

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 1: I'm Getting too Old for This

“Out of the way!” I nearly tripped over a rat out in the alleyway. She was doing nothing more offensive than hanging up her laundry. It was I who burst upon the scene, nearly trampling her and sending her washing all over the dirt streaked pavement.

And the fact I couldn't see for a few moments, my eyes obscured by someone's tighty-whities, *did not* help.

“Sorry!” I called back as I skidded around the next corner.

Her reply wasn't so civil.

Bugger. Where in all the nine underworlds was I? I'd made a left at the last intersection, then a right... or was it another left? I was so freaking lost in this endless maze of alleyways that I could just as well be up in Richmond for all I knew.

And that was *not* a good thing.

Tongue out and panting, I spared a quick glance behind me as my black claws skidded around another hairpin turn between these cracked and sagging red brick buildings. There was barely enough room between them for the alley, my shoulders were nearly brushing the brickwork.

I may not know where I was, and I may not know where I'm going, but I knew for a fact that I *did not* want to stop running.

The hunter couldn't be more than a dozen strides behind me.

I charged through this man made maze sounding like nothing so much as a steamroller, the hunter was whisper quiet behind. I couldn't even hear so much as footfalls over my racing heart, but I know the hunter was there.

I'm a wolf, my name's Tommy.

Another few strides and I came face first to a brick wall. A dead end.

Bugger.

What now?

A quick look at the walls that surrounded me on three sides, they were all typical pre-cataclysm human construction. Sturdy and well weathered, the brick rose up a good five stories. A quick hop on my part and I was able to hook my worn claws into the cracks.

This was not fun. I really need to go on a diet when this is over. Hanging from your fingers is

bad enough, putting all your weight on what amounts to your fingernails is even worse.

Then try climbing on them.

My knuckles felt like they were just about ready to seize up by the time I even made it so far as the second floor window.

It was good enough for me.

The room inside was empty, likely had been for decades. I didn't even need to kick in the glass of the window, it was long rotted out.

A wiggle to get myself through the narrow frame and I was inside. Turing, I spared a quick glance back. I couldn't see anything, but I'd swear one of the shadows was moving.

Yep. No natural shadow could *loom* like that.

Off and running again, the room in here looked like it might have been a nice place. Once. There was nothing left now.

I had to move more slowly. The floor in here creaked in a way that did not leave me feeling all that comfortable. The fact I could all but play a symphony with the different sounds coming up from under me was not a good sign.

Pressing forward, I stepped through the bedroom I was in and to the main part of the apartment. The door to the hall was up ahead.

Giving the handle a yank, the rotted wood of the door came away in my hand, leaving a gaping hole where the handle had been.

Tossing the useless chunk of wood aside, I stepped out into the hallway.

It was better out here. Not a lot, but by some measure.

The apartment had been completely abandoned, the rest of the building was only *mostly* abandoned.

There were lights in the hall, though only perhaps one in five of the bulbs above me cast even the faintest glow.

Starting forward, I could hear the floor of the apartment groaning behind me, far louder than I'd ever been able to make it.

I didn't see another soul until I'd dashed down the stairs to the main floor. Taking the steps four at a time, I was just lucky I didn't fall face first to get a too-good look at the pattern on the carpet.

There were a couple of folks in the main area here, an oni and gnome of some sort. I didn't look at them, but they seemed to be interested in me.

They pointed and yelled my name as I ran by, but didn't offer to help. I was little more than a sideshow attraction.

Shouldering the heavy front door open, I was back out on the street. This wasn't exactly one of the busier parts of V-town, but I was back amongst people again. Worked for me, might give me enough cover to slip away.

Yeah, and fish would fly the day I escaped the hunter that was on my tail.

I got about two steps down the front walk before my left foot tried to fly out from under me.

What the bugger?

Black ice. Gods, this was just my day. It was still late spring. Most of the snow and ice was already gone, but not all apparently.

I'd almost forgot about it. I'd already shed my winter coat. After the long, cold winter we'd just had, I was ready for summer.

Fighting for balance, my other foot slid forward over the same patch of ice that was already causing me trouble. It took everything I had to get back under control.

Gods, I'd climbed the Rocky mountains – and fallen off them – I didn't want to meet my end

slipping on a sheet of bloody *black ice*.

Okay, breathe, breathe. Got it.

No sooner had I pulled both feet firmly under me again then I was off and running. I didn't have any time to spare if I wanted to be able to walk away from this.

Picking up speed, sprinting down the middle of the road, I heard the door to the apartment building boom open again behind me.

Heh. The hunter was getting slow. I'd only lost a second or two, but I was pulling away again.

Another few paces and I reached out to grab the corner of a building, using it to help me pull around the sharp turn.

And nearly ran face first into one of V-town's finest.

Bugger!

The cop almost looked as surprised as I was. I'm sure he wasn't expecting to see me here, this wasn't exactly one of my normal haunts.

With a stuttering motion he reached up to touch a finger to his upstanding black canine ear.

"Afternoon, Sir."

I didn't even waste a breath in rebuking him for calling me 'sir'. Then again, the dogs called everyone that, whether they'd been mayor of V-town or not.

Casting a glance over my shoulder, I could see the dog watching me curiously as I peeled away. A moment later a shadow fell over him. A large one.

The dog simply looked up and said, "Good afternoon, Sir."

Down another side street and I was once again, you guessed it, in an alley. Bugger. How do I manage to do this? I have a sense of direction, I've lived in V-town all my life.

Guess I'm just better at being the hunter than the prey.

Okay... this was starting to look familiar. I think the whole chase started somewhere around here.

Yep. Ten minutes and I've done nothing more than run in a complete circle.

Glancing up, I was startled by a flock of pidgins taking flight from the rooftop up ahead. I must have spooked them.

Not pausing for breath, I kept running down the alleyway. It had been wide enough before, more of a street really. Now it was nearly so narrow that I'd have to start walking sideways soon.

Hey, not that that's a bad thing, it might just force my hunter to go a different way.

Bugger. No such luck.

The hunter's foot falls had been near silent before. They weren't so now.

He must be getting tired, sloppy.

Now that I held my own breath for a moment I could hear him panting, even from this distance, his massive lungs drawing in rough breaths.

All I had to do was keep up this pace for a couple more minutes and I should be home free. Even if he could track my scent he'd be far behind me.

Chalk up another win for canine endurance. We may not be quite as fast as felines, but we can keep up the pace.

Another sound came from above. I was right below where the pigeons had taken off from. This one was less of a rustle, more of a slide click.

I let out a breath and rolled my eyes.

I was right back where the hunt had begun. Right back where I'd begun running from the *two* people who'd started after me.

Oh bugger.

I didn't even get the chance to raise my hands before the batta-batta-batta of a rapid fire gun cut the air.

I guess I should be glad the person behind the trigger couldn't aim. The first half dozen shots went wide, far to my left, staining the red brick a bright blue, but they came closer by the second.

The alley was far too narrow for me to duck aside. It was only a matter of time before I was caught.

Looking up, could see the sun glinting off the grey gunmetal. From the corner of my eye I could also see the golden streak of my hunter.

The lion made one last lunge through the narrow alley, trying to get to me before the shots did.

He missed by *that* much.

I was cut down by the shots, dyed a bright blue across my brown fur an instant before his hands closed around the scruff of my neck.

The shots didn't stop, they continued to rain down, washing the both of us in neon.

That was all English needed. The lion fancied himself a thespian. Though I'd never really seen him get up on stage I knew for a fact he could ham it up with the best of them.

Screaming out in mock pain, the lion threw himself to the ground, shoving me out of the way, and began the longest, most dramatic, and frankly overwrought death scene I've ever had the misfortune to encounter.

He'd put first year drama students to shame with his hack job.

"Woe! Oh woe is me, I am killithed!" With one last howl he dropped to the ground in a heap.

The shots stopped for a few moments before starting up again, seemingly doing their best to pound him into submission, and, more importantly, silence.

"Uh, Babe," I glanced up to the roof far above, "I think you can stop. He's dead."

There was just the faintest of laughter trickling down.

"I don't think so, Wolfy. This is pay back for a *long* time."

From my feet I heard a deep chuckle roll forth. "She better take it for all it's worth, Mate. I don't plan on giving chances like this too often." One paint pellet hit a particularly sensitive spot. A high pitched yelp escaped his lips before the blue rain finally ended.

Reaching down, I gave the now pastel lion a hand to his feet.

"You better hurry. I think she's out of ammo, we need to get out of here before she reloads."

He laughed. "How about I do one better, Mate?" I glanced over to him, "A distraction."

It was my turn to yip as he once again grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. This time hoisting me in the air, he forcibly tucked my arms and legs in until I was little more than a furry ball.

"Uh, English, what--"

"Sush, Mate. You'll throw off my aim." He reared back, still clutching me under his arm.

This was going to hurt.

I had just enough time to tense up before he turned and threw me like a shotput. English had done something like this once long ago, back on the Diamond Dice.

I'd had nice soft water to land in then. This time, not so much.

The lion must be starting to feel his age, his throw wasn't as strong as I expected. That's not to say he didn't send me flying, only that he barely managed to leave me scrambling at the tiles on the roof of the three story building.

I guess I shouldn't be complaining, at least he hadn't missed and splatted me flat into the wall.

I could hear my claws scratch for purchase as I searched for anything I could to keep myself from slipping down. Have I mentioned that I *hate* climbing. Scaling the sheer face of a building is for

a feline, not a wolf like myself.

I almost made it when my grip slipped.

Oh bugger.

I don't care how in shape I was or wasn't, I didn't feel like falling three stories onto hard asphalt.

I was less than a second from freefall when a soft hand slipped around my wrist.

"Need a little help, Wolfy?" Rebecca's face slid into view.

I rolled my eyes.

"Babe, when have I ever said no?"

Rebecca, being a human, didn't exactly have the upper body strength to hoist a guy like me up on her own, but her grip did stop me from sliding any further as my feet scrambled blindly for a toehold.

Sending a few rock chips flying as I pushed myself up, I could hear English cursing below from the onslaught. Somehow I didn't feel sorry for him.

One last push and I was over the edge and on the roof of the building. Not even trying to stand straight, I did more of an undignified roll to get to safety. I could feel the gravel and tar chips and they ground into my pelt.

It was only then I heard Rebecca laughing.

Opening my eyes, I could see her squatting down next to me.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

Reaching forward, she tweaked my whiskers. "I didn't realize just how good these paint pellets were, you've been dyed pastel blue."

I managed to work up a growl from somewhere, "And it's all your fault. Ever heard of conserving ammunition? Or not kicking a downed man?"

"What about me, Mate?" English's voice came from the street below, "How do you expect me to get this off my pelt? I look like an ageing hippie who got stuck in the tie-dye machine!"

Rebecca stepped away from me, poking her head over the edge of the building.

"Looks good on you, English. Anyway, the dog who gave it to me said the paint should just wash out."

There was an unsatisfied grumble from below. A moment later it was followed by a hail of rock chips.

Rebecca squeaked and backpedaled from the edge. Worked for me, that brought her in range of my grasp.

Reaching out, I snaked an arm around her as I sat up, pulling her into my lap.

"So was it worth it, Babe? All this effort the cops have put into helping you arm yourself and you still just seem to be spraying bullets."

She made a face as she settled into my lap, squirming slightly as she got comfortable.

"I still don't see why *I'm* the one who needs it, Wolfy. It's you that had all the death threats, not me. Anyway," She turned her head slightly, glancing back at me, "I've got my knives if I need to defend myself, just like you have your claws. The only reason the police department is pushing this on me is because they think that guns are the ancestral weapons of humans or some nonsense like that."

I chuckled and pulled her closer.

"Something like that, Babe. But you can't deny that it puts you on fairer terms when we play like this. Left to your own you'd never be a match for English or I."

"Is that so?" I could hear a mischievous chuckle work its way into her voice. "I don't need to be able to fight toe to toe with anyone. That's what I've got you for, *Wolfy*. I've domesticated you to do that for me."

"If you say so, Babe."

Anyone else making a crack about domestication and I would have had harsh words for them. Rebecca... not so much.

"Mate, Lass, are you two going to stay up there all day and leave me down here?"

I'd been settling into a nice cuddle and English's just had to break it up.

Stifling a yawn, I looked over at Rebecca before turning back to the street below.

"We'll be down in a second. Meet us on the other side of the building with the fire escapes."

English must really be tired. I could hear the click of his claws on the pavement as he walked away without a word.

"Shall we get to it, Babe?" Reaching out, I helped Rebecca off my lap.

She paused for one last moment before moving, seeming not to want to give up her living pillow.

It wasn't until I stood up behind her that I got a good look at the world around us.

Up on the third floor, we were on one of the tallest structures in the area. Not many buildings were left in V-town that climbed to more than three floors. That gave us a commanding view of the city beyond.

It was... less than inspiring to say the least.

Not that I could say anything against it, but V-town still had a lot of rebuilding left to do.

More than two thirds of the buildings standing were like this one, built by the humans before the cataclysm. They stood the test of time, but the years did still leave their mark on them. Much like this building and the one I'd raced through, they were dilapidated.

Our knowledge of buildings these days wasn't up to what they'd had before. It took everything we had just to keep them standing.

The remaining one-third of the buildings in V-town, they were a whole 'nother matter.

There had been a whole lot more of them before the big earthquake last year. That had taken most of the newer buildings down to nothing more than piles of rubble. The structures that had sprung up in their place, I'm happy to say, were a little bit better built than those we'd been constructing before. Fire Chief Hamish had made sure he'd had something to say about *that*.

But that's a thought for another time. Rebecca in hand, I crossed to the far side of the roof, making sure not to trip over the loose gravel. It was rough on the pads of my bare feet, but I was long toughened to such things now.

"After you, Babe." I mock bowed to her as I stood before the ladder.

She smiled and flicked my nose as she passed by.

You know, it was only after she started climbing down that I realized I did it wrong. If I'd been smart I should have gone first. That would have given me the opportunity to look up.

To make sure she didn't slip. Yeah, that was it.

English was waiting for us on the ground. The lion was still pulling at his blue fur, looking honestly distraught.

"You sure this stuff is going to wash out, Lass?" He tugged again at a tuft on his shoulder, as if trying to pull the very colour from it.

Rebecca smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"Relax, English. I got the gun and dye from the police. This is what they use for live fire exercises." She laughed. "When was the last time you saw a blue furred cop walking the street?"

English's hand finally came away with one last tug.

"Guess you're right, Lass. They wouldn't use anything that stains. Would be against regulation for any of them to dye their fur. It would be conduct unbecoming a police officer." He pulled a face.

Reaching down, he pulled the gun from Rebecca's hands as we started walking.

"So this is the toy is it, Lass? Doesn't look like much."

I had to hand it to him, in the lion's hands the gun looked like little more than a child's toy.

Then again, English was easily twice my weight, and I had a good thirty or more pounds on Rebecca. In English's hands *everything* looked like a toy.

About the only thing English seemed to know about the gun was to make sure to keep the pointy end away from his face. Other than that he turned the rifle over and over again. Inspecting it.

"Was this made by us, Lass? The quality looks too good to have come from any V-town foundry."

Rebecca shook her head as she gently took the weapon back and double checked the safety. "No one really knows where it came from to begin with, but we do know for a fact that it was made before the Cataclysm. No one's been able to make a decent gun since then. That's why they're so associated with humans."

"Hurmph." English grinned as he put up a fierce front. "Having a little toy like that would change the whole bounty hunting business. Anyone could be a bounty hunter then, not just the biggest or the fastest. And imagine what it would do for efficiency if we didn't have to do the chase every time?"

Stepping forward, I circled an arm around Rebecca, pulling her closer.

"I'll take the world the way it is, buddy," I said. "If we started having any measure of these things showing up it wouldn't just be the bounty hunters with them. The criminals would too." I shivered. "And I've been shot too many times to ever wish that."

English forced a fragile looking smile to his lips before reaching out a hand to settle on my back. "You know I didn't mean it like that, Mate. Just idle thoughts, that's all. Anyway," He glanced up the road, his smile becoming real, "We're almost there."

Looking up, I realized where we stood.

"Café Bristol?" I couldn't help but chuckle. "Don't you eat anywhere else?"

He tried to put up the act of being offended. "Mate! What kind of business man would I be if I patronized other restaurants? I've got to keep them in business."

'In business' was right. I'd hardly ever seen anyone but English here, but the lion alone seemed to eat enough to keep the place in the black. I doubt the restaurant would have survived if he hadn't bought it.

Stepping up to the wrought iron table, the same one we always did, we hardly got a chance to sit down before the waitress hopped up.

"Afternoon, E." She smiled and leaned forward on the table as she set out some cups. I noticed that she leaned forward a little more than was strictly necessary. And that her top was cut a little lower than health regulations likely allowed.

Rebecca shot me a glare, but I was more interested in watching English oogle than I was at looking myself.

"You're normal, E?" The waitress asked.

"You bet, dear." He glanced over to Rebecca, "And don't forget to bring something bland and flavourless for the Lass over here. She still can't seem to get her pretty little head around raw meat. There's no accounting for taste."

Both Rebecca and the waitress rolled their eyes in perfect unison.

"I can understand that, E."

A moment later she was off.

We hadn't even had a chance to settle into the drinks that the waitress had set off, water for

Rebecca and I and the obligatory tea for English, before a shadow crossed the table.

Looking up, I knew before I even saw him who it was.

Only police dogs moved like that.

“Good afternoon, Sir.” He bobbed his head down in a swift, hard motion that would have been curt for anyone else. For a police dog it was just part of the job to make every motion perfect. “I have a packet of papers for you from Mayor Maxwell.”

Sighing, I reached out for the locked box he held. Taking it from the dog's hands, he reached into his pocket and unlocked it for me.

'Mayor Max'. That wasn't a phrase that I'd expected to hear even just a few months ago.

I'd won a... contested election race last fall to become the official mayor of V-town. Max had been my running mate back then.

I hadn't really wanted the job, but Commissioner Sayer of the V-town police had been more than adamant that I take it. By hook or by crook.

I'd won a clean race to make him happy, hung around for a couple of months to make sure everything went well, then abandoned the post to Max, a man who was a far better person for the job than I.

Well, that was the plan at least. I'd gotten the first bit down alright, but hit a snag when I tried to resign.

I hadn't thought Sayer even had the lung power anymore to yell. It appeared he did.

The top cop in V-town hadn't been so happy to hear of my plans.

A lot of arguing and a little bloodshed later and we'd come to an understanding. I wasn't mayor anymore. My official title was new 'administrator.'

I was the administrator of V-town. I didn't have any real powers on paper. The position was completely superficial, a figurehead. Something like a governor general.

And it also meant that I was above the mayor.

Opening the box the sat on the table, I rustled through the papers within. Nothing that really required my immediate attention.

Some new laws to sign my name to in order to put them in force, a few status updates. Just another day in paradise. At least I didn't have to make any policy decisions these days.

Snapping the box shut, I pushed it aside as the waitress came back carrying two heaping platters of food. I didn't know how she managed to carry those things, they looked to weigh as much as she did.

“Here you go, E.” She leaned forward again as she sat the platters down. Too bad the lion was more interested in the food than he was her.

The food hardly touched the table before he dug into it. Both Rebecca and I were experienced enough to know that no matter how hungry we were you don't get anywhere near a lion's food until he's good and ready to let you.

