolf gods were painted plain as day across the far wall. They were the *only* gods depicted.

I don't know much of the current religious practices, but I do know for a fact that when I curse 'the gods', that's exactly what I mean. Not one god, not just a couple of gods, but a whole pantheon. Last I checked there had to be better than eight dozen recognized gods, a handful for each and every species.

This church, it seems, was dedicated to only a small subset of those gods. Those that looked most like me.

I walked past the tight little pews to stand next to the painting. It was a nice enough piece of

art, though nothing spectacular. There were three wolves depicted, each looking mortal enough if not for the halo of soft light that surrounded them.

The lowest down and furthest to the left was a common looking wolf with a speckled coat. None of the gods, as far as I knew, had official names, but he was known as The Commoner. He held a brick in one hand and a clump of black dirt in the other.

The furthest to the right was the next of the wolves. He stood higher than The Commoner. His fur was jet black. His hands were empty except for his claws. His name was The Protector. His body was held firm, but his head was bowed in reverence to the final wolf in the image.

Between the two other wolves stood the third. He stood taller than the other two, and he was the only figure to look directly out at the viewer.

Clad in a soft grey pelt, his figure was more diffuse and harder to focus on than the others. The Commoner and the Protector were solidly grounded in this world, the final wolf was not.

Even his unofficial name was The Unknown. Most just called him the wolf god. He was, according to those who believed such things, the one who looked down upon his people and guided them.

I just snorted and rolled my eyes.

Turning from the painting, I heard the soft click of claws on the worn wooden floor.

"Hello, is anyone there?" The voice was aged and cracked.

The serious thought of slinking away came to mind before the wolf entered the room. I was, however, too slow. A second later the priest was here.

He was old and stooped. He may have had a red pelt once, but now it was faded to a near uniform grey.

He didn't look up at me, but raised his nose and sniffed the air.

"Don't be afraid, my son. You are among your own kind. Where are you?"

I cocked my head for a moment before speaking. How could he not see me? I was no more than a half dozen meters away and in plain sight.

"Over here." I was annoyed how small my voice sounded.

"Ah, thank you, my son." He turned towards me, stepping forward a few paces, his hand brushing along the top of the pew.

It was now I could see why he had been unable to find me. The old wolf's eyes were nearly white with cataracts.

"Now," He took a seat on a pew beside to me and patted the wood next to him, "What can I do for you, my son?" He sniffed again, thinking. "I don't believe we've met, my son. I am Father Champion."

It was only with great reluctance that I sat down next to the priest. I was happy to note there was a slot in the back of the pew for our tails to stick through.

"The name is Tommy."

He paused for a moment, rolling my scent and name over in his head. Then he shrugged.

"It's good to meet you, Tommy. Any wolf is welcome here. Was there something on your mind?"

I couldn't quite decide if he'd recognized me as the former mayor or not. Either way he wasn't bringing it up, so neither was I.

A quick glance back towards the door and I could see my guards still waiting for me. The flow of air in the room was such that their scents were pressed away from us. That was fine with me.

"I've never really been in a church before..." I almost added 'father' at the end, but that just felt wrong. There was only one 'father' in my life, and he was the hunter's alpha.

"Yes," He paused for a moment, raising his face in my direction for a faint smile, "I can smell the confusion on you."

There was something about his clouded eyes. They should be cold and alien, diseased as they were, but there was something comforting about being next to a wolf that was so obviously weaker than you.

It was disarming to the pack and dominance instinct.

Clearing his throat, he continued, "Did your family never bring you to a service before? Your father, at least, must have been a member of the flock."

I snorted when he used the term flock. I knew it was simply a loan word from the old human churches, but it seemed ridiculous none the less.

"No, neither of my parents were religious, and I doubt you'd be pleased having my mother, a sprigien in your church."

He paused for a long moment. "Technically, my son, all are welcome in this house, whether they be of the flock or not. I do have some young members who are brought here by their other parents... despite their cross-breeding. They may not be invited to involve themselves in all, but their children are."

