

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 7: Modern Love Walks Beside Me

I'd dozed off for a few moments when I heard the door to the apartment click open. The sound of feet on the floor told me that those coming were friends.

Wait... *those*?

Forcing the last of the wool from my brain, I sat up from where I lay on the thin blankets that spread across the floor in the bedroom. We still didn't have any replacement furniture.

I was a touch more on guard than I wanted to be as I stepped into the main room. I recognized the booted footsteps of Rebecca, but I was still too asleep to place the clicking claws of who were with her.

I needn't have worried. Well, I had to catch the bag of takeout food that was hurled at my head, but the lion who did the hurling was no threat to me.

"Mate." English grinned. "I saw the Lass out pounding the street. Told her I just had to come and see you after what I heard happened today."

I groaned. "Does the whole city know?"

Rebecca stepped up to me after first setting her bags of food on the floor. She didn't say anything as she circled her arms around me, but I could feel her unobtrusively checking me for any wounds.

"Pretty much, Mate. Folks are starting pools on how long it's going to be before the next attempt on your life. Though," He grinned, "I've heard the odds on you actually *dieing* in the near future are pretty low. Folks haven't forgotten just how much you survived back during the election."

The lion didn't wait before ripping open the bag he still held. My nose twitched when I picked up the scent of cooked chicken.

"What did the two of you pick up?" I asked as I pulled open my own bag. "I know it can't be *that* bad if English let you buy it."

Checking the logo on the boxes I held, they had the name of some Chinese place I couldn't pronounce.

"Babe," I looked up to her with pleading eyes, "Please tell me you didn't just get human food. You know I don't care for that cooked stuff."

She reached up to tweak my nose. "You can afford to try something new once in a while,

Wolfy. You know, it'll put hair on your chest and manly things like that." She ran her hands through the fur of my chest with a giggle.

I rolled my eyes. "First time I've ever heard someone say I need *that*, Babe." I returned the gesture by running my hands through her shoulder length hair.

I was just about ready to move on to the next step when a cough from English disturbed us. He'd already managed to eat his way through half a bag of take out.

"You should try this rather than getting it on, Mate." He grinned evilly, "It's not half bad."

Dinner went over well enough. I still preferred my meat raw, but the beef chow mein wasn't half bad. The portions of meat were small, but mixing them up with the rice made them stretch further.

The conversation was light. Neither Rebecca or English seemed to want to talk about what had happened to *me* today. English, however, was more than happy to talk about his own exploits.

Seems I hadn't been the only one to spend some time in the hospital lately.

He'd been off on another hunt – sans partner – and managed to get himself in a scrape. The battle had left him with a twisted elbow.

I was a bit surprised to be honest, I can't ever remember a time that English had walked away from a hunt with anything more than a scratch.

"Don't give me that wide-eyed stare, Mate. I may not have the grey hair that you wolves get, but I'm not as young as you. I've got to have twenty years on you, eh?"

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. "Really? You're fifty?"

He glanced away. "Well, perhaps, but I'm closer than I might like to admit, Lass. It's only going to be a matter of time before I have to trade in my claws for a desk job." He gave me a dirty look, "And sooner if I don't have a spry little partner to rely on."

I let out a sigh. "Not again. Don't try to guilt trip me, you poof-tailed cat. You know I'll always be here if you need me, but it's kinda hard to hunt when I've got *yet another* killer trying to rip my tail off."

He snorted. "Don't you worry about it so much, Mate." He lifted his lips for just a split second in a fearsome display that nearly made me lose my appetite. "I'm making it well known to every nee'er do well that anyone who hurts you won't just have the police to worry about." He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing, "We both know what the constabulary are capable of, but *I* can do much worse. Never doubt me, Tommy. *I can do far worse.*"

Dinner was over soon after. I just couldn't seem to eat all that much more.

The evening was still young when we finished, day light still abound outside. I, quite frankly, was more than ready to call it a day, but English would have none of it.

The lion just short of dragged us down the hall. Anyone who didn't know him would have thought it a kidnapping. Thankfully, the police dogs knew us well enough to simply stand aside and watch.

Passing Jon's office, he looked more than a little hesitant to let us leave his watchful eye. I think the only reason he finally relented and waved us on was English's presence.