Finally feeling brave enough to nip a claw forward, I made away with a piece of raw, dripping beef. It squished between my fangs just the way it was supposed to.

Rebecca was better off. She was able to grab hold of some bread, something I'd never seen English ever take an interest in. I was sure it was put there for her benefit alone.

“Uh, Sir?” The police dog at my shoulder broke in.

Was he still here? I'd thought he'd gone back after delivering the box.

“Yes?” I turned to look at him, leaving, with an effort, my meal behind me.

“I believe there is a message in the delivery that you should read right away.” He coughed slightly, looking away, “I was asked to being an immediate response.”

Sighing, I reopened the small box, taking a longer look at the papers within while the sounds of English eating just feet away tried to distract me.

Let's see here... bill, bill, building plans... what's this?

Down at the bottom of the box was a handwritten letter from Max.

Wiping my hands on my fur before pulling the letter out, I read it slowly.

It was Max alright, I recognized the oni's handwriting.

He was asking me to come back to the job as mayor.

It didn't take long for me to understand why. It may be Max's writing, but it wasn't his words.

Max didn't use terms like 'civic duty' and 'needs of the city'.

I could just see Commissioner Sayer looking over Max's shoulder, dictating to him as he wrote.

I glanced up to the police dog that stood motionless beside me, his face was blank.

Tucked next to the letter was a blank piece of paper and a pen.

"They really want an answer? Right now?"

The dog didn't even blink. "Yes, Sir."

From beside me I heard a chuckle. Rebecca had read the letter over my shoulder.

"They really do seem to want you back, Wolfy. I guess being Mayor in all but name isn't good enough for them."

Letting out a sigh, I set the paper down on the table, taking pains to keep it free of stains, and lifted the pen.

What to write?

Smiling, I started in nice clean script:

'Dear Mayor Maxwell and Commissioner Sayer,'

Pausing for a moment, I glanced back to the police dog that watched me. He was holding his breath.

'No.' I grinned. 'Sincerely, Tommy Taggart.'

Folding the letter crisply, I set it into the included envelope and licked the seal.

"Would you be kind enough to take my message back, Officer?" I asked the dog, while holding a completely straight face.

The dog's own face had dropped. It almost looked like he'd expected me to accept the job back right then and there.

English didn't say a word until the dog had gone, he just kept chewing on whatever it was that had caught his fancy.

"That was a bit of a nasty play, wasn't it, Mate?" His voice was soft, "They really do seem to want you back. They've been trying something different every week."

I rolled my eyes as I finally set into what remained of the meal with full force.

"Really, English? I thought you'd be one of the first people to applaud me walking away from the government. It gained you a partner back at Storm Front, didn't it?"

He grumbled and rubbed his narrow chin before belching.

"Mate, I was never one to egg you on to the job, but you had my full support once the race began. You may not have cared for it much, but a lot of people voted for you, believed in you. It was a bit of a bugger move when you walked away from it after less than a year, yeah?"

I settled back onto my chair and began chewing away at a bit of fat that had come on the edge of a slice of pork.

"I didn't *walk away*, English. You know that. I would have liked to, but neither Sayer nor my conscience would allow."

Rebecca was close at my side again, leaning gently on me.

“You did what you had to, Wolfy. Nobody's blaming you for getting burnt out. You'd never been mayor before. You did a great job while you were in office.”

I laughed. “Let's not ham it up, Babe. I did a decent job, an okay one, nothing more. It was the people below me that did all the work, I just smiled and shook hands.”

She chuckled. “I thought you hated shaking hands.”

I lost most of my appetite soon after. Unsurprisingly, it was English who licked the plate clean.

Heading off, we parted company. Rebecca and I to our apartment and English off in the other direction to his home at the edge of town.

I really didn't understand why he kept that place. The walk out there took a good hour. I know he likes his privacy, but that's taking it a little far.

Our walk wasn't long, but it was a nice change from my previous run to be able to stroll calmly down the wide main avenues of V-town and watch the people stream around us.

There weren't as many folks as there had been before the quake, but the streets were still full with every type of life you could imagine from wolves and cats to onis, gnomes, and avaiens. Even the occasional human could be seen.

And, I'm not unhappy to add, it was what was missing that made me most pleased. While Rebecca and I turned a few heads every now and then, we didn't draw much of a crowd. Most of that could be attributed to our lack of a police guard.

Throughout my whole run up to being mayor and my time in office I'd been nearly unable to escape my omnipresent police guard. Not that I'm saying I didn't need them with the rough ride I'd had, but it was like a breath of fresh air to be able to step outside these days without them always around me.

It wasn't that we didn't see cops about, they could be found every few blocks, and they tended to keep an eye on us as we walked past, but they weren't huddled close like a self-imposed bubble any more.

Rounding the last corner to the apartment, something tickled at the edge of my vision. A wolf's vision is unusually attuned to motion, especially anything abnormal. I couldn't help my head from snapping around, nearly sending me off balance as it did.

Rebecca squeaked as I nearly pushed her over, steeping straight into her path.

“Tommy!” She caught her breath as she saw my eyes narrow. “What is it?”

Good question.

Taking a step forward, I tried to pin down what it was that had attracted me so. There was nothing of note, only an empty alley stood before me.

Okay, that was weird. I hadn't have anything like that happen for a long time. I was long accustomed to living in the city, the two-legged motions of the inhabitants here shouldn't ever trigger me off like that.

“Don't know, Babe. Something just caught my eye. It's gone now.”

Turning, I looped an arm over her shoulder and pulled her close for a quick hug. I did my best to disguise the step I took to place myself between her and whatever it was that I'd seen.

That was the only thing we encountered as we walked home.

Seeing the cracked and plastered walls of Monroe Hall before me was a sight for sore eyes. I hadn't realized just how much English's chase had taken out of me until now. I was ready for a warm shower and a soft bed.

And there, standing just inside the front door was one of only two official remainders of my

police guard.

The lone officer stood stiff as a board and attentive as every other example of the V-town police I'd ever seen.

I nodded to him as we passed by. His voice was firm and clipped when he spoke.

"Good evening, Sir."

Up to the third floor, I waited as Rebecca pulled out the key to unlock the apartment door. I'd long ago given up trying to keep track of keys. I ended up losing them so often that I should get a discount in doors for the number I've had to break down.

Stepping in, I noticed a letter had been slipped under the door. With a sigh, I picked it up.

"Mind if I get freshened up, Wolfy?" Rebecca was pulling off her coat as she headed towards the washroom.

I waved her on, "Yeah, yeah, Babe. Though I don't see why *you* need it. I was the one doing all the running." She chuckled in response. "And don't use up all the hot water!" I added. "I still need to wash this dye out!"

She closed the door and I heard the water running a moment later. Figures. I never was able to understand why humans spent so much time cleaning themselves, both the men and the women. You'd think a creature like me with a pelt would have to spend more time maintaining it than someone with bare skin, yet she washed far more than I did.

Not having anything better to do, I sat down at the kitchen table and waited. This place was finally starting to truly feel like home. I've owned it for almost a year and a half, yet for much of that I hadn't lived here.

First I'd been forced out to Horseshoe Bay with the humans the previous winter, then I'd only been back a day before leaving to explore Edmonton for the next six months. It was only after that, when I'd returned after the quake and started my run as mayor that I really begun living here with Rebecca.

And most of that time it had felt more like a prison than a home, hemmed in as I'd been with police dogs and civil servants.

The last couple of months I'd finally been able to move beyond all that to make this place *mine*.

There were no more scents of countless people having passed through here, only me, Rebecca, English and a few other trusted friends.

Leaning back against the chair, I let out a sigh. Yep, I was home at long last.

I was just about to relax when the ruffle of paper broke my mojo. The bloody envelope.

It was odd to get mail like this any more. I had a normal mailbox down in the lobby, and most government papers came via police dog. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had a paper slipped under my door.

No matter. It was just as likely another government document that some bureaucrat had forgotten to slip in with the others.

Ripping the unmarked brown paper envelope open with a claw, I had to fight with it a bit. Whoever had sent this had certainly sealed it up tight. It took a good couple of yanks before it finally split open.

There was only a single sheet of paper inside.

Reaching in for it, I pulled back in shock a moment later.

"Ow! Bugger!" The edge of the paper was sharp, it cut the callused pad of my finger.

Sucking on my stinging papercut, I reached in again, more gingerly this time with the other hand, to pull the paper free.

It was blank.

I rolled my eyes.

“Gods save me from bureaucrats.” Whoever had gone to all the effort of sending me this single sheet of paper had forgotten to even write their message upon it.

Pulling my injured hand from my lips, I was happy to see the wound had already sealed. I was born with regeneration, a nice little quirk of being a wolf. About one in a thousand of us wolves have it, and I just happened to luck out. All that remained of my papercut now was an angry purple line down the middle of my finger, and that would just as likely be gone in a couple of minutes too.

Tossing the paper and envelope in the trash can, I got up and walked to the bathroom door.

“Hey, Babe, you almost finished in there?” I could hear the shower running on the other side.

“Just about, Wolfy.”

A smile crept to my lips. “How about a hand? I could always wash your back. And you know I'm going to need the favour returned to get this dye out of my fur.”

She laughed.

Opening the door, I stepped into the thick steam of the bathroom.

The next morning came soft and easy.

I was getting used to this 'work when I want, as I want' lifestyle. Partnering with English made me more than enough money to get by with my meagre needs, and partnered with my salary as 'City Administrator', I hardly even needed to do even that.

It was the sun that woke me up, shining through the bedroom window. I never pulled the blinds when we went to bed for this very reason. Bugger the alarm clocks, I'd much rather be woken up by the sun.

Rebecca lay beside me on the bed, curled up against my stomach, a double fistful of my fur held firmly in her hands.

“Morning, Babe.” I reached out with my tongue and licked the tip of her nose.

She giggled, still asleep, and rolled over, letting go of me.

Getting up as quietly as I could, I hung around only long enough to write her a note.

I felt like bounty hunting today. The run with English yesterday had gotten my blood pumping and I could use a good hunt.

“Ow.” My finger stung in the middle of writing the note. Looking down, the cut from yesterday was still there. If anything it looked worse. I don't think *green* was a good colour for a scab.

Whatever. I wasn't about to start worrying about it just yet. My regeneration had managed to deal with far worse than a papercut. If it could pull me together after falling off a mountain it could deal with this.

The walk to the SF headquarters wasn't that long, but I took a slight detour on the way to pickup breakfast. Takeout first thing in the morning wasn't the greatest idea, but I hated hunting on an empty stomach.

The SF building had been all but completely demolished during the quake last year, but you'd hardly know that looking at it now.

The heavyset three story structure was all but completed, and from the outside it looked near identical to the previous one.

The front steps were the same ones that had been on the old building. They were worn and cracked now. Not as smooth and shiny as the first time I'd climbed them, but they had personality now.

The outside of the building looked pretty much the same as it had before, but that familiarity

didn't extend to the inside.

Last time there had been a fancy lobby here, complete with water fountains and benches. Not so much now.

There were a couple of reasons for the change. One, it had taken every penny English had to get Storm Front back up and running – that hadn't left much for luxuries – and two, the old lion wanted to make a statement.

Last time English had taken a hands off approach to running Storm Front. He'd been one of it's biggest owners, but he hadn't involved himself in much other than the hunting, leaving the corporate image and higher level decisions to an executive board.

That had gotten us in trouble to say the least.

The front desk to Storm Front now was clean and utilitarian. Stepping in the front door, I was met with little more than a midsized room with some hard benches and a service counter.

The only people who generally came in this entrance were those looking to place a bounty, and they were rare. Ninety-nine percent of the bounties were straight from the government.

Waving to the man behind the counter, I walked up to a small door set in the far wall. I didn't need a key, it was unlocked.

Storm Front didn't believe much in locks these days – other than on the holding cells – few people were suicidal enough to storm a building full of bounty hunters.

The hallways back here were cramped and bordering on unfinished. Not to mention a bloody maze.

I'd been in the building a dozen times and I still got lost. That was why I came in through the front door rather than the employee entrance. It was a shorter walk to the stairs.

I was just about ready to admit that I'd gotten myself turned around again when I rounded yet another corner.

“Yipe!”

What the bloody...

I had to keep myself from bursting out laughing. It looked like I was toe to toe with a giant grey fuzball.

Graham stood before me, the papers he'd been carrying now drifting slowly to the ground. His one remaining arm was clasped firmly over his heart like he was trying to keep it from beating straight out of his chest.

The leopard's fur had fluffed out so much he looked like a plush toy.

“Tommy?” His voice was breathless as he fought to calm down.

I grinned as I stooped to collect the scattered papers. “Yep. How's it going Graham? I haven't seen you in months, since before the building was finished.”

He leaned against the wall, a smile spreading across his lips. “It's good to see you again, Tommy. Are you working here again? I thought you were still with the government.”

I rolled my eyes as I handed him back his papers. He clutched them tightly.

“Not really, Graham. I'm the 'administrator' now. It's more of a ceremonial position.”

He cocked his head. “Really? Last I heard you were the mayor's boss. Not a law gets passed without your signature. Everyone keeps saying what a great job you're doing. It's still your government, isn't it?”

Backing away now, I began glancing around for the stairwell.

“Not really, man. I'm just helping out every now and then with the PR, nothing more. You'll have to excuse me...”

The cat sighed and tucked the papers under his arm before opening a door, “English's office?”

This way.” He pointed down an identical hallway.

“Oh. Yeah, thanks.”

Heading off down the hallway, I had to ask myself why they didn't label any of these doors.

“Mate! Good to see you. All rested up from yesterday?”

Stepping into English's new office, the bunny receptionist who had led me here turned back towards her desk.

“Good enough, buddy. You got a hunt for me?”

Glancing around, there was little in the spacious room but the walls.

English sat on a simple wooden chair behind an even simpler desk. There was a bank of windows behind him, but other than that the room was unadorned.

Well, other than the stacks of paper that seemed to have collected in the corners.

Picking up a sheet, I gave it a quick glance. It was a purchase order for some bounty hunting equipment.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, Mate.” English was behind me in a heartbeat, pulling the paper from my fingers. “I should read 'em. That's what got me in trouble last time. I try, Mate, I really do, but they bring this stuff in by the box. No one could read it all.”

I rolled my eyes. “You do realize who you're talking to? I'm the fella who managed to keep afloat running *the government*. Don't talk to me about papers.”

He laughed.

“And if memory serves, Mate, you weren't all that happy about the reading either.” He yawned and bent over backwards in a stretch, nearly touching his heels. “But on to more exciting things. You want a hunt, Mate? You've got one. How does a bank robber sound?”

To be frank, it sounded like a lot of work.

The robber was a bear, and a big one at that. He'd managed a smash and grab at one of the banks yesterday and the Storm Front scouts had traced him back to his hideout this morning.

“Stop!”

The bugger had managed to get past us back at his apartment. Now he was making a break for it down the side street.

“I got him.”

English was somewhere behind me, having taken the brunt of the bear's attack when he pushed past us for the street.

Despite his size this guy could move. It took everything I had to close on him.

A leap and I was on his shaggy brown furred back. It almost seemed like he didn't notice.

“Alright, I said *stop!*” Not having much of any other options, I clubbed the bear on the side of the head with my fist.

That got his attention. He staggered to the side when I hit him, falling off balance. That was enough for me to throw my own weight with him and pull him from his feet.

Scrambling away, I had to fight to make sure I wasn't underneath him as he went down. The guy was big enough to snap my leg.

Letting out a breath, I wiped my brow as I pulled the cuffs that hung from my belt.

“James Urson, you are being arrested for the robbery of a V-Town collective...” Bending forward, I snapped one of the oversized cuffs over his wrists before he had time to collect his senses, “You are being brought to...”

I never got a chance to finish. Reaching down to snap the other cuff, my arm went numb.

“Gah!” A second later a shot of pain ran up as the cuff I'd been holding fell to the ground with a clank.

The bear took the opening for all it was worth.

Rolling to his feet, he whacked me on the side of the head with his uncuffed hand and began running.

I was no longer in any condition to follow him. Not only was my arm useless now, but I was seeing double as I tried to pick myself up from the asphalt.

“Never worry, Mate. I got this.”

A heartbeat later English's golden form leapt over me, racing after the bear.

The quarry almost made it to the next corner before English was upon him. They went down in a tangle of limbs and it was less than a second before I heard the click of the other cuff.

A moment after that the bear's rough voice ramped up, cursing out the both of us.

“You okay, Mate?” English asked once we'd dropped the man off at Storm Front for processing.

I was still rubbing my arm, trying to get any feeling back in it.

“I'll be okay, I think.” I hadn't hurt it in the chase. The only wound on it was the papercut from yesterday. And, oddly, it looked no better.

“Let's have a peek, Mate.”

One could never accuse English of being overly sensitive to personal space. A moment later he had my arm in his grasp, running his hands up and down it.

“Dude! Back off.” I tried to snatch it back, but he held tight.

“You can't feel when I do this?” He brought his fingers together in the fleshy part of my elbow.

“Nothing.” I shrugged with my other shoulder.

The lion set his lips in a straight line.

“Mate, you're going to a doctor. Now.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It's nothing, I'm sure. I'll just sleep it off.”

Taking me by my good arm, he dragged me out to the street and towards V-town general.

I've said it before, and I'll say it as many more times as it takes. I don't like hospitals.

Well, I've met few people who do, but hospitals always give me a bad feeling. Not the least of the reasons is the smell.

No matter how much they clean, these places always smell of sickness and death. Makes sense, you don't come here if you're feeling good. That alone would be enough, but the endless cleaning solutions they use to try and keep the place antiseptic have scents all their own, and they make me nauseous.

The end result is that I can't walk in the front doors of a place like this without wanting to vomit.

I guess being the 'administrator' did have a few perks. It let me skip the line in the emergency room. That, added to the generous health insurance that Storm Front maintained for its hunters, got me to a doctor in the click of a claw.

English had disappeared somewhere once he was assured that I would be seeing someone. He made an excuse about having to 'run the company' or something.

I'll admit I was a bit surprised when I saw who walk into my examination room. It was the same doctor I'd taken Rebecca to back in Horseshoe Bay. A human.

She didn't even look up from her clipboard when she walked in.

"Mr. Taggart? What seems to be the problem?"

"Hi, Doc."

Pausing a moment, she glanced up. A quick shock crossed her face, then she smiled.

"Oh, hello. I was wondering when I'd see you again."

I cocked an eye ridge. "Really?"

She shrugged. "Of course. There aren't many doctors that specialize in patients with regeneration, and most of them were killed back in the quake. Most doctors don't want to deal with people like you, you don't react to treatment like most people."

I rolled my eyes and smiled. "Gee, make me feel special."

I gave the doc a quick run down on what had happened to me today, the chase and the bear.

She inspected my arm, quickly finding the still swollen papercut. I told her about the letter yesterday.

"Do you still have the paper?"

I shook my head. "No. I threw it out. Why?"

She didn't bother responding, instead finding an empty needle in a nearby cupboard and prepping it.

"Uh, Doc? What ya going to do with that? I'm not so hot on needles."

She didn't even pause before bracing my arm under her armpit and pulling my swollen finger out for another look.

"We need a sample of the poison. Now."

