

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 11: Another Meaning to 'A Shotgun Wedding'

I must have dozed off at some point. The sun was only just peeking over the horizon when next I woke.

My mother was gone, but not far. I could pick up her scent from the bedroom, laying next to my father. They were asleep.

A quick stretch and yawn and I was ready to go. I'd already been here longer than I'd planned.

Stepping out the front door I was annoyed, but not surprised, to see my police guard still waiting for me. They'd made themselves comfortable out on the sidewalk, never daring to set so much as a toe on my father's property.

Smart dogs.

"Alright," I let out a sigh as they formed up around me, "Let's go." I started out back towards the apartment.

We'd gotten about three blocks when I saw someone come around the corner ahead of us. I could tell by the way he stepped out that he'd been waiting for us to pass by.

It was Jon.

There was something off about him, but I couldn't to put my finger on it before he stepped up to the officer in charge of my guard. They exchanged a few hushed words.

It was obvious quickly enough that something wasn't quite right. I can't remember a time I'd ever seen two police dogs argue – their hierarchy is far too strict for that – but the tone of voice Jon was using to cow the other dog was akin to what I'd heard my father use when he was alpha.

I could only catch snatches of their conversation, but I did most definitely hear Jon snarl, "I am in charge of his protection. Not you. You are dismissed."

A few moments later the guards around me fell away into near single file behind their leader. They didn't, however, leave.

"Tommy." Jon stepped up to me, his lips still pulled into the snarl he spoken to the dog through. "If you'd join me." Before I even had a chance to speak he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me away down a side street.

It was only now I realized what was wrong with this picture. Jon was out of uniform.

It wasn't unknown for him, he'd spent the entire walk to Edmonton in civilian clothes, but it

wasn't common to see him like this now that we were back in the city.

"Jon, what's..."

He raised a finger to my lips as he paused for a moment and listened.

I could hear it too after a few moments. The sound of a dozen sets of paws marching, near silently, in perfect time, tracking us.

The set of Jon's ears told me he was *not* pleased.

"Come on." He took my hand again and we rushed off down another street into a busy market district.

I hadn't the slightest what was going on, but I knew for a fact that Jon was getting me good and truly lost. We dove in and around the market stalls, then in a building and out the other side. Then, just to top it off, he walked me down the top of a crumbling brick wall.

"Care to tell me what's going on here?" I asked.

For the first in a long time I saw Jon smile. Not the tight, controlled smile of a police dog, but a wide, happy grin of the domestic canine.

"We needed to give your guards the slip, Tommy. They are true officers, among the best we have. They *should* have followed my orders to go back to HQ, but they're smart enough to know this isn't standard procedure."

"Great," I rolled my eyes, "Then you care to tell me *what in all the gods bloody names is going on?*" I kicked at a stone on the road, it skittered on ahead of us and ricocheted off a wall.

"Ah," His smile winded, "But that would be telling."

I raised a hand to my brow and shook my head. "Alright, who are you and what have you done to Jon?" I couldn't help but laugh. "The Jon I know would never act like this. You're almost acting like a *normal* person."

He cocked his head slightly then laughed. I can't say I've ever heard Jon laugh before. It wasn't a wholly unpleasant sound.

I didn't get much more out of him as we dove and weaved through the streets. I thought that *I* had gotten good at avoiding the police. It was now that I realized I was a rank amateur.

Jon was able to pull me seemingly through plain sight without a single cop noticing us. I was suddenly *very* glad he was on my side.

I was just getting winded when we stepped up in front of a six story apartment building. It wasn't as nice as the place I was living, but it was head and shoulders above my old apartment. All in all it was about as nondescript as I could imagine, its drab brick walls poking unpretentiously into the air.

Jon pulled a key from the simple green vest he wore and unlocked the door, ushering me in.

Up four flights of stairs, he opened an apartment door. Glancing inside, this looked pretty much like what I'd expect of a police safe house.

"Uh, Jon? What..."

"Welcome to my home, Tommy." His voice was low, but there was pride there.

Well, looks like I just got an answer to my question 'where the heck did Jon go when he wasn't at his desk?'

Despite the near empty and general feeling of disuse in the room I worked up a smile. "Looks nice."

His ears perked up a bit. "Really? I... I don't spend much time here. I haven't had any real opportunity to, uh, build a personal life. I spend most nights at my desk."