There were few people in the city who could fight Jon to a standstill. English was one of them.

I was just about to go wandering down a random street when English's large golden paw settled over my shoulder.

"Nada, Mae. How about I choose the direction for once?"

I wasn't in much of a position to argue, seeing he had me firmly in his grasp. I simply reached

out for Rebecca and we started walking.

"It's strange, Wolfy," Rebecca's voice was soft beside me in the calm evening breeze, "I'm not nearly as well known as you are, but people still seem to react to me when I walk down the street."

I glanced over to her, "Really, Babe?"

She shrugged. "Sure. Most people still don't know who I am, but every so often I get the most random of person recognizing me. Most of them treat me almost like royalty. It's..." She shivered slightly, "A bit disconcerting. But it's better than those who don't care for me so much."

My ears perked up. From behind me I could also feel English tense.

"Most who recognize me are pleasant enough, but there's always got to be those who arn't." She worked up a smile from somewhere, "We haven't gotten this far in life, Wolfy, without toughening ourselves to shrug off the occasional slur or spit."

I bristled until she laid a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, Wolfy. It's just life."

"And speaking of life, Mates," English turned down another street, "See anything familiar?"

I nearly groaned.

Smith's tailor shop was dead ahead.

"No." I dug my claws into the pavement and refused to take another step. "No. No. No. There is no bloody way I'm getting another suit." I looked up at the lion, "There's nothing you can say that will get me in there."

English paused for a moment before raising an eye ridge and turning to Rebecca.

"Think you could give us boys a little time, Lass? Feels like it's time for some jock-talk, yeah?"

Rebecca leaned forward to give me a quick kiss on the cheek before turning and disappearing into Smith's shop. I could just vaguely hear her muttering something about not having enough testosterone before the door clicked closed.

English gave my guard dogs a glare and they two backed off, disappearing into the slowly gathering shadows. I had no doubt they were still about, but they had the manners to keep from sight.

The only dog I could still see was a block down, standing under a street lamp.

"Pull up a nice square of concrete, Mate." The lion lowered himself to the ground, wrapping his tail around him as he leaned against the nondescript wooden wall of Smith's shop. "I'm thinking we could do with a bit of a lip wag."

Well, there was one positive sign. The thicker English's accent got the more coy he'd become. He might want to figure me out, but at least he wasn't about to try and rip my lungs out. I only had to worry about that when his accent slipped away to nothing.

Letting out a long breath, I settled down next to him. I didn't have a scrap of fat left on my body after the number of regenerations I'd had to put my body through, I could feel the bones of my hips settle hard against the stone.

Setting my head back against the wall, I looked up to the sky.

"You know, English, that's one of the things I miss about being out in the forests."

"What's that, Mate?" His voice was soft.

"The stars." I squinted and tried to see past the ever present clouds that blanketed V-town.

"When we were in Alberta we had nothing but clear skies. I can hardly remember a night since we got back that I've been able to go star gazing. It's like we're trapped under this blanket of fog, unable to see the wider world." I barked out a laugh, "Do you realize that we're, with the exception of the dogs and wolves that traced our path to Edmonton, the most well travelled men in the city?"

He snorted. "You might be in the better ranks, Mate," A smile tinged his words, "But you seem to forget who you're talking to. I walked further by the time I was twenty than you've yet to do. I don't

hold it against you, Mate, but you're a downright homebody compared to me.” He glanced away, “Even Sayer saw a bit of travel in his younger days. People tend to have a little more behind them than you think. No everyone tells their whole life story when you first meet them, eh?” Now he did laugh, “Except for me, Mate. You know a good half of my life by now. Like I said, Mate, you'll be my best friend until the day I die. I don't have any choice – you know too much.”

He reached an arm out over my shoulders. For a moment it almost felt as crushing as my Dad's used to. His, however, held a warning that my father's never had. The needle sharp pinpricks of his claws penetrated my pelt to rest ever so softly on my flesh. They were a warning both to me and to anyone who might have designs to harm me.