I didn't even get a warning before she stabbed the needle in my wound and drew out a not inconsiderable amount of blood.

The rest of my arm may be numb, but that particular spot *was not*.

I think I reached high C when I screamed.

It's not exactly a manly thing to admit, but I passed out at some point around her getting the needle half full. Watching my own blood, brackish and black from the sore, slowly fill the tube was enough to knock me out cold.

When I next awoke I wasn't alone in the room.

I can't speak for other people, but waking up, the first sense that comes back online is smell. There was someone near by. I wasn't quite awake enough yet to figure out *who*, but I knew for a fact it was a close friend. Close enough that I wasn't alarmed. The familiar scent was comforting in this antiseptic place.

The next sense online was hearing. Well, that was useless. I could hardly make out a thing. If I strained I could hear a calm, measured breathing.

It took me a few more moments to get to the point where I was ready to open my eyes, by then I wasn't surprised to see who sat straight as a rod in a chair next to the table I lay upon.

"Hello, Jon."

The police dog nodded curtly in my direction. A smile never cracked his lips.

"Afternoon, Sir."

I sighed. "If you're calling me 'sir' again this must be bad."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "The toxicology reports just came back, Tommy. You were injected with a lethal dose of ricin."

"Ricin?" I scratched my head, "What's that?"

Taking a sheet of papers that were laid neatly on the end table beside him, he held them out to me. I declined to reach out for them.

"Ricin, Sir, is the single most deadly natural toxin known to exist on the planet. It's cultivated from the castor bean."

I shrugged. "You're speaking Greek to me, Jon. Remember, my education is in history, not biology."

A smile finally did slip to his lips, though it was barely detectable.

"Ricin, Sir--"

He didn't get a chance to even start again before the doctor was back, pushing a whole cart of medical equipment with her.

"What he was about to say," she began, "Is that less than two milligrams of ricin, either injected or breathed, would be enough to kill." She gave me a critical look up and down, "We found at least three milligrams in the blood we pulled from your finger. You should be wallowing in pain right now, hardly even able to move and well on your way to death. The only thing that saved you was your regeneration. It kept rebuilding your cells as fast as the toxin could kill them, keeping the poison firmly in the tip of your finger. You only even noticed when it got into your nerves."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or break out in a cold sweat.

"So I'm okay now, right doc?"

She nodded slowly. "As far as we can tell. We pulled a lot of blood from you, but it looks like you should be alright." I glanced down to my finger only to notice it was bound in a thick bandage. "Though I'd like to keep you here overnight for observation..."

"Not a chance, Doc." I tried to back away, but I'd forgotten I was sitting on a table pushed up against the far wall. All I managed to do was bump the back of my head.

"But, Sir, you--"

"No." I put everything I had into that word. It worked. I managed to pitch my voice into that commanding growl that I'd heard my Dad use so many times. "I'm not staying here. And," I levelled them with a glare, "We're not talking about this to anyone. I'm sure Sayer already knows, but no one else needs to. I don't need the public knowing that someone is stalking me again."

With that I began pushing my way out of the room.

The doc was loth to see me go, but I gave her few options. She tried to load me up with pills to take to ward off whatever poison might be left, but I pushed them back to her. We both knew my body would destroy the medication just as quickly as it had the poison.

Back on the street, I was happy to get the clinging scent of antiseptic out of my nose.

"Sir, we need to wait here for your guard," Came Jon's' voice from just behind my shoulder.

I kept walking.

"How many folks know about this, Jon?" I asked as I pushed forward, diving into the crowd of people that milled up and down the street.

"Few," He replied, "The doctor, Commissioner Sayer, and myself. I was the first informed by the hospital as I am, being your personal attache, responsible for your well being."

"Fine," I let out a long breath, "Let's keep it that way."

Chapter 2: What's Five Times Four?

The walk back to the apartment took longer than I'd anticipated. We had to detour around construction twice. And not only that but I was tired.

I didn't want to think it was the poison, but rather I was run out because my regeneration had done so much to fight it off.

Jon began nattering on about different things as we walked. Separating him from the force had been the best thing ever to happen to him. He was starting, however slowly, to develop a personality of his own now.

I didn't listen too closely to what he was saying, going on as he was about building security and government matters.

"And I've begun plans for your and Rebecca's wedding, but I really do need the two of you to pick a date."

Wait... what?

I stopped dead, Jon ran flat into my back a second later.

"Jon, you're doing *what?*" I turned to him.

His face was neutral, he didn't seem to react at all to me.

"I've begun plans for your and Miss Rebecca's wedding, Tommy." He paused for a moment, then something seemed to click in his head. "Oh. I don't believe we ever did discuss it in depth, did we? The announcement of your engagement was six months ago. No one else seemed to be interested in starting the planning, and your office has been receiving inquirers daily about it, so I took it upon myself." For just a moment a spark of good humour passed his lips, "To be honest, Sir, it's more of a hobby for me right now than a job. I've had comparatively little to do since you've left the office of mayor, and it's good to have something to occupy my time."

I just raised a hand to my forehead as I turned and started off again.

"A hobby, Jon? Seriously? You're planning my wedding as a *hobby?*" I let out a long breath.

I was about to tare into him with a long, and likely not that well thought out, speech about certain things being private matters when my eyes twitched again.

Just as last time, I saw something out of the corner of my eye that didn't belong. In a world that walked on two feet, this shadow didn't.

Spinning around on the crowded street, I nearly knocked Jon back into the milling bystanders.

I didn't even know what I was doing before I was already off and running, Jon at my heels.

It took me only a heartbeat to make it to the alleyway where I'd seen... whatever it was.

There was nothing here, no footprints on the hard concrete. The only thing left was an odd, spicy scent that I couldn't quite place.

About to turn away, another flash of movement came from down the alleyway. It was far further away than it had any right to be. No one could run that fast on two legs.

Without even thinking about it, I fell to my four legged stance. I almost never ran this way, but it was my only option for catching up with the shadow.

Well, that didn't work.

On all fours, I got about two steps before I had to put weight on my wounded left hand.

At least I didn't scream this time.

The arm wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before, but it just couldn't support weight. My entire limb felt like it had the consistency of boiled fat.

I went down face first on the pavement. Thankfully, before I could pick up any speed.

"Sir!" Jon was at my side a moment later, pulling me quickly up into a sitting position and propping me against the wall.

All I could see now was the dog's back. He stood before me, surveying the now empty alleyway and trying to place himself between me and anyone, or anything, that might be poised to attack.

"I'm okay, Jon." I huffed out a breath. "I just thought I saw something and forgot my arm can't hold weight."

"Be that as it may, Sir," The dog pulled a radio from one of the countless pockets on his uniform, "I believe it best if we wait here until your full guard arrives."

I groaned and set my head back against the wall.

The rest of the journey back was, thankfully, uneventful. I took the time to flex my arm and try to get some strength back in it. By the time we made it to the apartment it almost felt back to normal. That, and the papercut on my finger was nearly gone.

"I can make it from here, boys." I dismissed the cops as I stepped into the lobby. They didn't seem to want to go, milling about outside the building, but the only one to follow me in was Jon.

"Thanks for being there, Jon." I patted my friend on the shoulder, "I just hope this isn't a sign of things to come."

He nodded sharply. "Agreed, Sir. I'll be in my office if you need me." He narrowed his eyes, "And, Tommy, you *will* tell me if anything of note happens, won't you?"

"Sure, Jon." I sighed. "Why wouldn't I, you're my bodyguard, eh?"

Back up on the third floor, I unlocked the apartment door with the key that Jon had discretely palmed me. There was no one home, Rebecca must be out on the town.

A stack of letters had been pressed under the door, but these one's looked more conventional. I guess my courier dog hadn't been able to find me while I'd been in hospital.

Far more gingerly this time, I opened the paperwork. Government form, government form, government form, bill.

You know, I'm almost starting to envy those people who's post consists of junk mail.

Picking out a report at random to read, I was somewhat disappointed.

It was a police report, though not directly from Sayer. Apparently unrest was on the rise in the

city.

I was just about ready to start banging my head against the wall.

The report read that things had been good all winter, at an all time low, but they've started up again in just the last couple of weeks. We were still *okay*, but we were no longer *good*.

Wonderful. Everything I'd worked for, fought so hard for and we were just going back to business as usual.

Fighting to keep myself from falling into a funk, I read the rest of the paperwork. There was nothing of interest until I got to the last letter.

It was from the expedition the police force had sent to Edmonton. I didn't envy those dogs. The entire operation had been done on the hush, only the police involved. And few if any of the cops had experience working outside the city, likely so much as tracking across the mountains.

Edmonton had been an... interesting experience for English, Rebecca, Jon, Amstys, and I. Frankly, I think we'd found what caused the Cataclysm. And then proceeded to break it.

The fact that English and I had spent some time as humans and Rebecca as a cat not withstanding.

Anyway, according to the paper the expedition had only just arrived back in the city last week.

Putting down the paper, I left the apartment and went to go find Jon. This couldn't wait.

About an hour later I had the lead dog from the expedition with me in one of the small offices tucked away on the main floor of the apartment building. I'd thought about taking him up to the apartment to talk, but I didn't want to make my space into a workplace again.

It was just the two of us in here, I'd had to chase Jon off. I wanted to make sure I could talk to this dog one-on-one, without anyone else interjecting or overhearing.

"Inspector Aspen, was it?"

The dog nodded. I was surprised to see a smoothness in his motions. The German Shepard looked almost exactly like Jon. Both their bodies were near identical, like they were brothers. The only obvious way to tell the difference between them was the small amount more brass on this one's shoulders.

"Yes, Sir. Inspector George Aspen. I was the commanding officer in the special detachment on operation Phoenix."

Again I could hear it, but more to the point I could see it in the man's motions. I had no doubt this dog had been as rigid and stuffed as any other police officer just a few months ago, but his time in the woods had smoothed out those sharp, institutionalized edges, made him... well, for lack of a better word, *human*.

"Can you give me a report, George?" The dog didn't even start when I called him by his first name. That alone was proof that he'd mellowed.

The man shrugged. "Everything is in the report that I'm sure you were given, Sir."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. I'm not looking for the official line, George. I want to know what really happened. And you can start with the name 'phoenix'."

A slight smile slipped to his lips.

"I didn't pick the name, Sir. But the theme of the mission was to learn more about the Cataclysm. To see if it could be possible to understand it, perhaps even control it. Our mission, Sir, was to learn all we could, see if perhaps we could turn back some small measure of the damage that had been done to the world."

I shook my head. "Not exactly a small order, eh? Please tell me you're not stupid enough to believe you could pull something like that off."

The hint of smile on the man's face grew. "No, Sir. Not quite *that* foolish. The goal of the overall mission was to control the Cataclysm. But the aim of my particular expedition was simply intelligence gathering. To blaze a permanent trail from V-town to Edmonton and further document any dangers that were encountered. The, ahem, debriefing from Constable Oaks, yourself, and Mr. English suggested that you ran across some extraordinary circumstances."

I could see him blushing under his fur.

"How did you manage to get all the way out there?" I asked. "I thought you cops weren't really that well prepared for operating outside the city. I know Jon wasn't."

The dog narrowed his eyes a small measure, his ears pulling back slightly.

"We wouldn't have made it alone, Sir." There was a slight strain in his voice, "We were less than a day out of the city when we were... waylaid. The six men in my expedition were encircled in the middle of the night and... informed that there was a change of plans."

I sat forward on my chair. The silence of the room seemed close around us. "What happened?"

The stress on the man's face grew slightly, then melted away as he took another look at me.

"The hunters, Sir. We were unexpectedly met by a party of six hunters. They were led by a female wolf by the name of Lucy. I believe you know her."

Groaning, I sat back. I could just see where this was going. Lucy was my cousin. The daughter of my uncle Griss, the hunt master.

"She insisted that they join us, Sir. I was, ahem, in no position to argue. It was made plain to me that if I should refuse I would not be continuing on."

Yep, that sounded like the hunters.

"They joined us for the journey, and I don't feel ashamed to admit to you, Sir, that I was happy to have them. Without the hunters we wouldn't have survived a month, particularly after the onset of winter."

"But anyway, Sir, we did make the journey over the mountains with relatively few problems after meeting up with our contacts Renfru and Ornthi." The dog shuddered a little bit when he mentioned the computer. "Then we continued on to your encounter in Calgary."

It was my turn to shudder when he mentioned Al-Sedextrus.

"There was no one left there, Sir." I let out a breath that I hadn't realized I was holding. "We started by sending forth our female officers to investigate the area, but they found no living people. They did find the compound you described, but it's been abandoned."

You know, I could have cheered.

"From there, Sir, we moved north through Red Deer. The citizens of that town were pleased to see us, willing to trade."

That was no surprise. Now came the real question.

"What did you find up in Edmonton?" I asked.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "Everything is detailed in the report, Sir. There was, ahem, little to be recovered. None of the systems we worked on appeared to be operational."

I tried to hold back a growl from my voice.

"I'm not interested in what you wrote in the report, George." Reaching forward, I set my hand on his. Not aggressive, but my motion into his personal space was obvious. "I want to hear it from your lips. What did you find?"

"We found banks upon banks of computers, Sir. Most of them corroded by the acid that had pooled on the floor."

That matched with what I remembered.

"Were you able to salvage *any* of them? Even a single one of those computers could create

enough of a disturbance to affect reality in a small area.”

Again he looked away. His voice was little more than a cough when he spoke again.

“No.”

I think I just got my answer.

“Fine.” I cleared my throat, “Were you able to recover any information about the people who had gotten there before us? If I recall correctly, I think they were from Ottawa. Have we been able to open any communications with them?”

The dog looked relieved to be talking about something else.

“You have a good memory, Sir. You're correct. What little we could find on them suggests that they were indeed from Ottawa. The, uh, capitol of Canada. So far we've been unable to raise them on any form of long range communications, but you'll have to excuse us. It's been a long time since we've tried to talk to anyone via wireless long range, and no one is really sure how.”

I smiled. A real one this time.

“That's alright, George. Just pass a message along will you?”

He looked up, ears perking.

“Tell whoever's in charge of the communication effort to contact Ornthi at Kicking Horse Pass. I'll bet you he... it can tell you everything you need to know once you identify yourselves as the V-town police.”

I let the cop go a few minutes later, after doing my best to grill him for any more information about the Edmonton computers. He was unusually cagey. I'd never had one of the police baldfaced lie to me before and I could tell you for a fact that he didn't enjoy it.

Heading back up to the apartment, I was starting to get hungry. It was well past lunch now and I'd missed eating while I'd been laid out in the hospital.

Opening the door to the apartment, I didn't notice it for almost ten seconds I was so intent on food.

The scent of someone else.

My fur bristled out almost before it hit me. Someone was here. In *my* home.

One foot in the kitchen, I stopped dead, breathing deeply through my nose.

There was *someone* here.

The scent wasn't right. I hadn't smelt something like this in a long time.

It wasn't a person... not quite. It almost smelt more like the prey I'd hunted while out in the forest.

The scrape of claws on linoleum caused my head to spin around.

There was... a dog?

No, wait. 'Dog' wasn't quite the right term. This was a real *dog*, four legs and all. Not a dog like Jon or the police. A real one.

He looked something like the old golden retrievers from before the Cataclysm, just rougher and more unkempt. He pressed himself back into the corner of the room as soon as he realized I saw him, trying to hide in the shadow of a cabinet.

It took everything I had to force my fur back down and keep the growl from my voice when I spoke. This was *my* home, but I needed to find out why he was here before I ripped him nose from tail.

“Uhh... hello, boy.” I wasn't sure how I was supposed to address a dog, I can't say I've ever seen one in my life, I thought they'd long died out. The only place I'd ever seen them was in my books.

“What are you doing here?”

Slowly going down to one knee, I reached out a hand towards him. He was still a good four

feet away, but he sniffed me.

I was just about to move another inch forward when he bolted. Wow, that dog could move.

In the span of a heartbeat he was almost past me towards the still open apartment door.

Lunging to the side, I was able to grasp one of his hind legs as he flew fast. I had to be careful that my claws didn't cut into him.

A yip and the dog stopped short, thumping down on the apartment floor well short of the door. He lay there for a moment before coiling around like a snake to bite at my hand.

He was fast, but now we were back into my element. I may have never hunted dog before, but I'd hunted most other things on four legs.

I let go an instant before his jaws closed around me, shifting my grip to his now conveniently located neck.

He yipped as I tightened my fingers and tried to pull away. It was a reaction, motion made without thought. Exactly what I wanted. Letting his pelt slide through my fingers, I adjusted my grip to right behind his jaw. I could feel the pulse of his frantic heart now.

I almost thought I had him when he switched tactics. Rather than pulling back again and helping me choke the life out of him, he lunged forward.

The dog's muzzle slammed in my gut, sending the air whooshing from my lungs. Not for the first time that day I was laying on my back, wondering what had happened to me.

On the bright side, it was little better for the hound. I rolled onto my elbows to see him staggering back and forth, shaking himself and trying to clear his mind.

Reaching out, the only thing I could grab was his tail.

Now, speaking as a guy with one of his own, grabbing another fellow's tail is a bit of a dirty move, somewhat akin to kicking a man in the crotch, but it was the only thing I could reach.

That got another yip out of him as he took off, dragging me behind.

Oh bugger.

I'd been doing pretty good so far at keeping the battle contained, but that changed in a hurry.

Up on the counter he jumped, pulling me along behind. I wouldn't usually have all that many cooking implements, preferring my food raw, but Rebecca was picky about such things. The first appliance to meet its end was our mixer. The dog kicked it off the counter with a back paw, sending it crashing to the floor. He likely didn't even notice.

Next was a set of mixing bowls, then soon after some flatware.

And that was just the start.

"Alright, *that's enough*." I was pissed off enough now to give up on fighting clean and give his tail a savage yank. It wasn't enough to pull the darn thing free, or even cause any major spinal damage. But it got his attention alright.

The dog turned to snap at me again, but all he got for his trouble was my fist squarely in his wet black nose.

"Yip!" The cry was less of an inarticulate sound now and more of a word. What came next were definitely words from the dog's mouth, though I'd just as soon not repeat them.

Huh?

The dog's tail slipped from my limp hands. What in all the gods' names was going on here? He was a *dog*. Dogs don't *talk*.

The only thing that kept the mutt from escaping was the fact I was standing squarely in the kitchen doorway, blocking the only exit. He backed up in the far corner of the room and began whimpering, trying to nurse both his tail and split nose at the same time.

"Okay, you're going to tell me what's going on. *Right now*." I levelled a glare at... whatever it

was. I was just starting to work out an idea.

He didn't say anything.

Letting out a sigh, I fell to my haunches, making sure not to move from the doorway.

"You're a Class Five, aren't you?"

All the people in V-town were 'classed'. It really doesn't mean anything more than our appearance. A Class One was nearly indistinguishable from a human, walking upright, hairless skin and all that. I was a Class Three, the most common, furred, anamlistic head and bipedal. This had to be a Class Five, indistinguishable from an animal.

But I thought the Class Fives were extinct. I don't think I've ever seen one...

The only time I'd seen a Class Five was almost two years ago, when English and I had been running from the police.

I let out a long breath and lifted a hand to my forehead.

"Come on," I said to him, "I know you can speak. I heard it. You might as well tell me your name. I'm Tommy."