There was something about the way he said 'cross-breeding' that set my teeth on edge. It was obvious that he disapproved of it, but he wouldn't come out and say it.

The priest must have noticed my reaction. He softened his voice another measure.

"Not that the church has any stance on the matter, that is. We welcome all acts of reproduction, whether they add to the flock or not. But, my son, there has to be a reason why *you've* come to me today. One does not enter a church for the first time in one's life without good reason. What is it that troubles you?"

I let out a long breath, trying to decide just how much I wanted to say. I still wasn't sure if the priest had figured out who I was. But, then again, it would only be a matter of time.

"I'm mated with a human, and she wants to have a full marriage."

Champion turned his head towards me. I couldn't tell for sure, but the way he narrowed his eyes suggested he was trying to see through the milky cataracts that clouded him.

"Well, my son, I can see no problem here. You're in love with a human? So be it. All your children will be of the flock. As for the marriage," He shrugged weakly, "It can be done anyway you like. The only ones who tend to care of such things are the humans. If you want it here, you're welcome to it. If at the human church, I doubt many will care. All that matters is that you and your bride are willing." He cocked his head slightly, "But there is always the question of your families."

I laughed. A real, true laugh. "Her family is gone, and mine will support anything and everything I choose. They're not a problem."

The priest's hand reached out to settle upon mine. "Then I see no problem, my son. Do what makes you feel best and the gods will smile upon you. We live for the service of those who are above us and guide those who are below, as do all who are born to the pack, but there are times that we can make decisions simply for ourselves and no others. There are no parties but you and your bride who need be involved in your happiness. Focus on what the two of you want, the rest will all fall into place. The pack, as the gods, will protect you. That's what we're for. All wolves are family, the church only exists to help us remember this. We are a single pack, of a single mind, though we may not always remember that."

I was about to get up when a thought struck me.

"Champion," He started slightly when I didn't prefix his name, "What do you know of the riots that seem to be returning? There aren't as many of them as there used to be, but the species riots are

coming back.”

He shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry, Tommy, I know little of them. I, as you can see, am no longer well suited to venturing out into the world. All I know is what the faithful tell me. I,” He paused for a moment, choosing his words, “As all clergy, can not call myself entirely innocent of promoting the progress of our species, but I will tell you now that I have never encouraged such behaviour. In my younger days I knew a great many of my fellow priests, not only those of the wolf church. We all held different opinions on how we should deal with each other, but none of us encouraged violence. The world is a wide enough place, the city grand enough, that we need not intrude upon each other.”

“Thank you, Champion.” I stood up. “I should be getting back to that world.”

“You are most welcome, Tommy,” His face turned to track me, though it was off by a few degrees, “And thank you for all the work you’ve done in the world. You’ve done more than you can ever know to help raise the opinions of others that wolves are more than just hunters.”

I snorted. “Anyone who would think such to begin with is a fool. No species can be seen as a single thing. We’re all to great for that.”

I was just stepping out of the church, my guard forming up, when a tan shadow peeled off the wall and stepped up next to me.

Predictably, my guards just about went snaky.

It took me a good five minutes to calm them down. Not one of these officers had been with me back when I’d been running for mayor. They didn’t recognize Reynold.

Walking down the street again, the other wolf matched me step for step.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve last seen you,” I said.

The wolf looked a little more weathered now, but no more happy to be here.

“I was sent. Predictably. Gowan of the hunters has determined that you need more protection after your last brush with death.” He pulled a face. “Though why anyone would want to waste the time trying to kill you now is beyond me. You’re as hard to squash as a cockroach, and twice as infuriating. However,” He rolled his eyes, “Gowan has deemed you important enough to be protected, so I’m here to protect you.”

“And that makes me feel so much better.” I ground out the words. “And why is Gowan making the decisions? My father is still the alpha. He should be the one ordering you about.”

Reynold’s face pulled, but it was one of pain rather than annoyance.