“Now then, Mate,” he continued like this was nothing more than a shot at the wind, “On to what we're here for. I think we have to have a talk about this upcoming date on your calendar. You've got Jon working all hours of the day, the Lass is all worked up over it, and I'm getting enough heartburn to start thinking this is *my* wedding. The question, Mate, is what are *you* going to do about it?”

I never moved my eyes from the sky. The clouds had just cleared enough that I got a split second view of the half moon peeking through before it was gone again.

“English, everyone's asking me this again and again.” The slightest snarl slipped into my voice before I pushed it back. “I've told the world that I'm going to marry Rebecca. We're already mated. *This shouldn't be such a big deal.* The entire city already knows we're together. This is just some antiquated human custom to announce it officially. I'm not getting cold feet, I swear, *I just want it over with.*” I laughed, “And it would be nice if people stopped trying to kill me.”

“That too, Mate.” The lion agreed. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He matched me staring up at the sky. His mane and fur was so regal, he should have been mayor rather than I.

“Do you think I did the right thing, English?”

He started slightly. “The Lass? Well, I--”

“No,” I cut him off, “Not Rebecca. I *know* I did that right... well, I ended up where I needed to be. I mean coming back to V-town. We left across the Rockies. It wasn't exactly the easiest thing we ever did, but... it felt good when we were walking. Over the mountains, across the prairies. Sure there were some problems, but...”

He snorted. I could hear more than just annoyance in that sound.

“There were more than *problems*, Mate. Don't you forget that she-devil.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “Yeah. But other than her. Being all alone, exploring the country, being by ourselves. Some days I'm just not sure we ever should have come back.”

English let out a breath heavy enough to ruffle my fur. “Tommy, don't talk like that. Don't even start. This hasn't been the easiest run for *either* of us. You know we've both had to deal with problems that we'd rather have left buried, but look what we came out of it with. The city was falling apart. And,” He turned, levelling me a glare, “It wasn't *your* fault that it all started. You killed VanDerhoom, but the roots extend far deeper. That was the tipping point, but it would have happened eventually even if you hadn't been born. What we don't know, Tommy, is if the city would have been able to make it though if not for us, for you.”

He paused for a long moment, returning his eyes to the sky before speaking again. “Sayer did get one thing right. There aren't any people in the city who would have been able to pull off what you did, Tommy. You think you're just a lame pup? How many lame pups have the genetics of the hunter's alpha? How many of them are able to cower the police force into submission, forge a lasting alliance with the humans and wrangle the government with their own laws and paperwork? You may not be the only of your kind, but you are a one in a million. And,” He worked a grin to his lips, “We've got a blasted slight fewer than a million people here in V-town.”

I laughed. "Fine. So coming back wasn't that bad a call. But what about now? Have I outlived my usefulness? I haven't done anything worthwhile since leaving the government."

That got me a cuff to the back of the head from the lion's paw.

"And what am I, Tommy? Offal? You're my partner and my friend. You've helped keep me alive on no too few hunts. And, dare I say, you're continued devotion for the Lass has in it's self been enough of an example to everyone else that inter-species can work. You never know, Tommy, that alone could be enough to get some folks after you. Not everyone *wants* V-town to work. Your marriage may just be the symbol they don't want to see. Once you do it the race wars might finally begin to die down for real. We won, but now you've got to accept their surrender."

It was only after he stopped speaking and we could hear the sounds of the city at dusk that I realized he hadn't called me 'Mate' even once the entire conversation.

His accent had been swept so cleanly away that I hadn't even noticed it go.

"There's one more thing, English." I turned to him. He still stared up to the sky. "I never did have the chance to ask you." I cleared my throat and tried to sound official, put on my 'mayor's voice'. "Would you be my best man? I couldn't think of anyone better than you."

A wide smile slowly spread across his face. It showed off all of his many teeth, but there was no threat in it.

"I'd be honoured, Mate." He let out a long breath, "I'm sure you could think of *someone* better than I, but I'd be honoured to anyway. But," He turned, wagging a finger in front of my nose, "If I'm to be involved in this I need to have some say in the proceedings."

I rolled my eyes.

"I'm going to regret this, but fine. You're in."

"Good. Smart choice, Mate." If anything his smile grew wider. "And my first executive decision is that we're going to get you in Smith's shop. You may not be crazy for the idea, but we need to dress you up in *something*. I know wolves like you, this will be your one and only wedding day. Let's make sure that while everyone else's eyes are on the Lass she'll have something to look at while she walks up the aisle."