I shook my head and laughed. "I believe you. One of these days you're going to have to get

some vacation time.”

A look of horror crossed his face for just the briefest moment before he smiled. “That's alright, I'd rather not. But,” He turned back towards the door while he swept his hand over the room, “Make yourself comfortable. I need to pick up some food.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right. Are you going to finally tell me what this is all about now?”

He stopped dead. “I thought you were kidding.” His eyes widened, “Your wedding is tomorrow this is your... err, stag party.”

I burst out laughing while Jon's ears fell.

“Seriously? A stag party? Who put you up to this?” I shook my head. “Fine, fine. I'm game. Anything to get away from the house guard.” I waved him away. “I'll wait. You go do what you need to.”

Jon disappeared a moment later, and I heard the distinct click of him locking the door after himself. I wasn't concerned. If Jon thought his place was safe enough for me to hang in for a bit then I had nothing to worry about.

I took the opportunity to indulge in my natural curiosity while he was out. I tried not to touch much, so as not to smear my scent all over the place, but I did my best to get a glance behind Jon's mask.

Frankly, I was a little disappointed.

I wasn't exactly expecting to find whips and chains... no, wait, yes I was. It took me a moment to remember the disguise English and I had seen Jon in so long ago. Where was that now? I hadn't seen him dressed like that in over a year.

Then again, there were other things I'd been hoping to find that seemed to be conspicuously absent. There were no family photos, no keepsakes lined up on the windowsills, not even a playbill from any of the shows down in the theatre district.

Well, strike that. There were a couple of photos carefully set away on an otherwise empty bookshelf. One was of Jon in a fresh and new uniform. It was a younger Jon, with a more haunted look in his eyes. It must have been his graduation day from the academy. Behind him was Sayer, the old dog still had the pips of an inspector back then.

The other picture was a bit harder to understand. I'd expected it to be of his parents or something, but rather it was *me*.

That was a little unnerving.

It had been taken just days after I'd won the election. I was there in my new suit, Rebecca in my arm and Max by my side. Even English was mugging it up for the camera behind us. Why would Jon keep *this* of all photos?

I picked it up, feeling its smooth surface under the pads of my fingers.

There was someone in the background of the photo, just barely visible in the shadows.

I could make out Jon's blue eyes staring out at me from the photo. His lips were drawn in the ruler perfect line of a police dog, but *somehow* I could tell he was smiling ear to ear. He was hardly visible in the photo, but yet he was one of us, part of the party that had won the election.

I set the photo back with a smile of my own. It took me a second look, but I was able to see more to the apartment now.

There was a chip of wood with teeth marks in it here, a tuft of fur that had been carefully placed aside there. Nothing was obvious, but I had no doubt Jon could, if asked gently enough, tell me storeys about each and every one.

I sat back in a rusty and creaking chair that had been pushed up against a breakfast table in front

of the window and looked out at the skyline.

It wasn't much of a view, despite being higher up than my apartment was, but I could see the sun and the sky. That was enough.

I was just starting to doze off when a shadow fell across my face.

"Boo!"

"Gah!" I toppled backwards in the chair only to land softly in a pair of large paws.

"How'ya mate?" English grinned down at me, showing every tooth he had.

"Don't do that!" I struggled to stand up. "How did you get in here anyway?"

He just grinned wider. "I was in here long before you, Mate. I'm the first one ol' Johnny boy collected, eh? Looks like the dog is even more paranoid than I am. He's got a vent in his bedroom that hides the scent of whosoever's in there. I just laid low and waited for you to come on in." He gave my nose a flick before finally letting me go. "You need to be more careful, Mate. Anyone could have been hiding here for you. Just be glad it was me."

"Yeah, yeah. Since when did you start calling Jon 'Johnny boy'?" I pushed my chair back upright and sat down, making sure not to overbalance this time.

The lion just shrugged as he pulled up another chair. It groaned under his bulk. "Ever since he started pulling that stick out from under his tail every now and then, eh, Mate? He's still a ponce in my book, but he's a reforming ponce."

"Anyway," He looped his arm over my shoulders, "You had no idea how boring it was waiting for you, Mate. There's *nothing* in this place. You'd think the woof would have accumulated *something* since moving in. It smells like he's been here for years, but there's nothing to show for it."