“The alpha is... not as young as he once was.”

I snorted. “You’re telling me.”

Reynold gave me a bit of a queer look before remembering just who my father was. It was not common practice among the hunters to refer to the alpha with anything other than the proper respect. Gowan may have a somewhat of a lax hand, but my father ran the hunters through a strict hierarchy.

“Come on,” I pointed down the road, “I’m hungry.”

It took us a little while to find a place to eat. I wasn’t all that familiar with this part of the city, and I couldn’t ask Reynold, he didn’t spend much time in civilization.

At long last I managed to find a little diner. It was close to lunch hour and the place was packed. The police dogs didn’t care much for the idea of me leaving them outside as Reynold as I went in for a meal, but I wasn’t in a mood to give them much of a choice.

I did offer to bring the dogs something out, but they to a man turned me down. Not that it surprised me. I’d seen the kind of stuff Jon ate. Police dogs had strange tastes.

The inside of the diner was set up like one of those retro places, trying to look a bit like a restaurant from before the Cataclysm.

There were red vinyl booths and a counter with bar stools. Just about every seat was taken. Reynold and I had to find the last two stools available. It was a good five minutes before the waitress came to service us.

Thankfully, despite the place's appearance, the menu catered to just about everyone.

Unsurprisingly, Reynold and I ordered the same thing, a slab of beef. Raw. I can't say much for the guy's personality, but we did think alike when it came to food.

It wasn't until we got our order that Reynold began to speak. His voice was soft as he held his meal to his lips. I doubt anyone else could hear him.

"There is another reason I'm here, Tommy." I glanced over to him, but his face was inscrutable as he ate, "Gowan may have sent me, but it is the alpha who has once again taken personal control of the hunters. He began an investigation to the... weapon used against you. Rumour has it he's not been kind to his beta. The gods know why, but he's taking a pound of flesh out of Gowan like the attack was his fault."

I sighed. The warm meat in my hands suddenly didn't taste so fresh.

"Don't worry about it, Reynold. I know what's going on. I'll make sure Dad doesn't beat up on Gowan too hard. It wasn't his fault."

The wolf glanced up. "Care to enlighten me?"

"No."

He shrugged and ripped off another hunk of his meat before continuing. "But there's more it. The hunters were able to gain access to the location your attacker shot from. It was a wolf who fired the gun. The alpha is not pleased. Most wolves are employed by the hunters. And we know for a fact the scent we picked up was not one of the hunters. A ring has been set up around the city. No one gets in or out without being checked. We know your attacker is still in V-town."

I was just about to respond with something along the lines of the hunters not being a military... or my personal body guard for that matter, when a commotion broke out on the other side of the diner.

This was a blue collar place, just about every class and species here. I couldn't make out what was being said, but the volume was raising fast enough for me to know something was wrong.

I could see my police guards scrambling at the door, but there was enough of a line up that they couldn't get people out of the way. Reynold put down his food and brushed his claws on his fur.

"I think it's time we left, Tommy."

Sliding a couple of coins on the counter, I stood up. Too bad I wasn't fast enough.

The argument that had been growing spilled over. And like a spark to a puddle of gasoline, it was aflame in only seconds.

I couldn't see who threw the first punch, but the battle spread. The only clear lines were by species. People who had been sitting together calmly enough moments before were now at each others throats. Even my police guards were being dragged into it as they tried to restore order and fight their way towards me.

Holding my ground, I pushed Reynold back when he tried to strike out at a rabbit who ventured too close to us.

Squinting my eyes, I tried to get a clear look at where the battle had started. There were canines there, and felines, even a few reptiles and even humans.

I still couldn't tell who had started it all.

A moment later a howl went up from one of my police dogs. It wasn't a cry of pain, but a call for help. A moment later it was joined by all the others.

The howl was haunting. I'm sure it had been designed that way. It didn't stop the fight, but it made no too few people turn to see what was going on.

There must be a police station not too far away, for a moment later the cry was answered by many, many more howls.