It was with great annoyance, and the lion's oversized arm over my shoulders that I stepped into Smith's store.

And you know what, I don't think a single thing had changed since I was last here with Rebecca and Amstys.

"Co'ce, Smith!" English's weight dropped from my shoulder as soon as the door was securely closed behind us. The lion rushed forward to break into Smith and Rebecca's conversation as he lifted the old as dirt fox into an embrace.

"It's good to see you again, my son." The words came sputtered and coughed from Smith's lips.

I'd never met English's real parents – they were dead long before I was born – but Smith was the closest thing the lion had to family in V-town. Smith, apparently, had taken the lion in when he'd stumbled from his ship.

"It's been a long time, my son." The tone of fatherly affection was plain in the fox's voice as he struggled in the bear hug. "I hear you've pulled some strings and arranged for my humble shop to tailor the wedding of the decade."

"Humble? I think not, Smith." I stepped forward and nodded to the fox. "You forget that I've been here before. I know your prices. Your suits are about as humble as a diamond ring."

A sly smile spread across Smith's lips. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just a humble little tailor doing my best to eek my way through life by providing quality suites to

discerning customers. I assure you, my prices are only what they are because so few men care about their appearances in this heathen of a city.”

I would have reached out and cuffed the fox's greying ear, but I was afraid if I did I might just take off his skeletal head.

“So,” I asked with a growl, “Do you think you can arrange me something for the wedding? I'm not really looking for anything fancy, I just--”

“Yes, yes,” In the blink of an eye Smith had extracted himself from English's hold and grasped me by the hand. The fox normally moved at a decrepit hobble, but he dropped twenty years whenever the prospect of money came up.

The next two hours weren't the worst of my life, but I swear to the gods they were up there.

I always thought Smith had been anal retentive with his suits before, but all the previous suits had either been for me personally or for day to day use as the mayor. This was a suit that, according to him, was going to be seen by thousands on the day of the wedding.

I wasn't so sure about that.

He remeasured me from scratch, dragging his measuring tape over every square inch of my body. Some parts more private than others.

At least that was the easy bit. I didn't have to move when he measured me, in fact he was more than happy I stayed stone still. It was when he started trying me out in different suits that the horror really began.

I'd gotten a bit more used to wearing suits during my time as mayor, but even then I'd tried to go fur out as often as possible. Wearing a well tailored suit was actually easy enough. One's fur tended to lay flat if the suit fit right, but there was no way to get in and out of a suit without rubbing your fur the wrong way.

And after about three dozen suits it felt like my skin had been gone over with sand paper. At least this time Smith had a better understanding of my sense of style – or lack thereof – he kept the emerald green and sapphire blue monstrosities to himself. Everything we went through consisted of clean lines and simple fabrics.

Even then it was just a matter of time before I lost my patience.

“No more.” I pulled off the last coat and pressed it into the fox's arms. “That's it, Smith, I mean it. No more. I know you're trying to be helpful, but I *really* don't want to be wearing a suit to this. I have enough on my mind already, I don't need yet another thing making me feel unnatural.”

The sputtering that came forth from the fox was enough to make me smile even after the last few hours.

“Tommy! But you just won't look professional...”

I grinned, showing my teeth. “That's the whole point. This is *my* wedding. This is *Rebecca's* wedding. This is *not* the city's wedding. I don't need to look professional. And more than that, I don't *want* to. I want to be me. *I'm* the one she's marrying, not some produced figment, some gaudy lie.”

The fox simply stood and stared at me for a moment in the dark and cramped back room of the shop.

“So be it, my son. The gods help you, so be it.” He set the coat I'd handed him carefully back on a mannequin. “But you can't deny an old man like me from at least giving you something.”

“What?” I asked guardedly.

“Now where did I put that?” The fox bent over ever so slowly to search through a trunk that had been pushed up under the staircase. I could hear each and every one of his vertebrae pop as he moved.

"Ah, here it is." A slight wheeze escaped his lips as he tried to straighten back up. "A hand if you would, my son."