I laughed as I glanced once again around the room, seeing all the small things that Jon had stashed away in plain sight. "Yeah, right. Nothing at all."

English slapped me on the back as he rested his feet on the table. "Exactly, Mate! The only things to be found in the closet were a dozen uniforms, all identical! That vest he's wearing must be the only one he owns. Can't even find the old costume he used to wear, must keep it in the powder room back at the station."

I was about to reply when I heard the click of claws in the hallway outside. There were two sets of foot steps. One was tight and measured. Jon. Even out of uniform he couldn't disguise his stride.

The other set were heavy, but muffled. They clicked sharper than Jon's. The claws on those feet had yet to be properly worn down by the city's asphalt streets.

The door clicked open and I was near instantly engulfed in a bear hug. I never even got a chance to see the salt and pepper streak that flew across the room at me. I was just lucky Amstys' momentum didn't send the both of us flying out the window.

"It's good to see you too, buddy," I squeaked out as he compressed my chest to roughly half the size it was supposed to be.

"As I am to see you, young master." The wolf paused for a moment, rolling my old title around on his lips for a moment before shrugging it off. "I'm honoured you invited me."

"I... yeah, sure I did." I glanced at Jon and English, they both just shrugged. Rolling my eyes, I asked, "Just how many people *did* I invite, you guys?"

The slightest grin edged back onto Jon's lips. "This would be it. With all the threats to your life we decided to keep the gathering small. I extended an invitation to Mayor Max, but he had to decline." He frowned. "Fire Chief Hamish was also invited, but cancelled at the last moment. Something about *overriding priorities*."

"And anyway, Mate," English pulled me from Amstys' grip and threw his muscled arm back over me, "Where else would you *want* to be but here with your mates the night before getting tied up?"

His voice took a darker tone but the smile never faltered on his lips. “And I feel no pity for anyone who tries to get to you tonight. The only place you could be safer would be in an hunter's encampment.” He flexed a hand, razor claws coming free. “It wouldn't be a question on us catching them, it would simply be one of who would catch them *first*. And what we'd leave behind.”

Was it just me or had the atmosphere in the room suddenly become downright chilly?

Jon cleared his throat and stepped back to lift some bags from the hallway where he'd set them to unlock the door.

“I, uh, guessed you wouldn't want kibble, so I asked the hunters for some supplies.” He paused for a moment as he opened the unmarked brown paper bags. “I mentioned it was for you and they directed me to a lady named 'Lucy'. She, uh, seems to have been more than generous.”

That was an understatement. You couldn't have fit any more food in the bags if you'd used a pile driver. There was enough in there to even get Jon drooling.

English popped into the bedroom and came back with a bag of his own. I eyed it critically.

“Not for you, Mate.” He grinned. “I remember what happened to you last time you got drunk.” He dug into the bag and pulled out a can of beer he threw through it at Jon.

I almost laughed out loud when Jon's canine reflexes kicked in and he sprang from his seat to catch it in midair.

“Huh?” He brought the can down before his nose like he'd never seen a beer before.

“Gods,” English threw a can to Amstys before popping his own open. It fizzed up and sent suds running down his arm. “Don't tell me you're a teetotaller like our condemned here. Even the titan over there knows what to do with a beer.” He pointed a thumb towards Amstys who had already pulled back a half his can.

Heh. I guess they must have had a brewery out in Brooks.

Jon glanced my way before pulling the tab on his can. I just shrugged.

The dog yipped as his own drink fizzed open. Well, I guess that was one way to get him drinking. He pressed his lips down over the opening to prevent it from spilling to the floor.

To say his expression was less than pleased with the taste would be an understatement. I almost thought he was going to spit it out for a moment before finally gagging it down.

“Don't worry, woof. It's an acquired taste, eh?” English reached forward and pounded him on the back hard enough to make him gasp.

“As you say...” Jon's voice was raw.

“But anyway, Mate,” The lion turned back to me, “We need to decide what it is we'll be doing on this momentous occasion. We've got to make sure to run you out bad enough that you'll be too beaten come tomorrow to be able to say anything but yes.” He paused for a moment before his eyes lit up.

Oh gods. That was not a good sign. It was *never* a good sign when English grinned like that. It almost always hinted of very bad things in my immediate future.