The initial cry hadn't been *that* frightening, but the sound of a good fifty police dogs coming this way was enough to shake the crowd.

The dynamic of the diner changed in an instant. A moment ago the police dogs had been trapped by the door, fighting to get to me. Now they controlled the door and had everyone else trapped as they tried to escape before the backup arrived.

The backup wasn't long in coming. In only seconds I could hear the oncoming footsteps.

Leaning back up against the counter, I turned to reach for the rest of my meal. It was all over now but the screaming. The police would have this under control in a few seconds.

I'd just picked up my meal when something hit me hard in the back of the head.

Bugger!

I fell forward, my jaw slamming into the counter so hard as to make me see stars.

A moment later I felt lines of fire as a set of claws ripped up my back. I know the sound of flesh tearing. It sounds exactly like ripping silk.

I could just see Renyold from the corner of my eye, he was leaping towards someone behind me.

Gathering as much sense as I could, I reached forward and pulled myself over the counter to fall bonelessly to the other side.

The cuts in my back were deep. I could feel the blood already dripping from them.

Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself. Popping my head back over the counter, I saw Reynold claw to claw and tooth to tooth with another wolf. This one had red fur.

For a moment I couldn't smell anything but the scent of food and the stink of adrenaline from the brawl. Then the scent of the red furred wolf came to me and the red of his fur was all I saw.

This was the wolf who had vandalized my home.

The pain of my wounds fell away as I launched myself over the counter to land flat on the bugger.

In the stretch of a heartbeat I was inches from having my fangs around the wolf.

First he fought frantically, trying to force me away, but the moment he saw my face a smile spread across his lips.

I made it my mission in life to rip those lips from his face.

He was too strong for me to get my fangs around his neck, both his hands were holding me back. Instead I lashed out with my claws. Reaching forward, I raked my hands down his face with all the vengeance I could channel.

Four parallel rivulets of crimson erupted from the bugger's face as my claws passed. For just a moment I watched in horror as my index finger tugged at his eyeball, catching and popping it open. The jelly within soon followed the blood in spewing forth to stain his face.

And yet the smile on the red furred wolf's lips never faltered.

I was just about to scream in triumph. There was no way the wolf would be able to keep to the fight with a wound like that.

And then it began to disappear.

I'd never had the chance to see regeneration work its magic on another. Less than one in a thousand wolves are born with it, and I'm unique with the speed it operates for me.

My muscles went slack as I watched the gashes on my opponent's face reverse course and seal up in a matter of seconds.

Even his eye reformed, flawless and perfect, in less than five heartbeats.

It would have taken me the better part of a day to do the same.

The smile I so desperately wanted to rip away only grew.

“So sad, little beast. You’ve never had to step up against your equal before, have you?” The wolf’s voice had a long and lazy drawl to it, like he hadn’t a care in the world. “Now you’ll simply need to come to understand.”

With that he forced me backwards like I weighed no more than a feather. I felt the vertebrae in my spine pop as I crashed against the counter.

The wolf raised his hand to slash down at me with his long, pale claws.

And he was met an instant later from the strike as Reynold hit him broadside.

The two of them went down to the floor, slashing and snapping. I heard a pained yip come from Reynold.

I only had a second to watch them before my head cleared enough for me to rejoin the fray.

Reynold is one of the finest fighters I’ve ever encountered, but the red furred wolf... he was different.

Reynold fought like a hunter. The other wolf didn’t. I’d never seen one who fought like him. He fought like he’d studied every technique ever developed, and some I’ve never seen.

And he fought without a care as to his opponent.

Even a hunter fights in such a way as to not cause excess pain in the one he kills. This wolf seemed to delight in it.

Diving into the battle myself, I could see my police guard just now closing in on us. The rest of the brawl had died away, now we were the only focus.

Reynold had a long gash down his arm and another across his gut. Unlike me – and our opponent – Reynold didn’t have the benefit of regeneration.