Taking Smith gently by the shoulder, I helped him back up. In the fox's withered fingers was clutched a thick leather belt.

"Here you are, my son." He held the belt out to me, "Think of it as a gift." His teeth gritted, "No charge. I meant it for that cad lion when he got married, but it's plain as day that will never come. This was given to me by my father when I emigrated from Scotland."

The belt was a dark brown, almost a foot tall and a quarter inch thick. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The closest thing I could compare it to was a kidney belt.

"It's a bit of an idiosyncratic tradition to my family, Tommy." He closed his eyes for a moment, wiping away a tear. "I wore it at my own wedding so many years ago, may her heart rest in peace." He ran a hand gently down the soft leather. Only now could I see the symbols carved in it.

"It's rune script, Tommy." The fox smiled. "No one can read it anymore, not even I. All I know how to do is translate a couple's names and the date of their marriage. I'd be honoured to add you to the inscription."

Squinting, I could see over a dozen lines on the belt.

"I'd be honoured, Smith." Reaching out, I pulled the fox into a soft hug. "Thank you."

Leaving the belt in the back shop to be worked on, Smith and I returned to the front room where English and Rebecca waited. The two of them were talking, but they fell silent as soon as we entered.

"Mate! Where's your suit? Smith," English turned to the fox, "Don't say you failed me!"

Smith scowled. "Don't you talk down to me you tomcat. Tommy and I have come to an understanding. One that you and I, may I remind you, were never able to. But," He moderated his voice, turning to Rebecca, "I've heard that you've already had your wedding dress made for you, my dear."

Rebecca cast her eyes down for a moment, biting her lip before speaking. "Yes. It was made – and donated – by one of the finest dress makers in the city. We're fortunate to have it."

I snorted.

"Yes, I've heard." Smith stepped up to her, taking her hand in both of his, "The Racconti dress makers. They're well known and highly prized." The fox's lips pulled up, "And they're hacks. I've seen this dress, it was paraded up and down before it was sent to you. The abomination is as ugly as sin. You have my condolences, my dear."

I think we were all in stunned shock of Smith's frank opinion.

It wasn't until English broke out laughing that the mood shattered.

"Smith, you dog," He slapped the fox on the back hard enough to send the frail creature stumbling forward, "You always were opinionated in woman's fashions weren't you? Have you *ever* encountered a dress you did agree with?"

The fox slowly straightened and adjusted the glasses that sat on the end of his narrow mussel. "Of course I have, you dolt. *The ones I've made*. They're the only ones worth mentioning. All the others are so much pandering to the here-today-gone-tomorrow fashions that the so called woman's tailors so use to keep their business turning like tops. There is such a thing as a 'proper fashion' and it was discovered long ago. There is no need for this constant recreation of already proven wrong bobbles and boondoggles. Create something timeless and it will last forever." The fox gave a nasty glare out the door. I had a feeling there was a dress shop across the way who's proprietor was starting to feel an itch.

"But that is not of our current concern, now is it, my son." Smith turned to English, "We have

still to decide upon *your* suit for the occasion.”

Unlike I, English followed Smith into the back room with a smile. And, also unlike I, there was no doubt that the lion would return with the perfect attire hugging him like a second pelt.

It was only once we were alone that I noticed something different about Rebecca.

“Babe,” I stepped up to her and ran my hands down her back, “Is that the same red leather jacket you wore back around when we first met?”

I couldn't quite remember it. That had been a year and a half ago, and things had been kind of hectic back then, but this looked like the same close fitting, thin red leather jacket she'd worn.

“Close, but not quite, Wolfy.” She relaxed back into my embrace. “That one was torn to shreds by Huston, remember?” I growled slightly in acknowledgement. “Smith gave me this one, just now.” She smiled. “It's the exact same type as what I used to have.”

“Looks good on you, Babe.”

Letting her go, I began pacing back and forth in the small show room of Smith's shop. I'd spent way too much time in the back with the fox, I wanted outside.

Poking my nose through the front door, I could immediately make out three police dogs in the shadows.

Well, we weren't going *that* way.

“Come on, Babe.” I took her hand and headed through the door towards the back of the building.

To my left I could hear Smith and English nattering on. The lion was parodying the fox's words, adding an even thicker Scottish accent. We pressed past without being noticed.