“I got it, Mate!” He took another long pull on his beer, “We'll hit the peelers!”

Okay, that seriously confused me. “What?”

He rolled his eyes. “The gods give me strength. I know you're sheltered, Mate, but you know, the strippers, the nudes, the – as the more expensive ones like to call themselves – *exotic dancers*.”

I just about fell off my chair laughing.

“Okay, I'd just about be game to see how that works,” I snorted. “English, unless you didn't notice, most of us have *fur coats*. Going about nude in public isn't exactly a big deal.”

A moment later an empty beer can *pinged* off my head. He'd hit me right between the ears.

“Mate,” English reached in his bag for another can, popping it open and taking another swig. It

left a foam on his mane, "You really need to expand your horizons. Not *all* of us have fur coats. Take the oni for example, or the Class Ones and Twos, or..." He pulled down another chug, "Humans."

"Urk."

Okay, no, no, *NO*. I *did not* need the image of Rebecca dancing around a brass pole tonight of all nights.

English must have noticed my reaction to his words. "Bugger. I just stabbed myself in the foot, didn't I?"

"Yeah." I finally worked some breath back in my lungs. "I think you just took your entire leg off."

He scowled and took another sip.

"Fine, Mate. Then what's it to be? Theatre?"

"No." Jon piped up from behind me. He was still holding his first beer. "Far too public. You know we're still under the danger of death threats."

"Double bugger." English crushed the empty husk of his can between his hands like it was no more than a sheet of paper. He pulled out yet another can and tossed one to Amstys in the process. "Then what? I'm running out of ideas here. No peelers, no show. Can't exactly go roaming the streets looking for a party. What else is there?" He let out a mighty belch. "We've got to do *something*, ol' Tommy, or this'll be the lamest stag party in memory. You're not supposed to be gelded until *after* the wedding." His head whipped towards Jon the moment the dog opened his mouth, "And the gods help you if the phrase *board games* ever passes your lips."

Jon closed his mouth.

"What about the bar down the street?" Amstys' soft voice slid in. "I passed it on the way here. It seems small and discrete enough. We should be able to get a corner table and keep our eyes open for trouble."

"I'm not sure it is prudent to become intoxicated while..." Jon began.

"Cut it, woof. That sounds like an idea to me. Let's go."

I noticed that Jon didn't fight *that* hard.

"Hey, what about me?" I cut in. "Shouldn't *I* get a say in this? It's my party!"

English looped an arm over my shoulder. "Nah, Mate. The unlucky ones never gets a say in his party. It's our job to make sure you act irresponsible, and we all know you well enough to know that'll never happen without some help."

I could smell the alcohol already on the lion's breath.

Well, I did have to give them one thing, there was no way in the world anyone would ever try to attack with English, Amstys, and Jon around. Anyone who even got within ten feet of us got glared away.

The local pub at the end of the street was named 'Green Gardens.' It was less of a dive bar as it was a pub and grill. That suited me just fine – perhaps they had something of value other than bacteria piss.

Stepping into the quiet establishment, I think the bartender's eyes nearly bugged out when he saw us. It's not often you deal with more than one guy English's size.

"Uh, howdy, folks. What can I do for you tonight?" The bull cleared his throat, "You do know we'll be closing in an hour, right?"

English flashed him a smile and pushed a wad of bills in his hand. "No, buddy, no you won't. Take this as a down payment on our tab. Mix a good drink and I'll guarantee you'll end the night with twice that in your till."

It must have been a fair pittance. When the bartender came back a few minutes later he locked the front door and brought us all menus. Along with complementary appetizers. Lots and lots of appetizers.

"Let's get things started here," English didn't even bother looking at the drink list, "Get me a stout, the big guy a golden larger, the woof a Irish coffee and the to-be-wed wolf a Shirley Temple, eh?"

That got me an odd look from the bull, but he wasn't about to say anything.

"And venison!" English shouted as the man walked back to the bar. He turned to me, "That's your favourite, right? Yeah," He raised his voice again, "Five orders of venison."

I was starting to have flashbacks to collage with the amount of alcohol that flowed over the table. It wasn't long before it seemed everyone but me was floating. Even Jon was getting a bit of a glazed look.

"Come on, big guy," English reached across the table to poke Amstys, "You gotta tell us some of the lurid details. I don't get none of them outta Tommy here. How's it getting on between you and Molly?"