His voice was rough when he finally spoke. It's what obvious he was unused to it, I doubt he used the English language much.

"I know who you are." The words were deeper than what I'd expect from someone his size, no more than a hundred or so pounds. "You're the wolf. Fisher told us all about you."

"Fisher?" I had to rack my brain for a moment. That had been the name of the Class Five I'd met. "Did he send you? What's wrong?"

The laugh that escaped his lips was most definitely not human. I was only able to recognize it as such due to our shared canine ancestry.

"He did not *send* me. I'm here because I choose to be. Because I volunteered to explore your strange world. I'm here to give you a message. And I have a name, you can stop calling me 'boy'. It's Sunny."

Leaning up against the door frame, I let some of the tension fall from my body.

"Okay, Sunny." I took a deep breath, "What's your message?"

He was about to speak when his ears twitched. Mine did at the same time.

Someone was running up the hall. No, multiple someones.

In the beat of a heart the dog was on his feet again, rushing towards me. I almost thought he was about to attack again when he leapt over my head. I reached for his tail, but my position left him too far away.

In an instant Sunny was out in the hallway, skidding around the corner and racing off in the opposite direction of the oncoming footsteps.

I didn't bother even standing up. There was no danger in the oncoming rush, I'd recognize those footsteps anywhere.

The perfectly measured sprint of a detachment of V-town police. And, if I didn't miss my mark, Jon leading them.

"Sir?" The familiar Shepard's head poked around the apartment door a moment later. His face was relaxed, but I could see the stress in his movements. "We heard a commotion. Is everything alright?"

I waved my hand as he stepped closer. "Yeah, it's fine, Jon. I just... ah, got a but clumsy in the kitchen here."

The dog's nose twitched as he came closer. He could smell the adrenaline of a fight, but more than that he could spell the presence of Sunny.

With a twitch of his hand he dismissed the other dogs. They left without a word or a thought. For just a moment I wondered what Jon had said to them to allow them access to my apartment. Jon was a cop, but he was *my* cop. We'd already gone through a round of split allegiances when it came to who the other members of the V-town police force would listen to when it came down to the wire. So far Commissioner Sayer had won.

Jon gently shut the door when the last of the officers had left, then took a deep breath.

That was followed by a wracking sneeze that nearly lifted him from his feet.

I grinned.

"Sir?" He didn't quite know how to put it in words. He knew that the scent the now permeated the room was *wrong*, but he, unlike I, had never met a Class Five.

I chuckled as I put my hand on his shoulder and led him to a seat at the counter.

"I said I was having a little trouble in the kitchen, Jon. I just never mentioned that there was someone else in there with me at the time."

He nodded silently.

"What do you know of Class Fives?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed as he furrowed his brow. Normally Jon had the answer to any question on the tip of his tongue. The fact he had to think about this was interesting. That would suggest that the police department hadn't had to deal with Class Fives in a long time. Long enough to remove them from their training.

"Very little, Tommy." He scratched his chin, "I know the classification exists, and its requirements, but I'm not aware of any citizens that meet them." He began ticking off numbers on his fingers as he thought. "The vast majority of those in V-town are Class Threes like us, perhaps sixty percent. Another twenty percent are Class Twos like Mayor Max, and ten percent are Class Ones as your mother is." He glanced my way, but I just motioned him on. "Then five percent are Class Fours and the remaining five percent are human."

I raised an eye ridge, "So not a single Class Five?"

He shrugged. "Not that I'm aware of. They existed immediately after the Cataclysm but seemed to fade out over the next couple of decades. The documentation from that time is limited to say the least. I'm not sure what happened to them."

I let out a breath. "I think I may have a guess."

"Oh?" He glanced at me.

"Not right now." I looked back to my newly destroyed kitchen. "Jon, I need you to do me a favour."

He didn't even hesitate before responding. "Anything, Sir."

I laughed. "Don't worry, nothing big. I just need you to do some research on the Class Fives for me, and keep it quiet. I'd prefer that no one know about it, especially the police."

He gave me a bit of a queer look but nodded his head. "Of course. May I, uh, ask why?"

I pointed a thumb back at the mess.

"Who do you think made that? I was just about to question him before you fellas scared him off."

Jon looked abashed for a moment before responding, "Sorry, Tommy. I'll get right on it."

Jon left a few moments later, leaving me alone in the apartment. Finally.

I'd come up here because I was hungry, now I was starving. But looking at the broken bits of mixer and plates that now carpeted the floor, I just couldn't eat until I got it cleaned up.

I'm not a neat freak, really I'm not, just like Rebecca, but it was the fact the mess had been made

by someone else, an intruder, that I couldn't leave it. It was a sign that they'd been here, broken into *my home*.

Twenty minutes and a couple of full bin bags later and I had things more or less cleaned away. We were light on appliances and some dishes, but nothing that money couldn't replace, and I had more than enough of that.

Sitting down at the counter with my well deserved side of beef, I still couldn't enjoy it. What in all the gods' names was happening? Things had been going great until yesterday!

I'd been able to get through the entire winter and most of the spring without anything funky happening to me.

Okay, bounty hunting isn't exactly a *predictable* business – and neither is politics for that matter – but I'd been doing pretty good. How did things change so fast?

Someone trying to poison me, raising unhappiness, and the return of the Class Fives. And I didn't even *do anything*!

I finally tore into the beef like it was personally responsible for my troubles. Ripping it to shreds between my fangs, I wolfed down the entire thing in seconds and still wanted more.

It was only while I was licking my fingers clean that I realized the cut on my finger was completely gone. Well, that was good news for a change. My regeneration had kicked in and gotten rid of that little problem for me. They must have done a good job cleaning the wound while I'd been out.

Standing up, I took a look out the window to the street below. People milled about in all directions. There was no sign of discontentment here. I couldn't help but wonder where the police had gotten their numbers from, though I didn't for a second doubt them.

Then the thought hit me.

I hadn't done anything to cause problems in the last little while, I've been all but divorced from the government.

I should go talk to the person who is making the calls these days. Mayor Max.

The walk to City Hall was, dare I say it, almost peaceful.

That was once I gave a slip to the dogs who were trying to guard me.

I let Jon know what I was up to, it was only fair – and good sense – but I didn't want the rest of the guards to know. Jon knew me well enough to leave me be, but I'd have to beat the police detachment off with a stick now that there had been an attempt on my life.

Walking casually out into the small back garden of the apartment complex, I took a moment to sniff the flowers that someone had planted here. There wasn't much to really enjoy yet, the growing season having yet to start, but I took the brief moment of quiet for all it was worth.

Sparing a glance over my shoulder, I took a quick hop and got my fingers over the top of the concrete wall that surrounded the garden.

Oof. I hadn't had to do this in a while. The wall was a good seven feet tall and the concrete was sealed and smooth without any footholds. It was all upper body strength to get myself pulled up here, and that was something that – to be honest – I didn't exactly have in abundant supply.

A couple of pained gasps for air and some scrambling and I managed to get my chest up and over.

Oi. I'd have to start working out at this rate. I was no better than I'd been when I first started hunting with English.

A quick roll got me atop of the wall. From there I was able to drop silently to the alley on the other side.

Crouching in the shadows, I crept towards the main roadway. I could see the cops from here. They were trying their best to look inconspicuous, but, like always, they stood out like a cracked claw. The V-town police may be efficient and incorruptible, but one would never call them *inconspicuous*.

Clad in their bright blue uniforms, they stood straight as rods around the front entrance to the apartment complex. They didn't interfere with anyone who passed by, but every man, woman, and child who went anywhere near those doors got a good long stare.

Taking a deep breath, I waited for a crowd of people to come down the street before stepping from the shadows.

First rule of not being noticed, *don't act like you don't want to be noticed*.

I walked down the street bold as day, not even bothering to keep to the side of the road. The cops never even saw me leave.

City Hall was looking good. Well, as good as one could expect considering it had been a pile of rubble not a year ago.

The old City Hall had been build in the most modern style. It had been an impressive sight, no doubt, with its towering spires and wide windows, but it had become nothing more than dust when the quake struck.

The new City Hall, built in part under my watch, was a more conservative structure. That's not to say it didn't have all the bobbles and badges that one would expect of the primary government building in the city, but they were all added on as opposed to part of the superstructure.

How the original architects had ever been drunk enough to trade security for appearances I'd never know.

Being able to mingle with the crowds of people who milled through the wide hallways was a bit of a treat for me.

Every other time I'd been here I'd been working. A loveless, drudgery of a task. And I had, every time without fail, been fully brushed out and wrapped in one of Smith's suits.

Now, filthy with street grime and still a little strung out from my time in the hospital, no one spared me so much as a second glance. I was just another brown pelted wolf among dozens of others.

There were two things that hit me when I got here.

One, there were protesters out front, something I hadn't seen in a while, and two, they'd remodelled the building again.

The remodelling wasn't a huge surprise. Without a City Hall at all the government had been in a bad way. That was why they'd moved back in as soon as possible. Folks had been working out of this building almost before the walls were up. As a result the floor plan was seemingly always in flux as folks were punted out of yet another part of the building for more construction.

I only found out they'd moved the mayor's office when I opened the door to find the woman's washroom.

Yeah. I got out of there real quick.

The longest single line in the whole place was the information booth. Made sense. *Everyone* had to come here to figure out where they were supposed to go.

Waiting my own fair turn in the seemingly endless line, I got a good look at the people who'd come to City Hall this fine day.

They ran the gauntlet from businessman to senior. It was a little surprising to see just how calm everyone was. No one made a fuss or pushed ahead in the line, everyone just stood quietly and waited their turn.

At long last I made it to the front of the line to meet the overworked receptionist who waited

there.

She was a deer, and I had to keep myself from adding 'with a caught in the headlights look'. I think she was probably somewhere on the ninth hour of an eight hour shift.

"Hello." I smiled. "Could you tell me where they moved the mayor's office this week?"

She didn't even look up at me before starting to flip through the loose leaf binder that sat before her.

"It got packed up last week..." She began flipping faster before coming to an abrupt stop on a seemingly random page. "And was reassigned yesterday." With a flick of a wrist she tossed that book aside to start flipping through another one underneath.

She still hadn't looked up when she next spoke. "Are you sure it's the mayor you want? If you're here to air a grievance or deliver a petition I can direct you to the proper office. Honestly," A tired smile worked its way to her face, "It would be quicker that way. Not many people get to see the mayor, he's got a schedule that's backed up weeks."

Reaching forward, I set a hand gently on her arm.

"Don't worry, Diane," I'd had to scrape my brain for her name, but it came to me just in time. She'd been working reception when I was here too, "I think I'll be able to get in alright."

Looking up, her eyes widened.

"Mr. Taggart! We haven't seen you in months!"

I grinned lopsidedly. "I've made a point to let Max run the show without my interference." Discretely, I lifted a finger to my lips, "And I'm keeping this visit under the radar, eh?"

She nodded meekly and smiled. "It's good to have you back, Mr. Taggart."

I rolled my eyes. "It's Tommy now."

I got my directions from her a few moments later and was off.

It was a good thing I stopped to ask. They'd moved the mayor's office clear to the other side of the building. I'd never have been able to find it myself.

And I'm guessing this wasn't its final location. Scrunched between a boiler room and some uniform storage, it wasn't all that much larger than a broom closet.

And, by the sign that had been hastily pasted on the door, the space was being shared with the assistant mayor.

A quick knock and I stepped back.

This hallway, unlike just about every other one in City Hall, was relatively quiet. I'd almost wager that was why this particular location had been chosen.

"Come in!" A gruff voice called, "Deloris, is that you?"

Turning the handle, the door screamed as I slipped through.

"Deloris?" I asked, "Don't know her, Max. Are you two timing on Kate?"

The red skinned oni glanced up from his papers with a look of confusion before recognizing me.

"Tommy!" He tried to bolt from his desk, but the little room was too cluttered with papers and boxes for him to make it more than two feet. He stopped trying to slog around the desk after a few steps and went back to sit at his chair, waiting for me to pick my way towards him.

My own journey took the better part of a minute. It was less than five strides to Max's desk, but there was hardly a square foot of free floor space in the room.

Finally making it to the chair across from him, I pulled myself up, standing on the seat and falling to my haunches to get my feet free of the papers.

"Heya, Max." The smile that covered my face was real. Max had been one of my best friends back at my old job before I met English. And the only man I would ever vote for to be mayor. "How

ya doing?"

If his bloodshot eyes were any indication, I think he was doing just about as well as I'd been in the job.

I couldn't help but feel my tail begin to wag.

Oddly though, he smiled when he spoke.

"I've got supply problems of every sort, a half dozen factions that want to pull me every which way, a dozen parts of the public service that are ready to collapse, and," He cocked an eye at me, "My boss sitting on the chair across from me, baiting me for everything I'm worth. You want your job back?" He paused for a moment, thinking, "Oh gods, don't tell me you're here because that letter worked!"

Wincing, I leaned back against the chair, almost toppling it over with my overly high centre of balance.

"Not a chance, Max. I'm just here to see how things are going. I've had a bugger of a day and just wanted to check that nothing odd is going on over here."

Max's pulled face became a little more strained as he paused to think for a moment.

"We have had a bit of an off thing for the last little while, Tommy. Reports from Sayer have warned of growing unrest on the streets."

I closed my eyes for a moment before turning to look out the small window beside us. I couldn't see anything but a few puffy clouds in a halfway clear sky.

"I know, Max. I've been getting those reports too. I was hoping that you might have an explanation for it. I haven't seen any indication of trouble." Unconsciously, I rubbed the tip of my finger where the scar was already long gone. "Well, not until yesterday."

He shook his head and was about to start into a, likely long, explanation when the door behind me bumped open.

"Sorry, Max, they were all out of sushi. You'll have to make due with a fish burger. Hey, it's all the same, right?"

Turning, I saw Dean Jameswell, formerly of the Progressive party, now the Assistant Mayor and part of the Open party, step through the door with his hands full of bags and papers. He kicked the door closed behind him without even looking up from the report in his hand.

"Hi, Dean."

I have to admit it, I pitched my voice a touch lower than I needed to, just a shade closer to a growl, just to watch him.

He didn't disappoint.

Between him and Graham, I was getting good at making cats jump.

I had to spring forward to catch the bags of food he dropped when he leapt. The fact it likely looked like I was springing on him didn't exactly help the situation.

"Breathe, breathe," I had to hold him still with one hand as I clutched the paper bags in the other. "Just breathe, Dean. It's only me."

I smiled as he forced his eyes to focus on my face. This man had been a terror when he'd been running against me in the election last year, but having a high-stress job like assistant mayor seemed to have fixed that.

"Tommy?" His voice was breathless, "Gods, I thought you were someone else."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I got that impression."

Letting him go, I opened the paper bags and pressed my head in for a sniff.

They both smelt like fish.

Sticking my tongue out I handed them back. Be it sushi or cooked tuna I never had a taste for

seafood.

The rest of the visit went a little more smoothly. Max and Dean had, government wise, everything as in hand as one could expect. Neither of them could say much for the unrest.

Max did his best to keep away from the topic of Sayer trying to get me back into politics, but Dean seemed a little more malleable to the old dog's desires.

I had to tell Dean, in no uncertain words and multiple times, that I *did not* have any interest in returning to office.

The cat looked a little put out at that.

Leaving City Hall, it was late afternoon by now. Not early enough to start thinking about dinner just yet, but we were getting there.

I took the main exit, down the front steps to the street. Mostly it was just to see the crowd.

There weren't many protesters here, only a couple dozen. They reminded me of the protesters that had been outside my apartment when I'd been running for mayor. These ones though didn't have the air of payola on them. I'd bet my two top fangs they were here because *they* wanted to be.

The interesting thing was to look at all the different species involved. There were mammals of all types, reptiles, even some oni and other mythologicals.

And each species was picketing for their own rights. All the little groups were independent, seemingly at odds with each other, yet they were peaceful enough.

One thing I did notice... there were no hunters among their numbers. There were wolves and felines, no question, but no hunters.

And that reminded me, it's been a while since I last went to go see my parents.

My parent's house wasn't exactly close to City Hall, but it was closer to here than it was my apartment.

The walk was smooth and quiet. My parents had made a decision decades ago to buy their home in a calmer, quieter part of the city. One where the tree lined streets were filled with the rustle of branches rather than the click of claws on asphalt.

Stepping up to the bright blue door of the house unannounced, I was hardly surprised when my mother opened it after only a single knock.

"Tommy!" She ushered me into the house near silently. I turned to speak to her but she raised a finger to my lips to quiet me.

Leaving me in the front room, she disappeared for a moment into the kitchen, peering discretely out the window to the back yard.

A moment later she was back, sitting on the sofa and patting the cushion beside her to encourage me to follow.

"Tommy," Her voice was hardly above a whisper as she spoke, "I'm happy you've come." She stole a quick glance back towards the kitchen before continuing, "We haven't seen you in some time. It must be two weeks since you've last come by."

I had to suppress a frown. Had it been that long?

"Sorry, Mom..."

She waved my apology aside almost before it got to my lips, "Never you mind. We know you have other things to worry about. But, Dear, it's your father."

My heart nearly stopped.

"What's happened to Dad?"

She laid a thin, pale hand on my lap, soothing me with nothing more than her touch.

"Nothing, Dear. Well... nothing. It's just that he's getting older."

The roughest shadow of a laugh escaped my lips. "We all know that. But Dad won't be one to go easily. He's the kind who'll take the Grim Reaper by the throat and try to rip the life out of him should he appear."

My mother paused for a long moment.

"That point may not be so far away."

I set my hand atop hers, trying to sound strong while inside my gut felt as cold as the top of Mount Logan.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as that... is it?"

She looked away, but not towards the kitchen this time. Just away from my searching eyes.

"It's nothing... concrete yet, Tommy. He's not really any worse off than he was last you saw him... just..."

Reaching forward, I took her, the woman who had given birth to me, raised me, in my arms. She felt so thin, so brittle.

Stepping out into the backyard, I took a moment to let out a deep breath. This had been where I grew up. The small grassy space had always had the power to relax me when I was younger.

It wasn't so easy now.

It took a concentrated effort to let the stresses of the day go, to leave them behind. I managed to do it. Almost.

There was only a single fear that pulled at me as I stepped forward. That for my father.

The old wolf was laying under the tree, in his favourite spot. Without a word I stepped over to lay down next to him.

He didn't say a single word as I settled down next to him. His eyes were firmly locked on the tree that towered over us.

After a long moment he spoke, but he never looked my way.

"Do you know this was a sapling, Son, when I planted it? I went out and bought it from a nursery for your mother when we first moved into the house. She didn't like it here back then, said it was too civilized for her tastes. Said it didn't have enough trees." He laughed softly. "Truth be told, Son, I hated it too. We'd both grown up in the forests, at the edges of the city. Neither of us *wanted* to move here, into V-town. We'd both just have likely been happy living out amongst the trees."

I turned my head slightly to look at him. His face was slack and expressionless.

"Then why did you, Dad?"

He chuckled softly before slowly reaching out to set one of his arms over my chest. It was heavy, but not crushing.

"We had you, Tommy. Well, almost. Aggey was pregnant and I knew that the woods and the streets were no place to raise a child. That was where I'd grown up, and I didn't want that for you. I wanted you to have a *normal* life." He snorted. "Looks like I failed at that, eh?"