Edging open the back door, I couldn't see any dogs in the immediate area. That was better. I could smell their scent on the wind, they were close by, but none were in sight.

I left the door open behind us, spilling its golden light into the oncoming night as I stepped out.

“Come on, Babe, the coast is clear.” Taking her hand, we sprinted silently down the alleyway, slipping past the net of police dogs.

I'd learned my lesson the last few times I'd tried to escape without the dogs, however. We may be in a relatively safe part of V-town, but I kept my guard up none the less. We stuck to the heavy shadows as we worked our way down the road.

I was a hunter, stalking was second nature to me now, and Rebecca, having spent so long in the wilderness, wasn't far behind.

“Tell me about your parents, Babe.” I whispered as we stole through an empty but brightly lit intersection.

She nearly tripped and fell as I spoke. In an instant I was beneath her, gathering her in my arms and carrying her along.

A few steps later I set her back down.

“You've never really asked about my family before, Tommy.” There was little emotion to her voice, and what slipped through was held firmly in check.

I shrugged as we pressed north-west.

“Never really had a reason to, Babe. You said they were all dead, right? Just figured I should know who I'm about to marry, eh?” I worked up a smile.

A few more steps and the thick trees of Stanley Park loomed in front of us. We dove into them without a second thought.

“I don't really know where to start, Tommy...”

Slowing, I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her. “Then how about at the beginning? You're from Salt Spring Island, aren't you?”

We slowed even more as the branches of the trees wove around us. Footing was treacherous in the wan light.

"Yeah." Despite what I'd expected her voice was soft and monotone, like each word was an effort. I'd thought she'd enjoy the chance to talk about herself for once, but it seemed I was wrong. "I was born on a small farm outside of Fulford. Salt Spring is a nice enough place, Tommy. There aren't many people on the whole island, only a few thousand. But they're missing one thing."

She paused as we wound our way to a river running through the park. Neither of us said a word as I settled against a tree, her in my lap.

"Every single man, woman, and child on Salt Spring was human. No exceptions. I lived the first ten years of my life not even knowing that there was anything but. Don't get me wrong, we had animals, but that's all they were. Animals. Not people like you. It was only one day that I was wandering in Fulford Harbour that I saw a ship with people on it. They weren't people like I'd ever seen before."

"They'd come to trade. They heard that there was a town on the island and wanted to see if they could sell their goods. They were still out in a long boat in the harbour, the men of the town met them out there, they wouldn't let them any closer. I could barely see who – or what – they were. For a long time I thought I might be dreaming."

"I asked my parents about them that night. They didn't have much to say. They'd been born on the island too. All they would tell me is that it was a wide world out there and people were strange. They told me I should be happy with my life on the island and not ask for more."

"It was a good life, Tommy, don't get me wrong, but it was... well, a little bit boring. Say what you will for farm life, but there are only so many years you can keep tending to the crops and milking the cows."

"A couple of years later, I must have been about sixteen, the strange men and women came again. Well, that's probably not true. I never really saw the first group of people, and these ones were likely unrelated. All I knew is that they weren't human and they weren't like any animals I'd ever seen."

"There was no more than a half dozen of them, they came overland from the east. They must have come ashore on the other side of the island and walked to town."

"Not a single person knew what to do with them. I know it sounds odd to say this to you, Tommy, but *they weren't human*. No one on the island had ever left in their lives, no one had ever seen a non-human face to face. It would be like a rock standing up and speaking to you."

"The village elders isolated the visitors in a building to keep the rest of us away from them. It was only listening to whispered stories that I learned these people were from the mainland. I still didn't know at the time what was going on, but my friends and I decided to find out."

"There was three of us. Me, and my best friends Noreen and Dale. We made the decision that we were going to speak to the outsiders. The elders had them cooped up at the only inn in town. We had to see them."

"We didn't even bother trying to get in directly. No one was allowed to speak to them, so the three of us waited for nightfall to sneak in."

"It was silly what we were doing, silly and stupid. No one knew who these people were, they could be killers on the run for all we knew. It didn't matter. That night the three of us stole from our beds and slunk to the town inn."