Whatever it was English had been plying Amstys with now it seemed to work. The wolf no longer spoke in the hesitant whisper that he had had when I first met him, nor the soft voice that he'd taken over the last few months. When he spoke now it came out in a bellow that matched English's drunken speech decibel for decibel.

"No, no," He shook his head with a laugh, "I ain't gonna tell you *that*. She'd cut my balls of like a gelded horse if I told you *those* stories. I can," He smiled, "Tell you that we are getting on *very* well. You would have done far worse than to take her for yourself, Tommy." He turned to me, "I owe you yet another count. Not only did you get me away from the bitch on the prairies, but you found me another bitch to settle down with out here. A far classier one." He let out a belch after speaking, as if to punctuate the statement. "So I suppose we should toast the better wolf than I, eh? If we were back home we'd tie you up and leave you out in the middle of a field on your bachelor's night." He took another pull of his beer, draining the glass, "So I guess a toast it'll have to be."

He raised his now empty glass. English and Jon followed a moment later.

Me, I was about ready to slide under the table and go slinking home. I felt at home on the street, in the forest, even in City Hall, but not in a bar like this. I just couldn't get drunk like them and it made it hard to relate to the thoughts that ran through their minds.

"So, come on, eh? How 'as Molly been? Haw far 'as the two of you..."

Getting up from the table, I made an excuse that I had to go see a horse about a man and made off for the washrooms a moment later.

I'd hardly so much as stepped through the door when I heard it open again behind me. I didn't turn around, but I could tell right away that it wasn't English or Amstys. The door didn't bang, nor did I hear the fall of heavy feet.

The claws that clicked across the tile towards me weren't parade ground perfect, nor were the clicks as tight or sharp as I'd come to expect.

A moment later Jon bellied up to the urinal beside me. I noticed he wavered ever so slightly, but not apparently enough to quite be drunk.

We studiously ignored each other until we were ready to leave. It was only then that he turned to look me in the face. I could see his eyes were turning bloodshot.

"It would appear, Tommy, that I need more practice planning outings like this one. The whole evening was supposed to be for your benefit, yet," He had to pause for breath and hold back a hick-up,

“You seem to be the only one not able to enjoy yourself.”

I shrugged and put my arm over his shoulder to keep him from swaying. “Don't worry about it, Jon. I've been the centre of attention long enough. Just having the lot of you around me without any of us having to be police, mayors, or bounty hunters is enough.” I smiled. “This is perhaps the first time I've actually been able to meet the real Jon, not Constable Oaks.”

He didn't smile back.

“Tommy,” He fought to keep his voice level, “I'm not really much of one for drinking. I think I saw a back patio. Did you want to get a breath of fresh air before returning?”

“Yeah.” I didn't take much convincing. English tended to reek once he got rip roaring drunk. “That sounds like a good idea.”

Out of the washroom, we took a right in the hallway back to the main room and managed to find a small space out back. It was less of a patio and more of a loading dock with some folding chairs for the staff while they were on break.

It was still enough for me, I could smell the night air and see the sky.

“I never got a chance to join in that toast a moment back,” Jon spoke as he shook himself like he was throwing water. It didn't really help his strung out appearance. “You don't know how much you've done for us all.”

I sat down on a three legged chair that had been propped up against a box. “Don't mention it, Jon. Really, don't. I'm not trying to be a great messiah here – I've already got enough problems with Sayer trying to pin that title on me. I'm just being me. Heh. English might say I'm following my pack instinct. You're all family as far as I'm concerned. Bugger, this whole city is. I just want to do right by you guys.”

Jon perched on a railing next to me. For a moment I almost thought I'd have to reach and and keep him from tipping backwards before his tail adjusted.

“It's more than that, Tommy.” He yawned. “But I guess I do owe you a few answers.”

I cocked my head. “Answers? To what?”

His voice was emotionless. Like it had been when I'd first met him in police HQ. “To who I am. I know my uncle Sayer has told you somethings, but you deserve to have the full story.”

“Jon, you don't have to...”

“No,” He shook his head again, this time I could almost see him fighting back the bad memories. “You deserve to know. You're the closest thing I have to family anymore except for my uncle.”

He took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky. It was as impenetrable and cloudy as always.