I reached up and set my hand atop his. I hadn't noticed it at a distance, but now I could see, and feel, that his pelt was thinning. My father's perfect grey fur was falling out.

"The two of you consigned yourselves to the city for *me*?" I asked.

I could just see him roll his eyes.

"If you want to be melodramatic about it. It was just that point in our lives, son. I knew it as well as she did, but it was time to settle down and make a family. Aggey would never be the one to suggest it, the gods bless her heart, she'd never presume to force me to do something that would affect the hunters. That made it my call." He let out a long sigh. "But some days I do think about it. What

would it have been like if I hadn't bought in to the city? We could have raised you out in the forest, or even in the outskirts. How would you have turned out then?"

I laughed. "I guess we can always dream, can't we, Dad? You might have had a normal son then."

His arm went rigid on my chest. I moment later he forced himself up. That action alone was surprising. My father had long ago hurt his leg. He shouldn't be able to sit up without his cane.

"Tommy," His voice was soft, "I didn't mean it like that, Son. I never..."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "I know, Dad. I'm just kidding." Sitting up myself, I scootched forward over the grass until we were side by side, our backs against the trunk of the tree. "Dad, how are you feeling these days?"

The faintest shadows of an annoyed growl edged into his voice. "That's why you're here, is it? No one ever comes by just to see me. Everyone has to have a purpose. Gowan comes by to talk about the hunter's business, Renald to deliver supplies, now you to worry about my health."

"It's not like that, Dad. But I am concerned about you. Have you gone to talk to any of the doctors at the hospital? I'm sure they'd be happy to see you."

The slight edge in my father's voice grew now until he nearly snapped at me.

"No. I am *not* going back to the hospital. I spent too much time there when I hurt my leg and see what good they did me!"

I pulled away before the emotion snapped. A split second later he was my father again, the anger, the visage of the hunter's alpha was gone.

"I'm sorry, Son. Gowan has been trying the same trick on me for the last week."

"It's only because we're worried about you, Dad."

"Just..." He let out a pained grunt as he settled back to the ground, "Just lay here with me for a while, son. Just stay here and let me protect you again."

I left an hour later.

The sun was still in the sky, but it was starting to set when I headed back to the apartment.

I kissed my mother goodbye when I left. I wasn't sure if I'd managed to do anything, but she seemed relieved none the less.

"Babe?" I called as I pushed open the apartment door, it was unlocked.

I'd snuck back into apartment complex the same way I'd gotten out. For a moment it almost seemed that I'd had a clean operation. That was until I noticed the police dog that was now stationed by the garden door.

He simply nodded to me with no further comment than "Good evening, Sir."

Rebecca looked up from the paper she was reading as I stepped in.

"Welcome back, Wolfy. Where were you all day? You had the dogs downstairs up in a huff."

I chuckled as I pulled her in for a kiss.

"Just out and about, Babe. Had to go see the family. What are you up to?"

Glancing down, I noticed she had a set of listings in front of her. Some of them were circled in pen.

"Just going through the job ads, Wolfy."

Sitting down next to her I craned my neck for a look.

"Job ads? What for?"

She rolled her eyes. "What do you think? I need a job. I'm going stir crazy here now that you're out of politics. You don't need me to help you win any elections, and Max has a whole party to

help him. And both you and English know you'd never allow me to come bounty hunting with you. I need a job." She stuck her tongue out at me, "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not much of a homemaker."

"But, Babe," I tried to pull her closer but she leaned gently away, "I make enough for us both. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"That's the whole *point*, Wolfy. I *want* a job. You'd go crazy without your hunting, I'm no different."

Reaching out, I snatched the paper from her hands before she could pull it away. I had to turn from to her to keep her from grabbing it back.

The jobs listed in the broadleaf didn't exactly fill me with confidence.

Half of them were for construction, not surprising given V-town's current state. None of those had been circled. The rest were for more menial positions.

Dishwasher, floor washer. These, thankfully, were also not circled. Though the ones that Rebecca had picked out were little better.

"Receptionist?" I nearly spat the word. "You can do better than that!"

She pulled the paper from me before I could read off any more.

"That's easy for you to say, Tommy. You've been the mayor, not to mention a successful hunter. The last job I had was serving drinks to rich gamblers."

I growled playfully when I thought about the getup she'd been dressed in back then. That got me a gentle slap to the nose.

"I'm betting you don't want me going back to that again, and it's the only thing I ever really had experience in. That leaves me in a bit of a bind."

I huffed out a breath. "What about the government? You were working with a bunch of different people when you were with me, right? We can just get one of them to give you a job."

"No bloody way." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I had quite enough with the government already. I'm not going back there."

Grinning, I shot out a hand around her waist to pull her next to me. She squeaked slightly.

"A lady after my own heart," I whispered into her ear. "How did I ever get along without you?"

She didn't bother pushing me away.

"How should I know, Wolfy? But you'll have to find some way to manage once I get a day job."

Chapter 3: Why I Stopped Being Mayor

Waking the next morning, the sun was shining down through the clouds, illuminating us with patches of light and shadow that shifted endlessly.

Reaching out with my tongue, I licked the inside of Rebecca's ear. She giggled and rolled over.

"Awake already, Wolfy?" Her voice was groggy.

"Yeah, Babe. Couldn't sleep."

It took her a moment, but a yawn and a stretch later she was propped up with one elbow on the pillow, looking at me.

"What is it, Tommy?"

I let out a breath, "I spoke to Jon yesterday. He's already trying to plan our wedding."

She laughed. "He *what*? I thought that was off when you left office."

I nearly fell off the bed.

"What? Of course not! I promised I was going to marry you and I will." Leaning forward I licked the tip of her nose. "After all, you're human and it's one of your quaint human customs isn't it."

She snorted.

"Right. 'Human custom'. It doesn't seem to take long for you folks to forget that each and every one of you is part human. Your customs are human too, you know."

"Sure, Babe." I grumped.

"But that does mean it has to be a big production, Wolfy." She fell back to the bed with a whoof of breath. "I remember some of the plans people were coming up with back when you were still in office. Gods, Tommy, you'd think we were royals the way they wanted to plan it! And the money! Hosting a wedding like what some people seemed to expect would bankrupt us."

I laid down beside her and pulled her back to my chest so I could bury my nose in her hair.

"Yeah, let's not go for that, how about? I'm happy with a simple 'I do' if you are."

She giggled and wiggled from my grasp before getting up and searching the room for some clean clothing.

"I want a little more than the sign of a registrar in some civil office, thanks." Turning, she stuck her tongue out at me while she pulled up a pair of bluejeans.

You know, even with the tongue I still didn't mind the view.

"Fine." I fell back to the mattress to stare up at the ceiling. "How about we do get Jon to plan the basics out? I'll give him a budget or something and he can get things rolling."

A moment later I felt Rebecca's lips on my forehead.

"Works for me, Wolfy. Anyway, it's a good thing you woke me up. I've got some interviews this morning. I'll see you later."

It was at least another hour before I dragged myself out of bed. The first place I headed after breakfast was Jon's office.

It was still fairly early in the morning, but I wasn't surprised to find Jon already there. If I didn't know better I'd almost say the dog never slept. I'd never seen him off duty and I didn't even know where his home was.

"Sir." He nodded to me as I stepped in the office. The dog never even lifted his eyes from the paper in his hands. "I'll be with you in just a moment." He made a few quick notes on the sheet and set it aside, giving me his full attention. "What can I do for you, Tommy?"

Sitting down heavily on the chair across from him, I levelled the dog with a stare.

"We need to talk about my wedding."

He gulped slightly. "Yes, Sir. As you're aware, I'm already receiving inquiries regarding where and when it will occur. In fact," A slight chuckle escaped him, "I've even had to begin a file – a rather large one – of people requesting invitations. It seems, Tommy, that every person who has so much as shaken hands with you is attempting to acquire an invitation. It's even gotten to the point that several people in the community have begun bragging that they've already received theirs."

"What? No. Absolutely not. Jon, what were you thinking, giving away invites?"

An honest smile spread across his face.

"I haven't had to think at all, Tommy. I haven't given out *anything*. I've refused to even discuss the event or respond to any inquirers. I have, however," He reached down and brushed his claws on the cuff of his spotless shirt, "Taken the liberty of... speaking to the individuals who claimed to have received invitations. They are no longer making those claims."

Did I see a hint of a predatory smile cross his lips ever so briefly.

"I knew I could count on you, Jon." Reaching out, I patted his shoulder. "But I do have a request of you."

He cocked his head. "Sir?"

"It's a personal one." I leaned back on the chair. "Only if you think you can handle it without affecting your other duties. I *would* like you to help plan the wedding. The gods know where I'd be without you, Jon. You're the only one who can seem to see more than two feet beyond his nose. And this includes me. Rebecca and I just want something easy and simple, but I doubt that's what the world will let us have. Do you think you can handle it?"

There was no smile to his lips when he nodded, but the dog's eyes danced.

"I'd be happy to, Sir." Pausing for a moment, he rolled the words around on his tongue, "I'd be honoured to, Tommy."

"Great." I slumped back against the seat. "That's one less thing I'll have to worry about. But," I wagged a finger at him, "I don't want to end up in debt over this. I don't know how much a decent wedding costs, but I don't want to end up poor."

Jon shook his head as he began shuffling through the papers on one side of his desk. "That shouldn't be a problem, Tommy. No small number of people feel indebted to you themselves for your work in the rebuilding. I have more than a few companies who would be happy to provide their services either for free or cost."

Snorting, I got ready to stand up. "Figures you'd have this all planned out already."

"There is one last thing, Sir." Jon raised a hand to still me. "I intercepted a runner earlier this morning. He'd been sent by Sayer to fetch you." I groaned. "I felt it was a good idea to turn him away, allow you some sleep."

Closing my eyes for a moment, I shook my head. "Thanks. Did he say what he wanted?"

Jon's face was stoic, but I could just see him wanting to roll his eyes. "No, Sir. But it is Commissioner Sayer. I think we can both make a reasonable guess what he might wish to discuss."

Stepping from the front door of the apartment building, the police dogs were already in formation around me. We set off without a word.

It's been a while since I last had to go to the police HQ. I'd had to take trips here ever couple of days when I'd been mayor, but I made a point of avoiding the place now that I was my own man again.

Oh well, one could only avoid the most powerful dog in V-town for so long. I may not be the sharpest tooth, but one does not ignore a summons from Commissioner Sayer. It tends to be bad for one's freedom of movement.

The police headquarters was completely rebuilt now, having been one of the first buildings in V-town to be completed. Its simple red brick walls were almost calming. One would never think it was possibly the largest structure in the city.

The floor plan took up a whole city block. That in itself wasn't all that interesting, a lot of buildings were that large, city hall for example. But the Police HQ took the *entire* block. There wasn't even enough room for a patch of grass to grow between the walls and the side walk.

The building rose an even three stories. And there wasn't a single window to be seen in any of them.

This wasn't like the Storm Front building. That one had been designed with a balance of function and livability. The Police HQ was a working building. Comfort didn't come first, or second. I doubt it was even in the top ten.

However, the most notable part of the building wasn't what one could see. The three floors that thrust up were relatively public, offices and waiting rooms, holding cells and such.

It was the floor upon floor that were dug deep into the earth that no one knew about that always left me shivering.

English and I had gotten an unexpected whirlwind tour of them some time ago.

I'd gone back a couple more times as mayor, mostly to make sure they'd been shut down.

Back then I'd only been aware of three levels of sub-basements. Now I knew there were five.

The sun was warm on my face as I walked down the street. I shivered.

There was only one obvious entrance to the building. A simple, single wooden door in the middle of the front wall.

I noticed at least a dozen police dogs as I made my way to it. They all stood in shadows and doorways, watching the crowds pass. They never even so much as nodded to me.

Opening the door, I was met with exactly the same waiting room as I'd seen a year and a half ago when I'd first come here.

The room was relatively small. A few benches here and there, and a single lineup that lead to a row of police dogs at a counter who were helping the public.

Was it just me or was the line longer than usual?

The queue of people stretched almost out the door, and it wasn't moving all that fast.

I couldn't make out what the complaints were – they'd designed the acoustics of the room too

well, but no one sounded happy.

It took me over an hour of waiting to get to the front of the line.

I could have jumped the que, I'd done it before as mayor when I'd been in a rush, but I was happy to wait now. Perhaps I'm just a little bent, but I liked being treated like a normal person again – and being stuck in a que was one of the things normal people did.

Stepping up at last to one of the police dogs on duty, she hardly even looked up at me as she shuffled the paperwork in front of her.

“What can I do for you, citizen?”

Leaning forward on the spotless oak desk, I tried to take some of the weight off my feet. I'd forgotten just how sore they could get when I was left standing.

“Is Commissioner Sayer in?”

The dog still didn't look up, but she started slightly when I said that name.

“I'm sorry, citizen, but I am not permitted to report on the status of the Commissioner. And, in any event,” She finished straightening her papers, “The Commissioner does not take drop-in visits. I'm sorry. Is it possible I could help you?”

I chuckled. “Sorry darling, it's the Sayer I wanted to see.”

She started again when I addressed her, finally looking up.

I knew what she saw. A scruffy brown furred wolf stood in front of her, a week or more overdue for a brushing, the cream of his belling lightly stained with blood from this morning's breakfast.

“Would it help if I said that Administrator Taggert is waiting for him?”

That got things moving along a bit quicker.

It still took a few moments for them to call an escort for me. It wasn't that the police were worried about be sneaking around the place, but *everyone* got an escort. All the hallways in this building looked identical and not a single door was labelled.

I think the cops navigated more on scent and muscle memory than anything else.

Unfortunately for them I'd spent enough time here to learn the basic layout of the place.

They asked me to wait just within the door behind the reception room. I did, like a good little boy. For about forty-five seconds.

Once the coast was clear I made off down the whitewashed hallway.

If memory serves it should be a left, a right, then a straight through to get to the short term holding cells...

Or was that a left, then a right...

Never mind, I was here.

Pushing open the door to the holding cell room, the guard on duty startled.

He had good reason to. The cells, while not as frighteningly full as they had been immediately after the quake, were still noticeably fuller than they should be.

“At east, Constable.” I waved a hand at the dog as I passed by. He was about to get out of his seat and confront me when I passed him by.

I wasn't sure if he recognized who I was or not, but he didn't stand. That was one ability I'd picked up while mayor. It was trivially simple to get most people to obey you when you simply *acted* like you were already in charge. Folks, especially canines, tend to respond to that.

And it didn't hurt that I'd had the hunter's alpha to help train me. My father had a lifetime of experience in tricks like this. I'd been able to pick a few of them up.

I didn't venture close to the cell bars, I wasn't that stupid. Rather I went to the coarkboard on

the wall next to them. That's where the cops kept the rap sheets on everyone in the room.

I don't really know how to read these things, but I was able to pick out phrases like 'aggravated assault' and 'property damage over one-thousand'. Most of the charges could be anything, but at least they seemed legit. That was all I needed to know.

The officer was still watching me suspiciously as I turned to leave the room. "As you were," was all I said.

There were a few catcalls from the people behind the bars as I left, but I didn't bother to listen to them.

Back in the hallway, I couldn't keep the smile from my lips as a dog came running towards me, out of breath.

It wasn't often that you got to see a police dog with even so much as a single hair out of place. Some days I almost thought of it as a challenge to find new ways to get them worked up.

"Sir!" He paused for a moment to gasp in a breath, "I... you... you didn't wait in the assigned location."

I felt a touch of pity for the dog. He looked young. He likely wasn't used to dealing with people like me.

Reaching out, I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. I just went for a wander. Do it all the time." I grinned. "You found me fast. It takes most dogs at least a couple more minutes. You're good."

I wasn't sure what tales Sayer was spinning about me these days, but the dog straightened and beamed like I'd just given him a commendation.

"Thank you, Sir." He had to pause for breath again. "Commissioner Sayer is waiting for you. Shall we?"

The rest of the journey up to Sayer's office was quiet. We didn't see another soul as we made our way down the endless hallways, and I was sure my escort was taking pains to keep me away from any more *interesting* sights.

Stopping in front of yet another unmarked door, I could already tell we'd reached our destination. The police were fastidious about keeping their den clean, yet I could still pickup Sayer's scent.

He didn't smell good.

Opening the door without a knock, I stepped in to the outer office. My escort stayed behind in the hall, pulling the door closed behind me.

I got hardly more than a glance from the dog working reception.

"The Commissioner is waiting for you, Administrator Taggart. Please go right in."

The police were the only ones who ever referred to me as 'Administrator'.

Stepping into Sayer's inner office, I was surprised to see another dog.

It wasn't Jon. I'd never seen *this* man before. He was seated next to Sayer and slightly behind. He was holding papers before the elder dog's face for him to read.

The moment I got a good look at Sayer it became obvious why the other dog was required.

Sayer was a white pelted Great Dane. He's always been tall and thin, looking ghost like. His health had been declining for over a year now, but he'd still been doing alright last I saw him.

That wasn't the case any more.

The fact I could count his ribs through the fabric of his uniform pretty much said it all. That, and the fact he didn't even so much as shift his weight when I entered.

The only thing that moved on the man was his head.

He nodded to the dog beside him and whispered something as I sat down. A moment later he raised his voice, though it was still hardly over a whisper.

"That will be all, Lieutenant. You are dismissed." There was something in Sayer's voice that I'd never heard before. It was soft, but in more ways than one.

The police dog departed a moment later, leaving Sayer and I alone in the near silent office.

For a handful of heartbeats the only sound was that of my breathing.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Taggart."

I shrugged and tried to work a smile to my face. "Don't mention it, Sayer. It's been a while since I've come over to see you. What's it been now, a couple of months?"

"Seventy-four days, Mr. Taggart. It's been seventy-four days since you stepped down from your position as mayor. That was the last day you came to see me."

I coughed slightly and looked away. I hadn't realized that Sayer had *quite* been keeping that close track. But then again, it would be just like him.

"So, what can I do for you, Sayer?" I tried to keep my voice light.

The dog moved for the first time since I'd entered the office. I could hear his joints creak from here. Slowly leaning forward, he laboriously raised his hands to rest them on the desk. I could see the strain in his eyes as he did even that.

And that was the odd thing about the dog. Every motion was a battle for him, every breath a struggle, but yet his eyes were still bright.

When Sayer had first pressed me into the position of mayor I'd wondered if his old age had affected his mind. Now I knew for sure it hadn't. The dog's body may be failing, but I had no doubt this old Dane could still run rings around me. His eyes were still clear, calculating.

"Mr. Taggart," He took a shallow breath, "I'd like to ask you what orders you have given Constable Oaks."

I tried to fain innocence. It wasn't hard. It took me a few moments to even remember that I'd asked Jon to look into anything for me.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about," I replied.

"We caught the Constable down in the research library. He was accessing shelves of books that haven't been touched in decades. And," The dog narrowed his eyes, "He refused to discuss the topic with us when we confronted him. He wouldn't say who had given him his orders, but you are the only person he would ever follow above *me*."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat. Jon had refused to answer a question from Sayer? That was almost unheard of for a police dog.

But on the other hand... I let out a breath I hadn't even realized I'd been holding.