"It wasn't that hard to get to them. The town was too small to have a police force, or even post a guard. The visitors had been placed in a room and the door locked from the outside. We simply unlocked it and walked in."

"It would be an understatement to say we were unprepared for what we found. I'd only seen non-humans once, from a distance, and my friends had never. We nearly screamed when the first of them woke and turned his head to us. He was a wolf."

Rebecca paused for a moment and turned in my lap to face me.

"He didn't look much like you, Tommy. His fur was a patchy black and red, and he looked like he had missed a few meals. His companions were a weasel and a rat."

"We didn't even get a chance to speak before my friend Noreen turned and ran back to her house. It was only good fortune she didn't tell on us."

"We didn't have much of a chance to speak, but I do remember the wolf's first words. 'Aren't you a little young to be up at this hour of the night? Your parents must be worried for you.' That was the moment I realized this wolf wasn't simply a wolf. He was a man."

"I asked him a few questions and he asked me a few in return. He seemed most interested in the fact that there wasn't a single non-human on the island. I learned from him that he was from the mainland, a place called Vancouver. The conversation was cut short when I heard someone walking in the street nearby. I closed the door and ran back home, Dale close on my heels."

"It wasn't until the next morning I realized that I never relocked the door."

"I could hardly get out of bed the next morning. If it wasn't for my friends who had come with me I would have thought the entire thing a dream."

"The three outsiders stayed with us for another few days, never being permitted to leave the room they had been confined to. After that the village elders let them go, but only with the promise that they never return. A bargain was struck, however, that humans from the mainland could come to the island to trade, but only humans."

"That was, to be honest, the last I thought of the mainland for a couple of years. It was when I was eighteen my mother was struck with a fever. It lasted for months, my father and I watched her waste away as we did everything we could to save her. We missed planting that year because we cared too much for her to ever leave her side."

"All of our efforts were useless in the end, Tommy. My mother died and we buried her in the soft summer soil next to the farm yard."

"That was the day that my father and I decided we couldn't stay on Salt Spring Island. The farm wasn't going to survive no matter what we did, and without my Mom there was little holding us there."

"There were no rules *per say* about emigration from Salt Spring. Only humans were allowed on the island, but anyone could leave. So that's what we did. We sold everything we had and hopped the next trading ship to the mainland. It berthed in Vancouver, V-town, soon after."

"Stepping off the boat into V-town was like entering another world. I don't have words to describe it, Tommy. It was simply like nothing we could ever have imagined. Not only were we encountering non-humans up close for the first time, but this was the first time we'd ever been in a *city*. The largest town on Salt Spring was only a hundred or so people. V-town was..."

She paused for a moment and looked at me again.

"It was like a kingdom from a fairytale story book. That's it. That's how to describe it. My father and I, we felt like adventurers in a bedtime story."

She chuckled to herself for a moment before snuggling back into my fur and pulling my arms around her.

"The magic wore off pretty quick though. Neither of us had anything but what we carried on our backs. We had a few V-town coins that we managed to get from the traders who brought us here, but that was it. We didn't know a soul and we didn't have a place to stay." I felt a shiver pass through her. "We did what it took to make ends meet. I'm not ashamed to say we begged, borrowed, and

outright stole whatever it took to get by.”

“It was a couple of years later that we finally began settling in. There wasn't a huge human population in town, but they were welcoming enough to us once we found them. If it wasn't for their generosity we never would have been able to get on our feet.”

The shiver passed through her body again. “And then those very people who had brought us in, invited us into their homes, began to disappear. It took us months, years even, to realize what was happening, but we were disappearing.”

“And then,” She forced a smile to her lips, “Then you happened.”

I leaned forward to lick the tip of her ear. “You know, Babe, there's one thing I never have found out about you.” I pulled her closer, “I'm about to marry you and I don't even know your last name. You can't tell me they don't use last names on Salt Spring Island.”

She snorted. “Of course we do. We're not *that* small. I just never really thought it was that big of a deal. I don't have any family left, no real relatives back on the island, and certainly no one I ever expect to meet again.”

“What is it, Babe?” I pressed her on.

She didn't bother to turn to me when she spoke. She simply shrugged like it was truly no big deal.

“McCarthy.”