Reaching down with my claws, I closed them around one of the red furred wolf’s ears. And I pulled. It came free a second later with the wet sound of ripping meat.

I almost found it appetizing.

“You bastard!” The scream of pain that came from the wolf nearly shook the walls. He turned to face me before looking over my shoulder to see the army of police dogs that stood there.

No more words escaped the wolf. He dropped Reynold to the floor and ran.

Jumping to my feet, I followed him as best I could.

This wolf was fast. Fast as English fast.

He tore through the kitchen, pulling down whatever he could behind him to slow me and the dogs.

Across the street, the wolf dived through an alleyway, we were no more than a heartbeat behind him.

A grim smile crossed my face as he dove into a dilapidated government building.

We had him now.

I knew from personal experience that buildings like this were positively byzantine. They had been constructed before the Cataclysm, and the labyrinth of rooms and hallways within were enough to confuse *anyone*, even those who worked there daily. I’d had to tour enough of these places while I was mayor to know.

“Spread out!” I called breathless to the dogs as we entered in behind the wolf.

I did my best to follow the red fur through the building, but I lost him in a half dozen twists and turns. I wasn’t too worried. There were enough dogs pouring into the building now that we’d catch him cowering in whatever dead end he found himself in.

Or at least that was the plan. An hour later I stormed out of the building.

This was just short of impossible! A tracker unit had arrived to sniff the wolf out. They followed his scent from the turn I'd lost him unerringly to the *one and only* back exit. He hadn't made a single wrong turn! There had been a dozen intersections and switchbacks between him and that door *and he'd still found it*.

I was about ready to tear something apart.

Back at the diner, the police had already collected the ear I'd liberated from the wolf. So far as I could tell no one was able to identify it.

I should be confident now that the police had my attacker's scent. Somehow... I was starting to think this particular bugger had a few more tricks up this sleeve.

Looking for Reynold, the dogs told me that he'd been sent to the nearby hospital for treatment. His wounds weren't life threatening, but he wouldn't be hunting for a while.

And I expected he'd be cursing my name that entire time.

The police dogs that guarded me wouldn't peel off until I stepped into the lobby of the apartment.

Someone must have run ahead. Jon was waiting for me, a nervous tick pulling at his ear.

"Sir." He didn't rush up and check me for wounds, but I could see him looking over me, cataloguing what was left from my fight with the red fur.

I nodded back. "Jon. I assume you've already gotten the story."

He nodded. "Yes, Sir. From here on out it should be an open and shut case. The government holds rather extensive records on all citizens born with regeneration. It was started over seventy-five years ago. We'll have your attacker listed. We'll find him, Sir." An uncharacteristic growl slipped into his voice. "We'll find him and we'll drag him out by his entrails and make... him... pay."

I turned and walked from Jon without another word.

My hands were shaking.

Up in the apartment, Rebecca wasn't back yet.

Thankfully, the scent of the red haired wolf was gone now. I couldn't pick up a single whiff of it. That fact alone helped set me at ease.

Opening the closet door, I dug to the bottom of the pile of random clothes there to drag out the box with the wedding dress in it.

Glancing around like a guilty pup with his hand in the treat jar, I yanked off the top of the box.

The dress lay inside, exactly as I'd left it. Not a single frill or ruffle was out of place.

Gods, it made me want to puke.

Running a claw down it, it occurred to me just how easy it would be to rip the gods ugly dress to shreds *right now*.

There was no one to see me. I could destroy it right now, throw it out of my life like it never existed and call this whole marriage off.

I would never leave Rebecca, I loved her from the bottom of my heart, but I could call the marriage off and just live with her like my parents had lived together.

The thought was so overwhelming that I very nearly did it right then and there. My claw was already pressed into the fabric of the dress hard enough to leave a hole.

No. I'd promised that we'd been married. It had been for all the wrong reasons, but I'd promised.

I'd given her the ring. I'd never ask for it back. And she'd given me the scar around my own finger in return. I'd never be without that.