"Don't worry yourself too much about it, Sayer. Jon just got a little overzealous about a personal request I gave him. I was looking for some history books on V-town and the surrounding countryside. I'm trying to get back into history now that I have a little spare time. I asked Jon to keep it quiet so that folks won't be hounding me. He must have taken my request for privacy a little too literally."

The dog closed his eyes for a moment, but otherwise didn't move. I couldn't even see him breathe. He could just as well be dead for all I knew.

Opening his eyes, Sayer's voice was a touch stronger.

"So be it, Mr. Taggart. However, we do have an additional item to discuss regarding Constable Oaks."

Oh boy, here we go again.

This had been an ongoing issue between Sayer and I since I'd become mayor.

Sayer had let Jon join English, Rebecca, and I on our trip across the mountains last year. It had officially been at Sayer's request, to guard me, but Jon had been the one to insist on it.

After coming back to the city Jon had worked even closer to me. I'd had to fight for it, but I'd been able to get Jon transferred to my personal staff. He was still a member of the V-town police, but he worked for *me*.

I'd made sure that deal held even after I left office.

"Mr. Taggert," Sayer's voice whispered across the desk like the sea breeze at two in the morning, "I must insist that you release Constable Oaks from your service. We've discussed it dozens of times. I *need* him to take over for me."

I leaned back in the chair. I normally had a hundred explanations and excuses why I still needed Jon, why I wouldn't give him back. Jon not wanting to go being hardly the least among them.

Sayer had selected Jon, his nephew, as his successor to lead the police force.

Jon had tried to explain it to me once, but I never did get my head around it. Jon wasn't the next highest ranking dog in the force, far from it, but he was the only living relative to Sayer. And as Sayer had been the closest living relative to the former police commissioner, it was expected that Jon would take over the position, being promoted as necessary.

Nepotism of that level made my fur itch.

"Sayer, Jon doesn't *want* the job. How many times do I, *does he*, have to say that. He turned you down. I know that Able and Baker don't particularly want to be promoted, but I'm sure you could find *someone* to take the job."

The dog let out a long sigh, the sound could have just as well come from the wind brushing the lips of a corpse.

"Mr. Taggert..." There was a long pause before he spoke again, "Tommy, do you know the history of the V-town police force?"

I had to scratch my head a little over that one. To be honest, I didn't. I have a major in history, but I didn't know much of the police. No one did.

"Can't say I've ever run across that particular text book, Sayer."

"It's not surprising. We go to extreme lengths to ensure that as little information as possible escapes these walls. The inner workings of the police department are not secret, but they are... private. The citizens would not have the same degree of confidence in the service if they knew our whole history."

A slight tingle ran down my spine.

"But you're just a police force. There's nothing magical about that, right?" My voice was rough.

"Not in and as such, Tommy." He closed his eyes. "The police force you see today has a very limited connection to the Municipal Police Department of Greater Vancouver, that which we replace. There are few records remaining from the time of the Cataclysm. I can tell you little of how the original force fared through that time, but our internal records begin about seven years after."

"The force that started at that time was little more than a loose collection of individuals. Some of them had previously been employed as police officers. Most hadn't. They came together with the goal of rebuilding society."

He took another deep breath, then let it out in a huff.

"Or at least that was there stated goal. There were all manner of species in the newly formed V-town Police Service. They were of all types and creeds, but they had one thing in common. They all wanted to control the city."

I cocked my head, but didn't say anything.

“The force numbered about two-hundred at that time. They chose to make their base right where we sit today, downtown V-town. That was not a proud time in our history. There are few public records of those years, and that's the way the force plans to keep it. For approximately five years the V-town Police Service was the defacto power in the city. And it was not a benevolent organization.”

“While there is no doubt that civilization improved under its watch, it did so only in ways that the Service allowed. They were not public servants, Tommy. They were masters.”

“It was at the end of those five years that V-town began to expand. V-town was not a pleasant place to be, but it was better than the wilderness. And the service made sure that no other settlements sprung up to challenge it.”

“Among the people to migrate to V-town were two lines of dogs. Their names have been lost to history, erased by their own humility, but they did a single important thing. They, every man and woman, joined the Police Service.”

“It was a simple enough matter. The police were willing to take any who were capable, and the dogs were. What the existing officers didn't expect were just *how* good.”

“In under ten years the new lines had taken over key positions in the Service. Not only that, but every one of their children who came of age also joined the service. By the time the original officers realized what was happening it was too late.”

“The purge came approximately fifteen years after the Service had been formed. There were enough dogs in its service now that they could wrest control. In a single night very near every officer who was not of the two dog lines was charged with corruption and jailed.”

Sayer opened his eyes now, staring straight into me.

“The two lines had also taken over most of the judiciary system by that point, the judges. In less than a week almost all of the two-hundred founding members of the V-town Police Service were executed for their crimes.”

“In that swift move the service changed. It was now under the control of the dogs.”

I gulped.

“Those two lines of dogs have remained almost completely unchanged to this day, Tommy. One line, the more common, are German Sheppard. They form the bulk of the force. The second line, the Great Danes, form the upper power structure.”

“I, Tommy, am the last of the remaining second line. That is why I command the force.”

“But what about Jon?” I asked.

Sayer shook his head almost imperceptibly, “My sister, Oaks's mother, did not agree with the service's hard stance on keeping the lines apart. She was a fine officer, and she married a fine officer, but together they were removed from the force.”

“Jon Oaks may not look it, but he carries both lines of the service man and the flag officer. He is one of the few, possibly only, men who can lead the force.”

“And more than that, Tommy, he must come to lead *now*. There is little time left. I was only partially trained in the ways of command, and I fear there is little time for me to pass what I know onto him. Jon *must* lead us. It is not my legacy that I speak of here, Tommy. It's all of V-town. The police force has been able to keep order for over a hundred years, with one noticeable lapse. If the service falls then so will the city.”

“Could you see that, Tommy? Everything we have both worked for – we are not so different – watch it crumble to the ground as the races begin fighting again?”

My head was spinning. I'd never heard any of this before. How could none of this have ever reached the history books?

“Sayer,” I had to force the words out, “Are the police responsible for the school curriculum?”

The slightest smile slipped to the dog's lips. "You are thinking, Mr. Taggert. No, we are not responsible for what happens in the city schools. But," The smile grew, "We do have some small degree of... influence. We've always made it plain that we have no interest in the subject of history. Unsurprisingly, that particular subject sees little funding." His face pulled. "And I don't mind saying that your initiatives as mayor caused us no end of trouble."

I had to grin at that one. Reforming the schools had been my number two priority after the rebuilding.

Standing up, I forced myself to step away from the dog.

"I'll ask Jon again, Sayer. That's all I can promise. He knows all this... doesn't he?"

The dog nodded. "Of course he does. He could not be groomed for leadership unless he knew." He paused for a moment as I backed away. "And, Tommy, I can be sure you won't share this with a soul, can't I?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "As long as you don't give me a reason to. And," I turned to him, "As long as you let Jon finish his research. Deal?"

Sayer didn't say a word.

Turning, I was through the door in a heartbeat, and out into the hallway in another.

The unmarked, whitewashed walls of the Police HQ looked far more sinister to me now than they had just a few minutes ago.

I found them far too tight and constricting.

I hadn't thought much of the seemingly omnipresent police officers while I'd been walking to HQ, but my eyes lingered on each and every one of them now.

Just how much did the average dog in the street know about the organization it called master? I knew for a fact that every one of these dogs, to a fault, was deeply loyal to the department.

And I also knew, thanks to my time as mayor, that the police department was a mostly independent part of the government.

It took its fair share of money from the taxes, accepted a few vague guidelines and more or less kept to itself.

I couldn't help but wonder just how many things the department had its hands in. I knew that Sayer had personally manipulated the bugger all out of me... what else had he done?

The number of cops slowly dropped off the further I walked from HQ. It was only now that I noticed my honour guard hadn't formed up on me when I set foot on the street.

Whether it was an oversight – unlikely – or a specific direction by Sayer to keep me from freaking out, it did make me feel at least a little better. A cocoon of police dogs watching my every step was the last thing I needed right now.

I was most of the way back to the apartment when I took a quick shortcut through an alleyway.

Something didn't feel right...

Following an instinct, I leapt into the shadow of an overfilled garbage bin. Not only was I obscured from sight, but its overpowering stench hit my scent.

Less than a minute later a form raced past. He paused for a moment at the end of the alley, searching for a trail.

It was a wolf. One like me. His fur was a muddy red and he wore a red windbreaker.

Stalking from behind the bin, I moved up behind him. I was no more than a pace away when he took off in a direction, seemingly at random.

I didn't have far to follow him before he dived into another alley parallel to the one I'd just been in. He put his nose to the ground here and grunted happily when he picked up something or other.

That was fine for me. It gave me the opportunity to jump him.

The wolf went down in a heap under me. It wasn't even a challenge to keep him there, he hardly fought.

It wasn't until I had him immobilized that I realized why.

This man wasn't hunting me. Or at least it wasn't likely. The lightening bolt embroidered on the back of his red blazer was all I needed. The fact the words 'Storm Front Bounty Hunters' were sewn underneath it made me blush.

I had a jacket just like this back in my apartment somewhere.

"You want to let me up, dude?" The wolf asked, voice tired.

Getting off him as quickly as I could, I took a couple of steps back to make sure I was out of reach. Even if this guy was on my side I still didn't want to leave myself wide open.

"Uh... sorry, man." Was all I could stammer out.

He stood up and tried to brush himself off. It didn't do much good. The filth of the alleyway was already ground into his jacket.

"You do realize you just lost me a contract?" Oddly, the wolf didn't sound as annoyed as I'd expect. I would have been a little more pissy if someone had just jumped me.

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

The wolf turned from me, surveying the far side of the alleyway. He let out a humph.

"Well, that cuts it. He's already gone." Turning back to me, he cocked an eye ridge. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep up to you without being seen? It's like you purposely take the worst routs you can find."

"Me?" I cocked my head, "You were following me? I thought you had a bounty."

The wolf rolled his eyes as he turned and began walking off.

"Of course I do. How do you expect me to hunt down your assassin if I don't follow *you*?"

I didn't even get another word out before he was around the edge of the alley and into the street again, out of sight.

There was a contract out on the person who was hunting *me*?

What in all the gods names... that wasn't the way the police worked. And even then, almost no one knew about my attempted poisoning.

I had just enough time to get myself all worked up over the rest of the way home.

It may sound silly, but I hadn't gotten all *that* excited when I'd been first attacked. I'd been put off balance, sure, but I'd been attacked so many times over the last couple of years that it wasn't a huge event anymore.

But this... this was just weird. Well, that and the story about the police. I just really needed a couple of hours to sit back and think.

It was just getting up to lunchtime when I got back to the apartment. I only just made it into the lobby of the building when my tail fell to thunk on the floor like a lead weight.

"Sir!" Jon came rushing up to me, pressing through the crowd of people who filled the room. "I'm sorry about this, but they just keep coming. I've told them you're no longer they mayor, but the just won't listen."

Like flashbacks to a war zone, images of my days running the goverment came back to me. The endless meetings... shaking hands and kissing babies for hours on end...

"Jon," I pulled the dog to my side as I whispered in his ear, "*Get them out of here.* I'm not in the game anymore."

"I tried, Sir..."

He didn't even get a chance to finish before one of the crowd, a short rat looking man, pressed his way between us.

"Hey! I need to talk to you! What's up with all the violence lately? It's ruining my business!"

"Yeah!" The crowd behind them cursed.

"I'm not mayor anymore, folks. Sorry, I can't help." I fought to keep my voice level as I raised to a shout to be heard over them, "Try bringing it up with Mayor Max. He's the one to talk to."

"He's not the one we voted for!" Came a cry from the crowd. "You're the name that was on the ballot! I want to talk to *you*!"

Oh bugger.

Some days I hate my life, I really do.

There's a million things going for me, but it's hard to keep them in mind when I'm staring down the mussel of a mile long line of unhappy people.

And it's even worse when you know for a fact *that you can't help them*.

Not that they seemed to care much. One by one they each came to stand in front of the makeshift desk that I'd had Jon make out of the furniture in the corner of the lobby.

I heard stories about everything from minor riots to livestock going missing in the ranches outside the city.

Overall it wasn't *that* bad. People made it out to be the end of the world all over again, but listening through the hyperbole I was able to tell that things weren't to that yet. They were getting there, but things were still... okay.

But 'okay' wasn't good enough anymore. People had hyped themselves up so much on the restoration that even this minor regression left them feeling cheated and vulnerable.

Not that I could blame them. The mere thought that we could fall back into the near chaos that had engulfed the city during the race riots left me shaking.

I suppose I was able to provide one service to those who came before me. Many of these people *had* tried to get satisfaction out of the government before coming to me. Only they'd been unable to get it.

Things were still too unorganized now. One department didn't know what the others were doing. That left people pinballing between government departments, each one trying to help but being unable.

And that made people feel helpless.

I was at least able to provide some vague sense of guidance. I'd personally bet that half the advice I gave out was wrong, but at least I was able to send people in the right directions and tell them where to start to get help.

It wasn't that I did much, and it wasn't that many people left smiling, but at least the hard set lines in their faces were relaxed some measure when they walked away.

It was a bit of a trick to get it done without anyone noticing, but Jon was able to lock the doors to the lobby, preventing any more people from getting in. He let each person out after they'd talked to me, slowly cutting down on the people crowding in the room.

It was still over two hours before I made it down to the last person in line.

"And I want to know why with all this crime running rampant more people aren't being carted off to jail!"

I hadn't even bothered to open my eyes to see whoever it was that stood before me now. My stomach was long past growling, I felt weak from hunger.

All I wanted was for the whiny, nasal, nails on chalkboard voice to *go away*.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I don't know. I'm sure the police department is doing all they can. They rarely perform arrests. That's left up to the bounty hunters. They're given contracts to hunt down fugitives."

"Exactly, Mate." The voice dropped several octaves. "Why are you in here when there're contracts to claim out there?"

Huh?

Opening my eyes, English stood before me, lounging forward on the table between us.

"Hiya, Mate." He smiled.

I fell back into my seat with a sigh.

"You don't know how good it is to see a friendly face," I said. "What are you doing in here?"

He shrugged. "Exactly what I said, Mate. Finding out why my partner is sitting in here rather than out on the street with me. There's money to be made, and *I'm not making it.*"

I barely got a chance to run up to the apartment and scarf down whatever was sitting in the fridge before I was very nearly dragged out of the building by my tail.

I was surprised to note that Jon didn't follow us. Perhaps it was for the best. I had a couple hundred questions to ask him, that should be done in private.

"Where are we going, English?"

We ventured out from the nicer part of town to the rougher, rundown warehouses of the Gastown district. Not many folks lived here.

"Got a juicy little bounty on a trouble maker, Mate. Human. Thought you might like to get hands on with this one."

I groaned. "Not again. Are we back to the humans making the majority of the bounties again?"

He shook his head. "Nah, Mate. I thought of that too and checked myself. This one lines right up with the percentages. About five percent of V-town is human? About five percent of the bounties are too."

"That reminds me, English," I said as we rounded another corner to be confronted with yet more dilapidated buildings, "I ran across a wolf today. Or perhaps 'ran over' would be a better description. A red furred one. Said he was on a contract. Something about hunting a assassin."

I heard a distinct 'urk' from the lion before he slipped into the shadows between the buildings.

"Never mind that now, Mate. We're almost here. Oh, and one more thing. We need to capture him alive. The cops had it in the contract, and in bold print no less. Seems he must know something."

This particular street looked no different than any other we'd walked down. The warehouses on either side were made of timeworn brick that had been nearly dyed black from the years. And that was where the walls still stood. There weren't many buildings around here that were fully intact.

A few hundred meters on there was one structure that looked a little more sound than the rest. It wasn't until we got closer that I was able to make out the amateur patch job that it had recently undergone. There were pieces of scrap wood and metal nailed on here and there to keep out the rain and wind. From any distance it was identical to the rest of the neighbourhood.

Closer still and I was able to pick up the scents of those who had come and gone. If there was any doubt on the creditability of English's scouts they were put to rest now. The scent of humans pervaded the area.

Thankfully, I didn't recognize any of them.

Humans were odd ones. They could remember to cover their tracks, but they almost never remembered to cover their scent.

Past the point of talking, English signalled to a small side door. I nodded.

The lion must have purchased up a lock pick at some point over the last few months. He put it

to good use now.

He wasn't that skilled, but we got the door open in due time. And without the use of blunt force.

The inside of the warehouse was dark. Stepping in, we found ourselves in the middle of the open storage area.

When it came to humans I could make a fair assumption that they would be camped out in the small office at the head of the structure.

Closing on the two story set of rooms, I was proven right. Electric light spilt through the windows towards us. I couldn't make much out, but they were there.

I nodded to English as we advanced.

We were only a couple dozen steps from the office when the overhead lights snapped on.

Near blinded, I sprung for whatever cover I could find. I hadn't noticed until now that the warehouse was almost completely empty.

I could hear the sound of running feet. At least three sets.

And the clunk of heavy machinery.

This was not good.

"English?" I whispered as I blinked furiously, trying to clear my eyes.

There was no reply.

Stumbling half blinded, I didn't stop until my fingers brushed concrete.

Ducking down, I was just able to tell I'd run across a ceiling support. The first few feet were concrete, then above that it was a steel girder. Worked for me, it was just large enough to hide behind.

"English?"

Again I looked around, trying in vain to spot the lion. It took me long moments before I found his nervously twitching tail poking out from behind a flimsy looking wooden crate.

Another echoing clunk from the direction of the office and the bottom dropped out from my gut.

What *the hell* was that?

It looked vaguely like the guns the police kept in backup, only about ten times the size.

Mounted on a tripod, it was fed by a long belt of bullets.

I, as a rule, don't like guns. I liked this one even less. And that was before it began firing.

"Clear!" Someone yelled from the shadows. A moment later it felt like the world was trying to shake itself apart,

The fountain of lead that sprayed from the weapon was beyond anything I've ever seen before. It was enough to make my jaw drop and my ears bleed.

It only took a handful of seconds before the raging boom of the gun fell to little more than a dull ringing as my eardrums imploded.

Thankfully, it looked like the people running the thing didn't much know how to use it.

They sprayed gunfire all over the room, but few if any shots came anywhere near English or I. Half their problem seemed to be the recoil from the weapon. It forced their aim up with every shot. Not a good thing when they were trying to hit the two of us. We were on the floor of the warehouse while the gun was sitting on the second floor of the office.

"English?" I *think* I screamed, but I could hardly even make out my own words. A moment later I saw the lion's face pop out from behind his cover.

He was scowling. So far the only blood on him was that which leaked from one ear.

I waved a hand forward. We needed to make a run to the office before they managed to get the gun under control. It didn't matter what cover we had, that weapon could chew through anything in ten seconds flat.

He scowled again when I motioned him forward, but responded by lifting three fingers.

Two... one...

We both leapt into the open at once, banking on the faint hope that the human manning the gun wouldn't be able to bring it to bare fast enough.

The stretch to the offices was only a dozen meters or so, but it felt far longer.

We were about half way there when I felt a chip of concrete fly up to hit my heel.

I couldn't see the line of bullets that swarmed over us, but I had a vague idea where they were. No more than a few feet above my upstanding ears.