“Oh.” I'd been hoping that after all this her family would be some great and grand revelation. Nope, guess not. Her last name meant nothing to me.

We sat in the forest for a time. Neither of us had watches, but it couldn't have been more than an hour. At long last we stood up. There was only so long we could stay here. Smith and English, not to mention the police dogs, were likely wondering where we were.

Walking south, back out of Stanley Park, we reentered the upper scale residential district. On the other side of the road I could see a young family going for a late night walk. There was a Panther mother, a human father, and their panther child. They looked about as happy and content as I could imagine any family being.

The child was only just old enough to walk. Each parent held one of his hands, helping him leap the cracks in the concrete as he giggled and bounced.

“So is that how you see us, Babe?” I asked.

She shook her head and pulled my arm over her shoulder.

“Perhaps someday, Wolfy. I'm not really the maternal type just yet.” She paused for a moment, “I guess it could happen someday, but I only just got you back from working fourteen hour days at the government. I want some time to have you to myself before I have to share you with any children. Think of me as greedy.”

“You, Babe? Never.”

The walk back to Smith's shop was more difficult than the one out had been. For the love of the gods, it looked like they'd doubled the number of dogs out here.

At long last, after more than a few detours to get around the tightened security, Rebecca and I were again on Smith's back stoop. He'd never closed the door.

Two steps in and the door closed silently behind us.

“We'd thought you'd never get here, Mate.” English stood behind us. There was no evince of a suit anywhere on him. No matter what Smith might have put him through the lion was back in nothing but his pelt and a belt.

“What's going on, buddy?” I asked, “Looks like the dogs are getting paranoid again.”

He huffed out a breath and rolled his eyes. “Give me strength, Mate. They won't tell me a word. All I know is that they want you back safely in their tender meat hooks. It started about twenty minutes ago. Something's up. Again. Jon's not here, so there's no one for me to pump for info.”

“Wonderful.” I groaned, “Where's Smith?”

“Here, my son.” His voice carried from the front room. “And I'd appreciate it if you'd get these blasted dogs away from my shop. They've been sniffing around the door and tried to get in at least three times. No class.” He snorted as he raised a fine bone cup of tea to his lips. “No class at all. Don't even know how to wait when told. What's the police service coming to these days?”

Stepping out of Smith's shop, Rebecca in my arms and English a step behind, we barely got five feet from the door before my newly expanded guard closed around us like a furry shield.

It took me a moment, but I found Officer Pine working his way through the ranks to stand before me.

“What is it *this time*?” I asked, trying to keep the edge of exasperation from my voice.

“There has been a formal death threat against you, Sir.” The dog's words were so clipped I thought he was about to bite off the tip of his tongue.

“A *formal* death threat? What has all the rest of this been, *informal*?” I rolled my eyes. From behind me I could hear English chuckle.

The dog's eyes widened slightly. “I'm sorry, I don't... know, Sir. I...”

I let out a breath and patted the dog's shoulder. “Don't worry about it, Pine. Let's just head back to the apartment and call it a night. Folks have been trying to kill me for a long time. Nothing's changed.”

He cleared his throat nervously, “I'm... uh, sorry, Sir, but I have orders from Constable Oaks not to allow you to return to your apartment. He's running a fresh audit of security as a result of this latest threat.”

“Bugger.” If it had been any other dog I would have just ignored him and gone home anyway, but I trusted Jon's opinion. If he didn't want be back there, then I wouldn't go.

“Fine.” I closed my eyes for a moment before glancing over at Rebecca tiredly. “Where are we going?” I just realized that I wasn't all that disappointed not to be sleeping on the hard floor of my furnitureless apartment.

Hotel Vancouver wasn't sounding all that bad right now...

“There's been a safe house set up for you, Sir...” The dog began.

“How about another option, Mate?” English stepped forward, edging himself between the dog and I. “It's been a while since I had house guests, and,” He glanced at the dog behind him, “Only a select few know where I live. It'll be safe.”

I wasn't exactly crazy about finding out just how sparsely the police furnished their 'safe houses'.

“Sounds good to me, buddy.”

Still hand and hand with Rebecca, we set off down the dark street. It was a long walk to English's home on the outskirts of town. We'd better get moving.