“I'm sure Sayer told you about the multiple lines. We're not, as one might first assume, separated by breed.” His voice cleared as he spoke, like he'd practised these words dozens of times over, “It's all in the families. Sayer's a Dane, I'm a Sheppard. We even have some bloodhounds and Akeitas here and there. It's all the family, not the breed.”

“My mother was of the finest of the leadership lines. She had an impeccable record. Not a single person doubted her ability, and her dedication even less so. She was well placed to be the first female chief of police in V-town's history.”

“What happened?” Jon didn't meet my eyes as I spoke. He kept his head pointed firmly up.

“She met my father.” No smile pulled at his face. “He was of the standard line, a simple beat cop. He was a promising officer, there was a good chance he would make Sargent Major. That's no small feat, Tommy. A rank like that is the highest that one of the non-leadership families can aspire to, and it seemed almost assured for him.”

“In any event,” Jon took a deep breath, “The two of them became acquainted. Nothing was

seen as wrong with this. It's encouraged that people from different lines meet and mingle, but never reproduce."

The stress he put on the word *reproduce* made it sound like nothing more than a clinical act, like it was signing a licence.

"The two of them, however, had different plans. They, the gods know why, formed a bond, fell in love without ever showing it to anyone else."

"For a time they were successful. They spent much time in each other's company, but no one thought anything of it. They were different lines. The fact they could be anything more than friends was unthinkable. Near literally unthinkable."

"For more than a year the charade remained. Both of them excelled. No one realized it at the time, but they were able to work together, combine the strengths of the leadership line with the dependability of the worker's line."

"Everything went well until they were unable to hide the evince any longer. It's difficult to conceal a growing pregnancy."

"It was quickly obvious to those who had been unable to conceive of it before what exactly had happened. Now, Tommy, it may sound harsh, but there are many rules in place to maintain the integrity of the service. I do not blame the force for what they did. The lines had never been merged. The upper echelons were frightened at the change in status quo that they saw."

"They did not expel my parents, nor even officially reprimand them. There was no *technical* law that prevented their actions, but they made it obvious that neither of them would progress any further in the ranks. Their lives were put on hold because they chose to create my life."

"It was the logic of the police administration of the time that no dogs would follow officers who had been tainted by such a scandal, no matter how talented they might be."

"To say my parents took the news badly would be an understatement. They both remained in the force for a short time longer, a scant few months, before resigning together."

"To resign from the force is not unknown, even my uncle Sayer did it at one point, but it is almost always part of a larger plan, authorized by the force itself with a path to returning. That was not so with my parents."

"For the first time in their lives my parents were alone, having no one but each other. They were cut off from the service, the pack."

I shivered. The mere thought of being cut off like that, for any canine, was nearly worse than death.

"I was born soon after. The first dog of mixed police lines to be born in over a hundred years, and to be born outside the force as well. To say I was abnormal would be an understatement."

"I remember little of my early life. My parents themselves are hardly more than shadows, faint sounds, and scents to me. I was told when I grew older that they did everything they could to fit into the city at large. My mother took a job as a clerk and my father tried his hand at bounty hunting before having to settle for a low paying position as a security guard."

"Sadly, and predictably, their new lives was simply not sustainable. Ask anyone who has come from a strict and controlled environment only to step out into the wide world. The transition is not... easy."

"In under four years my mother was dead. She had simply been unable to adapt to a life where she had to follow the decisions of others day in and day out, to have no long term goal, plan. She was of the leadership line, but she had no one to lead, no worthy goal to accomplish. She was never able to adapt, to accept the concept she was truly on her own."

Jon shook his head. "The force was prohibited to intervene. My parents were to be an example

of what would happen to those who broke the unwritten laws that bound us who are part of the service.”

“I saw less and less of my mother. She was gone by the time I was four, before I even knew her. The police report I found years later recorded her being found face down in a pool of her own vomit after she had done her best to drink herself to death. Even in that she failed. She died of drowning, not alcohol poisoning.”

“My father was of a simpler line. The worker caste of the police force, he'd been able to hold himself together as long as he had my mother to look up to. Her death rocked him in a deeper way than even their departure from the force had.”

“I was six when my father hit rock bottom. This I do remember. It wasn't his sanity that failed like my mother's, it was his finances. He'd be raised and taught how to live off a police man's wage. What he made now was far less and he was failing to adapt. Every month put us deeper in debt.”