"Faster!" I gave English a shove on as I leapt and rolled off in a different direction. I could only hope that the human would follow me with his aim rather than English.

With my regeneration I could take a bullet better than the lion. Though I doubted it would do much against the hundred or so rounds a second the gun was spewing out.

Regeneration might be good and fine, but it does have limits. It still needs a beating heart, and I doubt the gun would leave that.

A line of fire lit up the tip of one of my ears as I scrambled for whatever cover I could find. Another support post. The three feet of cement at its base had seemed adequate last time, but it felt far less comforting now that I was no more than a dozen meters from the gunner.

One positive note though. I could just see English sprint into the door of the offices. Gods, that lion could move like his tail was on fire.

Taking a deep breath, I fought to make myself as small as possible behind my meagre cover. The fact the concrete was *shrinking* as the gun chipped away at its edges was not helping.

Like someone had flicked a switch, the hail of bullets stopped.

"Come out, *wolf*." He spit the last word like a curse. "You can't escape. Come out and face your death like the animal you are."

I could tell by the voice that this was definitely a human. Why in all the gods' names was a human trying to kill *me*? I'd just spent the better part of two years fighting to keep them alive.

"What do you want?" I called out. My hearing was already returning, but the sounds were still muted.

"Not much, wolf, just your head on a platter. Then we'll serve it up to all the turncoats in the city!"

The gun opened up again, cutting off any hope for conversation. I guess they were done talking.

I couldn't hear, and didn't dare poke my head around to take a peek, but I knew something had changed. For just a moment the gun began spraying wildly again, now sweeping the ceiling, floor, walls, and everything in between.

Then it fell quiet.

"Mate? You alright?" I'd never been so happy to hear the lion's voice.

Carefully edging my nose around the now half destroyed concrete barrier, I could smell something over the bite of gun powder and the hot burn of powdered concrete.

Blood. Human blood.

I let out a long sigh.

"You killed them all?" I was just about ready to start banging my head against the wall.

English shrugged. "Didn't have much choice, Mate. They were all armed to the teeth and not much interested in talking. I tried to knock our target out but he would have none of it."

Looking at the bloodbath that was sprayed across the walls of the gun platform I had to wonder just how hard he'd tried.

"Fine." I set down the last corpse after checking for even the faintest sign of life. "You'd better get this reported back."

"Me?" The lion's voice took a mock incredulous edge, "Why me?"

"Because," I replied, turning away, "I wasn't here. The cop's nesting instinct has already come back in full force. If they find out I was involved in this they'll never let me leave my apartment again. But, English," I turned back towards him, "Have your fellas at SF take a look at the scene first, eh? It would be good to get a frank opinion of what in all the gods' names is going on before the dogs descend on it."

English just laughed grimly and shook his head.

I made the trip back to the apartment on my own. I'll admit I was a little more paranoid this time. It's not everyday in V-town that you run across someone with a gods forsaken *machine gun*. And even less that they try to kill you with it.

Thankfully, the walk was uneventful. There were a few people outside the apartment, likely looking to talk to me, but I slipped past them without being noticed.

There was a fresh guard standing at the front of the building. He let me in without a word. I'd made sure to take the time to remove the scent of gunpowder from my fur. All he would smell was the strong brine of the ocean.

In the lobby, it was empty. Not even Jon to be seen.

Climbing the stairs to the apartment, I was more than happy to pick up a familiar scent.

"Hey, Babe." Closing the door behind me, I walked straight to Rebecca, encircling her in my arms where she sat on a stool.

I got a slight squeak out of her as I squeezed her tight.

"Wolfy, what is it?" She shifted slightly to relieve the pressure. "You're acting like you haven't seen me in weeks."

I closed my eyes and buried my nose in her hair.

"It's been a long day, Babe. How about you?"

She laughed softly. "Yeah, for me too."

Opening my eyes, I looked down at what she was working on. It was a job application form. For KDP.

"Babe..."

She let out a long sigh when she saw what I was reading.

"There's not much for it, Tommy. I don't have a lot of skills that apply well to an office job, and there's no way I'm going back to serving drinks."

"But, Babe, won't people hire you just because..."

She gave me a stern look. "No. I haven't been using your name while I've been searching. In fact," She tossed her hair, "I've been making a point of *not* mentioning it. Not many people recognise me and I'm just fine with that."

"But, Babe, KDP..."

She shrugged. "It's where you worked."

I let out a long sigh as I settled next to her. "And it was a hole. You can do better than that. And what about Hayfair and West?"

She turned from me slightly and returned to filling out the form. "You know that Hairfair is in jail, and as for West..." She shrugged, "He was cleared of all charges save for a few misdemeanours. He hasn't come to bother you since you stepped down from being mayor, right?"

I still couldn't stand the thought of her working in such a place.

“Babe, please...”

She gave me a gentle shove away. “Don't worry about it, Wolfy. I've filled out a dozen of these forms today. This is just another one. We'll worry about it if I get an offer.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

Waiting as she filled the form, my eyes wandered to a box that lay on the floor beside her.

“What's that, Babe?”

She glanced over to where I pointed. “Oh,” She blushed slightly, “The wedding dress.”

“The *wedding dress*?” She'd said it like it was nothing.

Rebecca shrugged. “Jon forwarded an offer to me this morning. One of the better bridal shops was willing to provide it for free as a 'thank you' for the rebuilding. It would have been silly for us to pass it up.”

Lifting the corner of the oversized cardboard box, I got a glance of the pure white dress that lay folded within.

And I think I very nearly got poisoned of ruffle and sequin overdose.

“Gah!” I pulled back, “What in all the gods' names... you expect to *wear* that?”

She looked over to me. “Sure, why not?”

I just shook my head as I let the edge of the box fall back into place. Now I got the full effect of the dress. Not only did it look.... but they'd also infused the packaging with some kind of mixture of oil and floral scents. I had to hold back a sneeze.

A few moments later I got another whiff of the scent and my sneeze changed. It was now a gag I was holding back. The cloying, sickly sweet scent of the dress weaved around me until I felt ill.

“It's... great, Babe.”

Grabbing the edge of the box, I dragged it into the closet by the hallway door. There was almost nothing else in there but a few of Rebecca's jackets. The box only just fit.

Chapter 4: Across the River and Through the Woods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She rolled her eyes and took them.

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

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

"Where are we going, anyway?"

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

She scowled and looked at the clock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rebecca scowled at me as we stopped to talk.

"Couldn't sleep." I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She just rolled her eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hiya."

The only thing I could see were golden eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I rolled my eyes.

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

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

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

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

It was English's turn to roll his eyes.

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

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

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

He was gone a moment later.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stopped dead the moment she saw the building.

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

Turning to her, I stopped pulling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She tossed the apple over her shoulder.

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at me sceptically.

"What are you, trying to be romantic?"

I grinned and leaned forward to kiss her.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's still not ripe, Wolfy."

I laughed as I took the apple from her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She snuggled into the fur of my side.

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

I rolled my eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was only one way to find out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And with that he turned and was off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The face was yellow furred. That of Sunny.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm Tommy. This is Rebecca."

Snow simply nodded and circled us, sniffing.

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

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

yip.

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

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

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

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

"Gold."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold was my only pressing concern now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Much like his wound it began to bleed immediately.

Unlike his, mine began healing.

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

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

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

"Wendigo."

"Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Huh?

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

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

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

It hardly stunned him.

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

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

That was it.

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

This time he went out like a light.

And now *both* my hands hurt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lived up to his advertisement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She didn't say much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He didn't answer.

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

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

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

It was Jon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

telling *me*?”

Jon's tail curled around his legs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5: Civilization Isn't Always Civilized

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

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

Oh yeah.

Well, there goes my good mood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And I was just relaxed enough to start getting interested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

Now I know why they'd never caught on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her clothing, however, didn't keep up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mate!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jon, got any good news for me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tommy, what's..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Jon.

Bugger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I waved him on.

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

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

"Or the humans." I added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you talking about, Tommy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What in all the gods' names...

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mate!"

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

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

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

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

From behind Jon a half dozen other dogs fanned out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yeah, that was a closer approximation.

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

Otherwise I likely would have bit off my tongue.

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

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

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

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

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

That was when I decided to stop struggling.

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

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

I was staring straight up at a painted white ceiling.

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

I sneezed.

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

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

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

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

I sat up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What in all the gods' names?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were bloody liars.

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

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

Having nothing better to do, I dozed off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite her dishevelled appearance she was grinning ear to ear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shivered slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

side effects other than perhaps some scarring.”

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

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

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

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

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

And I kept unwrapping and unwrapping.

This was not looking good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I never made it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rebecca?" I turned to her.

She just shook her head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I still couldn't see anyone.

"She's out shopping."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened?" Was all he said.

When he spoke, he spoke as an alpha.

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

"This is not good."

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

He didn't say anything for a long moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why do *you* have it, Dad?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shivered slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The conversation went downhill from there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

crutch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just humor me this time, eh Jon?"

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

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

That was pretty much *everything*.

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

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

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.

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.

Chapter 8: She was no Jasmine

I was nearly dead on my feet when we made it to English's home an hour later. The lion was used to the walk, I wasn't.

"Welcome back, Mate." He smiled at me as I carried Rebecca up the steps to the front door. She'd fallen asleep about a kilometre back.

English's home was about as I remembered it. It was a slight shock for me to realize that I'd only been here twice before. Once when I'd tracked him to it shortly after being hired on at Storm Front, and once after getting drunk at West's party.

Last time there had still been some damage from the quake. The lion's fortunes had been doing well enough over the last half year to let him get the place fully repaired.

The building itself was a pure white Victorian style country house. It wasn't all that large, but its location here on the edge of town was prime. All the sides of the property were edged in forests. You could go to sleep here and feel like you were the only person in the whole world.

"Why don't you set the Lass up in the spare bedroom, Mate?" English waved me in after unlocking the door. "There should be plenty of room in there for the two of you."

Turning, the lion glanced at the two dozen dogs that had followed us from the city. He let out a long sigh. "And you buggers can do whatever it is you feel you need to." After a moment he added, "Just don't trample my garden! Most of those plants had to be imported from half way around the world!"

The inside of English's house was just as spotless as the outside. Everything was whitewashed and clean. I set Rebecca down on the soft sheets of the guest bed before turning to look out the window.

I could see the police dogs scouring bloody near literally every square inch of the property out there. They took their job seriously. There were few things I could count on, but the loyalty of the police dogs was guaranteed. I was no longer so sure as to the foundations of the *police service*, but the dogs themselves saw me as some twisted version of their alpha. I didn't have to worry about them directly.

Turning, I headed back downstairs towards where English sat in the kitchen. The first time I'd

been here the pure white of the home had set me off. Now I knew English better.

There was little in the house to truly reflect English as a person. And that was just the way he liked it. Not many people got close to the lion, Rebecca and I being the exceptions. The house was arranged so anyone breaking in would find little about English, or his history. The few things that English held close to his heart were secure and secret.

Down on the main floor now, I followed the only light in the house to the kitchen. It wasn't much of a surprise to find him here.

"Mate." He didn't turn to acknowledge me as he fussed over a steaming kettle of water. "I was making a late night cup. Care to indulge with me?"

My nose wrinkled at the scent of the tea he was preparing. Unlike him, I was never really one for the drink, but I knew it wasn't worth the pain it would cause for me to turn him down.

A few moments later the harsh whistle of the kettle broke the quiet night. It was enough to make me jump.

The sound must have carried, I could see a few vaguely canine shadows out in the yard jump with me.

"We're ready, Mate." Moving with deliberate slowness, English poured the hot water from the kettle into his fine bone china teapot. The pot itself didn't look like all that much, but I knew he'd carried it on his back from Africa.

It was, as far as I knew, the only reminder he had of his mother. Or his father, or whole family for that matter.

There was a soft splash of two teabags dunking into the pot.

"Come one, Mate," he whispered as he picked up the pot and two cups. "There are too many prying eyes and ears here. Let's go find ourselves some privacy, eh?"

"It's just the dogs..."

English snorted. "You may not mind them, Mate, but I still have yet to forget what *they* did to us. I don't accept 'just following orders' as an excuse. This is the first time I've ever let them on my property. Just cause I've agreed to it doesn't mean I have to like it."

There was no basement to the home, so our only option to get further from my bodyguards was to go back up.

"Sorry, Mate. Never had this place made for so many guests." He chuckled. "With the Lass in the other bedroom, this is the only place we can get some peace." He walked into the master bedroom, setting the pot and cups on the hard wood floor before stepping up to the windows.

A slight scowl crossed his face before he pulled the blinds closed.

"Blasted mutts. I told them not to trample my garden." He let out a sigh.

I wasn't quite sure what to do. There were no chairs in the room, only the single king sized white linen bed. I perched on the corner.

English didn't have the nerves I did. He reached down to pour himself a cup of tea before stretching out across the bed with a yawn and a flick of his tail.

"You might as well relax, Mate, it's going to be a long night by the look of it." He grinned evilly when I didn't move from the corner of the bed. "Pull the stick out, Mate." He swatted at me with one hand, hard enough to send me rolling backwards onto the soft bed beside him. "After all this time? You can feel safe enough, Mate. If I wanted to make you a conquest I would have done it long ago before you met the Lass." His grin widened. "Unless that is you're..." He trailed off as he took a long sip of his tea.

Reaching for my own cup as an excuse, I put a foot of space between us. "Not with my fiancée sleeping in the next room over."

English snickered. "Whatever you say, Mate. It's not adultery *yet*. Give it a few more days and they'll change. Anyway," His voice descended into a deep, rolling purr and he shifted onto his back and set his teacup to rest on his chest, "I haven't told you about my own wedding have I, Tommy?"

That was almost enough to send me falling off the bed in shock.

"Since when were you married?"

He laughed softly. "For a long time now, Mate. Perhaps since before you were born, pup. Let me ask you this, Tommy. We've spoken about why you're marrying the Lass. Respect, is it not? Perhaps a little bit of duty mixed in there as well? And love." He chuckled again, "I think we've been able to decide that the two of you have a little bit of that. Am I about right?"

I wasn't quite sure what he was getting at, but I nodded.

"Good, Tommy. That's the *right* answer. Now, let me ask you this, have you ever looked out over the Pacific?"

I scratched my head. "Sure, I guess. Not that there's all that much to see to the west. Do you mean to the islands? I was just talking to Rebecca about Salt Spring..."

"Nah, Tommy." He took a deep breath. "Further. Much, much, further. Few thousand clicks. To Japan."

I shrugged. "That's where Max is from. And Kate, his wife."

"Hmm." The lion nodded sagely, staring up at the featureless white ceiling. I had the distinct feeling he was seeing something else. "You could say that's where I'm from to, in a transitory way."

"It was after I left China, Tommy. You already know that story, so I won't say much more than my escape from the bounty hunting company was not as easy or clean as I would have liked. It was a bit of a running battle all the way south to Beihai on the coast." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I didn't kill any of the men they sent after me, but I did make sure that some of them wouldn't ever be walking again. Anyway," He cleared his throat, "That's not what we're talking about, eh? I made it to the coast, that's all that matters. I didn't really know where I was going at that point, just 'away'."

"I hopped the first ship I came across that I could afford. I wasn't poor at the point, having made fair enough coin at my last job, but I'd had to leave no too few of my possessions behind when I fled."

"The ship I happened across was bound for Nishinomote. Japan." He said the name of the city in a single easy breath, but I'd never be able to repeat it.

"It's on Tangeashima Island, Mate. Not that that really matters all the much to you. All you need to know is that it's one of the smaller islands in southern Japan. After the Cataclysm it became a bit of a playground for the remaining rich and noble. I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was that it wasn't China. That was good enough for me."

"Anyway, I got off the boat not speaking the language, holding no Japanese Yen, and not a clue where I was other than 'not where I had been'. Frankly though, it didn't concern me much. I'd already managed to get over those particular hurdles more than a couple of times already and I was game for it once more."

"Tangeashima Island, Tommy. Heh, it's a bloody well nice place. I'd lucked out that my ship had stopped there. It normally costs an arm and a leg to set foot on the island. Only the rich go there. My ship was just stopping off for supplies before continuing on and I – quite literally – jumped overboard and swam the last few hundred meters to shore." He shivered slightly. "Not something I'd do again. I didn't know at the time just how bad a swimmer I am. I was lucky to make it."

"Anyway," he continued, "I washed ashore and began prowling through the woods for a nice place to set camp. To say I was a little surprised would be an understatement. You ever seen one of those Japanese gardens? The kind where *every single* flower and *every single* peddle has been

painstakingly placed? Nearly the entire island was one of those. It was off putting to say the least.”

“I managed two nights on the island before the local guards ferreted me out. For once in my life I was smart enough not to fight. In no small part due to the fact all five guards were dragons. Tommy, I'd never seen anyone like that before – not even during my time in China.”

“Anyway, there was no *official* law that forbid me from being on the island. It wasn't *technically* private. They dragged me in front of a couple of the head owners on the island, dirty and weathered as I was, for them to decide what to do with me.”

“Now, keep in mind that I couldn't speak a word of Japanese, but I did know a few snatches of Mandarin. It wasn't much, but I was at least able to get across that I was a wayfarer, though they preferred the title *rowan*.”

“See, I'd been surprised when I encountered dragons, but these folks were even more surprised when they encountered *me*. Seems there wasn't a single lion on all the Japanese islands – not surprising as I hadn't seen any of my own kind since leaving Africa – and lions have a place in Japanese mythology. Our lack over the past hundred years had done nothing but elevate us in their estimation. I, even in my dirty and rather unpleasant smelling state, was something akin to seeing a living spirit.”

“Now don't get me wrong, they didn't see me as a living god or anything like that, through I was young and stupid enough that I would have been more than happy to encourage it. What they did see in me was a fountain of money. Each and every person who owned land on the island was rich, and most for good reason. They saw in me a tourist attraction.”

“Yes, Tommy,” He pulled a face, “I spent over three years on the island, working as a bloody *tourist attraction*. It wasn't a bad living all said and done, I just had to smile to the rich nobles and business men who came to see me, give them blessings.”

“Not a bad deal. They taught me Japanese, gave me a small hut on the island. What they didn't do, however, was teach me more than the absolute minimum of the Japanese culture needed to avoid giving offence.”

“Sound odd? Not really. Much of my charm was in the fact I was 'foreign'. Teaching me too much of the Japanese culture would have caused me to lose some of my value. They had no issue with me mingling with those who came to see me so long as I kept acting different. And trust me, Tommy, *different* is something I do well.”

“Anyway, it was towards the end of those three years that a particular Japanese noble family came to the island. It wasn't the emperor, or even close, though they were distantly related. There were four of them. The mother and father, the older brother and the younger sister. They were all cats.”

“They were the Gifu family. I knew they had to be important when the owners of the island came to me personally and asked me to show them a good time. Seems they were more than simply rich, and they'd come to island to see *me*.”

“Despite what you might think, Tommy, it didn't go to my head. Dozens people had come over the years just to see me. They were, as far as I knew, no different.”

“The day came and the Gifu's arrived. I played the perfect gentleman, with my normal edge of barbarian – that is to say, non-Japanese savagery – they were suitably impressed. I spun them a few tales, handed out blessings and did what I did every day. When the time came for them to return to their rented lodgings for the night I took the hand of the young daughter, Aika, and kissed it. It was forward of me, and *very* improper, but it was part of my savage charm. She just giggled.”