“He went back to the force, crawling on his knees, begging, groveling for his job back. They denied him.”

Jon let out a long breath. “From a purely logical standpoint I understand why they said what they did. My father *had* been one of their best dogs. Now he was broken, tainted. He was of no use to them. They refused to hire him because they wouldn't get their money's worth. That, and they wanted him to die as my mother had. To be the final punctuation to the demonstration of what happens when you break the rules.”

“I will give it to my father, however. He hung on for all he could. It was three more years, I was nine, before he gave into to the inevitable.”

“I was at school that day when he went downtown and took out the only life insurance policy he could find that had a clause giving reimbursement in the event of suicide. Then he wrote a letter to children's services, and leapt from the Lion's Gate bridge.”

“As far as I know his body has never been found.”

I couldn't think of anything to say.

“As you can guess, Tommy, I didn't have an easy childhood. I became an orphan of the city when I was nine, ran away when I was ten. The, ahem, disguise you saw me in shortly after we first met was what I wore until I was sixteen. I refused to live in an orphanage, so instead I made my own life on the street. The disguise is all that remains of that time.” His voice was hard. “When I was sixteen I first met my uncle Sayer. He had just been promoted to inspector at the time. He took the initiative to hunt me down and teach me my own history. I had, until that point, been generally ignorant of who or what I was. He offered me a new option in life. The force had banished my parents, but *I* had done nothing wrong. More than that,” He cleared his throat, “They were afraid of me. I was an unknown in their carefully arranged system. They had decided it was better to have me under their supervision than running free. My uncle, with the blessing of the upper dogs, offered me the chance to try out for the force when I turned eighteen. Given I had no criminal record.”

I cocked my head. “Why would you? It was the force that killed your parents. Why would you ever want to join them?”

Jon look me straight in the eye. There was something there in those deep, bloodshot eyes that I'd seen in every other police dog.

“It's less a *want*, Tommy. More an innate need, a desire. I come form a long line of police officers. Everyone on the force is family, whether I know it or not. It's not so much that I *choose* to be a police officer than I simply *am*.”

“In any event,” He cleared his throat and looked away again, “He made good on his promise. I mended my ways to ensure the justice system never had any reason to hold a record on me, then when I

turned eighteen I cashed in the trust account my father's life insurance had given me, bought a clean set of clothes and walked bold as day into the police headquarters and demanded they test me to become a member of the force."

"Joining wasn't easy. All the other dogs had been trained by their parents almost from the day they could walk, but I had other advantages. A life on the street hadn't slipped away without teaching me some unique lessons."

"I did in due course graduate with honours. I was now in the service and set for life. What no one ever told me, but quickly became obvious, was that I would never advance past the rank of constable. It didn't matter how good I was, the powers that be never wanted a dog of mixed blood to hold even the slightest authority."

"So instead they used me in other ways. I was assigned to the *messy* jobs. I got the assignments that, should they become volatile, the service could cut me off adrift and make me disappear. I never failed an assignment. And that, Tommy, was how I was assigned to work with you and English. The human exodus was a *very* messy assignment."

A smile touched his lips now. "But then the unexpected happened. The riots and the quake. The quake brought down much of police headquarters, and nearly all of the leadership line who were within it at the time. Suddenly the force was very nearly without a head. Every dog of the leadership line was suddenly precious. Especially me."

"My uncle Sayer was promoted to commissioner, and, as you're well aware, he has some *unique* ideas on how to run the city. That includes ignoring my mixed heritage. It'll likely as well succeed too. The working dogs never held against me, only the leadership line. And they are all but gone now. Not even Able or Baker have a word to say against me that I'm aware of."

"Wow." I was about to say something, though for the life of me I couldn't guess what, when a mighty crash came from the bar behind us.

We were both on our feet in a heartbeat, racing back to where we'd left Amstys and English.

We needn't have hurried, a moment later I heard the lion's deep laughter.

Stepping into the bar, we found English still sitting at the table with yet another glass of bitter, Amstys fallen over to lay spreadeagled on the floor, and a very concerned looking barkeep wondering just how he was going to pay for the booth that the big wolf had managed to splinter.

I glanced over to Jon.

"I think it's time we headed home."