“It was later that night that I received a summons to their rooms. When I say 'summons', Tommy, I mean it. People like this do not *request* that you come see them. They *summon* you.”

“I hadn't the slightest what to do, so I went, after first taking a moment to comb myself out all nice and do what I could to make myself presentable.”

"I knew I was outclassed the moment I walked in the building. You know the feeling. That moment when the door is opened by a servant and you just *know* you're out of your league. But that's never stopped me before, Tommy." English shook his head. "To be honest, the only thought that went through my mind was that the kimono I'd been given was too drab. Heh, imagine that, Tommy. I was stepping into the personal quarters of one of the richest families in Japan and all I could think was that the clothing I'd been given by the people who owned the island was too drab. I guess that I was still young back then. It never really went through my mind, but I, deep down, still thought of myself as a prince."

"Anyway," He pushed the thought aside, "I was ushered into the sitting room of the family. All four cats were there, dressed to the nines. They bowed to me when I entered and I bowed back. A moment later they began nattering away in Japanese, but I only caught one word in three. The best I could do in return was to nod my head and smile."

"In the end it took at least five repetitions, but I figured out what was going on. Now I really was smiling. It seemed that the daughter, Aika, had taken a shining to me. You see, that wasn't all that uncommon. I'd had a few different ladies throw themselves at me over the years. I was more than happy for it and found no reason to complain. Aika, however, was thinking something slightly different."

"She wasn't the firstborn of the family. Don't get me wrong, she was already set for life, but she didn't need to carry on the family name like her brother did. They'd come all the way out to the island to see me. They'd heard of the lion that had washed up ashore and were, quite frankly, curious. I was, in their eyes, a living good luck charm. And the fact I stood a good four feet taller than them and outweighed them by triple didn't hurt either."

"In any event they invited me to sit among them and drink Nihonshu. That's what they call what foreigners call saki. The evening passed quickly and pleasantly. I'd never partaken of Nihonshu before, Tommy, and let me tell you that it has a kick like a pissed off elephant."

"I held it well enough, but that night I had no compunction against laying down with Aika. The evening started well and ended better."

"That left me a little confused, to say the least, when they packed up and left the next morning without another word."

English took another sip of his rapidly cooling tea. "I all but forgot about them a week later. It had been a pleasant distraction, but I assumed I must have misunderstood what we were talking about. And in any event, in my world anything beyond a one night stand was a dirty concept."

"A month after that and I was just waking for the day when one of the owners of the island came to me all smiles. He was carrying a basket filled with rice balls and wine."

"I hadn't the slightest what was going on as he made me pack up and follow him out to the harbour. Truth be told I thought I was being sacked. I only realized what was going on when I saw the name on the boat that waited for me."

"Gifu's Explorer."

"It was the same family that had come to see me a month before."

"Boarding the ship, I was disappointed to see that no one from the family, especially Aika, was there to greet me. The staff were no help. Most of them were too shy to speak to me in my still fractured Japanese, and those who did could only tell me that they had directions to pick me up and return to the city of Chiba."

"And that was how I arrived in Japan proper. I'd landed on Tangeashima little better than a stowaway, but I arrived in Chiba like a king." He chuckled. "Or a prince."

"There was no great fanfare when I stepped foot on the soil, but I was quickly sped to the

family's residence.”

“Tommy, Mate, you've never seen Chiba. Gods, you'd remember it.” The lion's eyes misted over for a moment. “They fell like everyone else during the Cataclysm, but they recovered far better than anywhere else I've ever seen.”

“They used to call Chiba City the cyberpunk capital of the world. It may not be quite that anymore, but they can still light up the night in ways that we in V-town can only imagine. For a boy like me, Tommy, who had hardly so much as *seen* an electric light...”

“Tangeashima Island was a paradise, but it was kept rustic for the nobles who vacationed there. Chiba... Chiba was like a dream, a technicolour nightmare. They have cars and trains there, Tommy. They have neon lights that brighten the night so you can't tell it was ever anything but the day!”

“Anyway,” He cleared his throat and glanced back down at his cup, “They brought me to a highrise building. I'd never seen anything like that before. You can't imagine how much trouble they had getting me in the elevator to lift me to the twenty-second floor! I just about rolled my eyes when I realized how high up we were!”

“And that's where I met the Gifu's again. Well, the Mister and the Missus. They stood there in modern business suits while I was still clad in the same performer's kimono I'd worn last they saw me.”

“They nodded and accepted me graciously. Then, quick as they could, they handed me off to the staff to be made presentable.”

“You think you had to sit through bugger all when you were mayor, Tommy? I had it ten times worse. I'd never even worn a pair of pants before that day, now I was clad in Japan's finest businessware. Special made it was, just for my size. I never did find out how they got my measurements.”

“They ushered me into a room, all clean and fresh smelling now. It was a boardroom, an imported oak table overlooking a set of floor to ceiling windows that gave a commanding view of the harbour.”

“I was still little better than a backwards bumpkin. I crawled up to the windows to peer out, fearful that I might fall the unimaginable distance to the ground far below. It was almost beyond my mind to imagine that I had come here in one of the countless ships that crowded the water so far below.”

“It was her laugh that shocked me out of my reprieve. I hadn't even seen her where she stood off in the corner of the room.”

“I should tell you about Aika. She was a catch no matter what her standing might be. Nowhere near my size, she was perhaps four feet tall and minty pounds soaking wet. She was a ginger cat, almost the same colour as I. If anything she reminded me of the females back by Lake Elementia.”

“She spoke softly, almost too softly for me to hear. I had to puzzle my way through her words to understand what she was saying.”

“I forget the words now, but they were something along the lines of welcoming me to the family, asking how I'd enjoyed my trip here.”

“I was still speechless. My mouth hanging open as I gazed about me. She stepped forward then, reaching up a hand to gently close my mouth. You know what? That was the first time she touched me as a lady. The Aika I'd been with for a night a month ago had been a girl. This was a lady. A young one no doubt, but a lady none the less. There was something about the way she moved.”

“When we'd been together before she had been hesitant, fearful. Now she was graceful and sure. She touched my face without a thought, like that was where she belonged. And I was too flabbergasted to so much as blink.”

English chuckled. “I never thought you'd ever hear me used a word like *flabbergasted*, but

that's the only way I can think to describe it. This was all too much. All too fast. When she stepped up to me and leaned into my side, it was like she was the only thing real in the entire world."

"I knew her, if only for a single night. She was a touchstone for me in this new world. I wrapped my arms around her and didn't let go for hours."

"She took me from the boardroom, out to meet her parents and brother again. They all spoke in quick and natural Japanese. It was all I could do to even pretend to keep up."

"At one point they began talking to me about a dowry. Well, that wasn't their word for it, but it's close enough. They must have taken my silence as indignation, for every time I blinked the numbers they were talking about went up. And Aika, she was no help, she was arguing that she was worthless, that the family should pay me *more* to take her."

"I didn't even have a clue what kind of value they were talking about at the end, but Anka seemed happy, clutching my arm. I just did what I always did when something went over my head like this. I sat there and nodded wisely, scowling every so often when the tone of voices talking suggested I should."

"The next two months were among the best of my life. They'd be the best, Tommy, if I'd never met Jasmine. Gods how I wished I'd never met Jasmine. She haunted my memories every time I was with Aika."

"Jasmine had been everything that Aika was not. At least on the surface. Jasmine had been strong, firm in direction, and unwilling to compromise in what she believed. Aika... she was the ideal Japanese woman. Or at least the ideal that their media held up for all to follow. She always fought for me, and never contradicted me in public, no matter how poorly I understood the situation or what social gaff I might be making."

"It was during that time that I learned Japanese properly. You don't know the language, Tommy, and I'll tell you now it's a bugger's bugger. The language of my birth had been relatively simple. Indian – or the dialect of it I'd learned – had been challenging enough. And there had been a good reason I'd never learned more than a few fragments of Mandarin."

"Aika was the one to teach me, she made it her mission. And she had a gods' given way of rewarding me for doing well."

"It was around that point that I truly came to understand what I was to become a part of. I was to marry Aika."

"Heh. I didn't have an argument with that. She was warm and soft, and did every single thing I told her without complaint or comment. And her family was more than enough to keep me satisfied."

"And, well, that was what happened. Two months after I came to Chiba we were married in a proper Shinto temple. It was a relatively modest wedding for what they *could* have afforded. The Gifu's, unlike many other families, truly did believe in living relatively humble lives."

"We made our lives simply enough from then on out. Being the younger daughter, Anka didn't inherit any of the family's shipping business, but they, and their money, was never far away if we needed it."

"I made use of my own gods given strengths then. You may not think of me as such, but I can turn a fair hand as an actor. And I did." Pulling a grin from somewhere, he struck a pose and flexed his muscles. If I didn't know English so well I'd almost think the smile was real.

"And I turned a fair enough coin. We were comfortable enough, but enough wasn't *enough*. I'd spend so many years walking the roads, making my own life. Now it felt..." He pulled at the air, "It felt like I was a puppet dancing on a stick. Every few weeks the Gifu family would call me up and parade me in front of some new cargo ship or new product they'd imported from the gods knew where."

"I was a mascot, Tommy. Can you imagine that? I was their *bloody* mascot. Not that I really

thought much of it at that time. My concern was more on our home.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Anka was an amazing woman. No longer a girl, there was little more I could ask for in her. Except she *wasn’t Jasmine*.”

“I never said it, not out loud at least. I did my honest best to be happy. Gods, Tommy, I did. I was a young fool back then, but I wasn’t so foolish to throw away what I had without a fight *again*. I’d done that once back in India and I wasn’t looking forward to it.”

“I told you that Anka never said a word against me in public. It was true. But she would speak in private. Her words were always soft, but they came more and more often as I became restless.”

“As sad as it might sound, I never did find out if Anka truly loved me. I made love to her, but *I* never loved her. She never did say if she married me, stayed with me, because she loved me, or because she loved her family’s business. But it was close enough to the same none the less.”

“She was the first person to know when I prepared to leave. She found out the evening she came into our bedroom and saw me packing my things.”

“I told her that I’d purchased two backpacks. She could join me if she wanted. If she didn’t... well, we’d had a good time together. I needed more than simply her. I needed to find my own life, not just be a status symbol of her family.”

“She didn’t say anything for a long time. Simply watched as I continued to pack. It’s odd, Tommy. I can remember most everything I put in that backpack.”

“My mother’s tea set, a single lock of hair from Jasmine, my hunting tools, and some money. That was it.”

“Anka’s voice was soft when she spoke. She was less than a foot behind me, but I could hardly make out her words. She asked me what she’d done to drive me away. She promised she’d do better. That’s she’d make me happy.”

“You know, Tommy, it was that moment that I almost put down the pack and stayed. I didn’t love her, but I could *make* love with her. It’s an odd turn of phrase. We didn’t just have sex. We *made* love. I couldn’t have love just by having her, but for brief moments I could find peace with her, could find, *make*, the love.”

“I turned to her, reached out to her. She didn’t shy away from me. My Japanese was good enough by then that I could articulate what I felt. The only problem is that *I* was the one who couldn’t make it into words, no matter the language.”

“I told her I cared for her. Told her I wished her the best. Even told her again that she was welcome to come with me.”

“Her words, I remember them, were ‘What of our marriage?’ I had expected her words to be of something about her family’s company. How I’d ruin her, her reputation. But no, she asked about *our* marriage.”

“I said I was still young and stupid back then, Tommy. It was true. All I did was to shrug and reply ‘Our marriage is what we make of it. You can make of it what you want, I’m leaving.’ It was then she walked away.”

“She didn’t flee from the room in tears. She simply nodded to me and walked calmly from our bedroom. A moment later I heard her leave our home, the door closing softly behind her.”

“That was the last time I ever saw her.”

“Packing, it couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes before I was ready to leave. I was standing just inside the front room to our home, pack on my back, double checking to make sure there was nothing else I wanted to take. I’d already gone through our finances. I left three-quarters to her. I felt it was only right. Most of it had come from her family anyway.”

“The door slid softly open behind me then. I turned. I can’t say I was surprised to see her father

and brother standing there. They were both dressed in their normal business suits like this was nothing more than another meeting.”

“They didn't say anything while they looked our home. I hadn't ransacked the place, to the contrary it was almost untouched. A moment later they brushed past me to look into our bedroom. Then they took a seat at our table. They looked up at me, not saying a word, but clearly expecting me to join them.”

“I wasn't in much of a rush. To be honest, I didn't even know where I was going. I'd only decided to leave a few hours before, after my last performance. I sat down with them, but I never took the pack off my back.”

“Shishi. That's what they called me. They'd given me that name when they first met me. They had always spoken the word with a degree of reverence before. Now they spat it like a curse.”

“I wasn't quite sure what to expect from them. To be frank, I was a little frightened. Not that I admitted it, even to myself. But I'm older now, Tommy, I know better now.”

“They didn't yell, didn't fight. Like Anka, they only asked what was to happen to our marriage.”

“I hadn't thought about it when Anka had asked the question, but now I'd had some time to go over it myself.”

“I told them that it had been pleasant, but it was time to move one. I didn't *want* to dishonour them, they had offered me an amazing gift, but I was ready to leave. As far as I was concerned the marriage had served its purpose.”

“The two of them looked at each other. The father's voice was quiet when he spoke, but hard. Like being hit over the head by a velvet wrapped iron girder.”

“He told me that marriage was not something that was simply 'convenient', that this was something that was intended to last until I died.”

“I was a bit taken aback. Sure I *knew* what marriage was, I'd seen enough married couples, but it was, in my eyes, academic. *I* was different. I suppose it was, once again, my damn father's influence.” The snarl that slipped into English's voice when he spoke of his father was enough to make him pause for a moment, take a deep breath and compose himself. “Anyway, I shrugged it off.”

“They asked me why I hadn't told them of this before we'd been married. They'd had their concerns with me, being as foreign as I was, and had given me a generous two months to make sure I was ready.”

“I simply cocked my head. I hadn't seen it that way.”

“In any event, the conversation was starting to make me uncomfortable, likely nearly as bad as it did them. I told them I had a ship to catch, that I had to be going.”

“I was just beginning to rise when a single word from the father's lips stilled me as sure as ice through my veins.”

“Stop. That was all he said. But he said it like a father, *my* father.”

“His voice became emotionless as he spoke now. He accepted that I was to leave, that was his way. His son, sitting next to him, did not take it so well, he was bright red and fuming, but the father didn't fight.”

“He told me that he couldn't make me stay, and he wouldn't even if he could. It wouldn't be right to me, and it would be a grave wrong to Anka. A graver wrong then even my leaving.”

“He only asked that I give up my connection to the Gifu family. And that I leave on one of his ships.”

“The deal was that he would let me go, but I must leave under the guise of a business trip. Anka and I would never be officially divorced. I would leave to 'help the family business grow in the new

world' and would simply never return. She would then proclaim me dead and move on."

"To be honest, Tommy, that was the best plan I'd heard in a long time. I was young, young and foolish, but I wasn't evil. I didn't *want* to hurt anyone. I just needed out. This seemed to me to be the perfect solution. I would have my freedom and they would retain their honour."

"It wasn't even all that bad a deal for them either." English began speaking quickly, tripping over his own words, "I'd helped the company grow no small measure while I was there, it was almost double the size as when I started."

"Anyway," He took a breath and steadied his words, "It was only hours later, in the dark folds of the neon Chiba night, that I left Japan."

"I can still remember my last sight of Chiba. I'd been there for two years. It had introduced me to the modern life. I can still remember it sinking into the water behind me as the small clipper I'd been given sailed away."

"And that, Tommy, is where my story takes yet another turn. You see, the clipper I'd been put on was not one of the Gifu's larger ships. Less than thirty feet long, it had only a crew of two. I had no idea where it was going. I'd been told 'the new world'. All I knew of that was that it was east."

"That suited me. I'd been travelling east since burying my mother. Some more east would be good for me."

"There was far more east to the Pacific Ocean than I'd ever dreamed. It was after our second week I began to become restless."

"I asked the captain, a low ranking but loyal man in the family business, when we were to arrive. He said we'd make our destination the next day."

"He wasn't lying. We did meet our destination noon that next morning. The middle of the Pacific."

"The Gifu had told me they would take me to the 'New World'. I assumed they meant North America. If I'd thought about it a bit deeper, I would have realized that New World can also translate into *The Next World*."

We were near dead centre in the Pacific when one-hundred pounds of explosives detonated in the belly of our ship.

"The crew had known it was there. They'd been the ones to bring it aboard, and they'd been the ones to detonate it."

"They both died instantly, but I – lucky or not – had jumped overboard moment before."

"That, Tommy, did not leave me in a good way."

"Thousands of kilometres from land, lost and alone, bobbing in the cold waters of the Pacific ocean, clinging to the floating debris of the ship that had been chartered to take me to the next world."

"I, Tommy, was feeling a bit put out."

"Suffice it to say that I didn't much care for swimming when I'd arrived in Japan. I downright hated it now."

"I ended up sitting on a shard of the hull, the largest piece that remained of the ship. Never did see either of the crew again. I sat there, cold, beaten, and lonely for five days." The lion laughed, a pained and pinched sound. Reaching up, he rubbed his eyes before taking another sip of cold tea. His hands came away wet.

"It was quite a change, Tommy. Not a month before I'd been in a warm, soft bed, Anka at my side, doing whatever I wished. I was a long, long, way from there now."

"I told you that when I first met Anka she was still a girl? Then she was a woman next I saw her?"

"Well, I'd still been a boy. I had the body of a man, but I'd still been a child. A child that had

killed and shagged, but still a foolish, selfish, boy. It was all alone on that piece of waterlogged wood that I finally became a man.”

He let out a breath. “It was just past noon on the fifth day that I was found by a passing ship. It was a trader, but not one the Gifu's. They knew of me and were more than happy to rescue me and bring me to the new world.”

“What they didn't know was that the man they pulled aboard from that floating coffin wasn't the same lion who had worked for the Gifu's.”

“The cub that had set out on the voyage would have been more than happy to sit back on my rescuer's ship and been taken to the new world in a degree of luxury.”

“The lion they did pick up, while not humble,” He smiled, “Was at least closer to.”

Picking the cup up again, he knocked back the last of the tea and laid back on the bed.

“They dropped me off in Victoria. There's not much there these days, more of a stop off on the way to V-town. I then found my own passage from there to here.”

A laugh worked its way up from deep in his chest. A real one this time.

“Then I met Smith, and Sayer, and started SF. But,” He yawned wide enough to make my jaw hurt, “That's a story for another time.”

I didn't really have much to say in response. English just looked over my way and reached out to ruffle the fur between my ears. I pulled back and nearly fell off the bed.

“That's not to say I think the Lass will try to get you killed if you leave her, Mate.” His accent was back in full force, “But it's just to tell you that this is a big decision. The two of you are already devoted to each other, so this is likely the best thing you can do, but you need to be sure it's forever.”

He paused for a moment and yawned again. “As for me, I guess there must be a god looking out for foolish young lions. That's the only way I can say I survived. But anyway, Mate...”

He petered off as we both heard the lock in the front door quietly click. A moment later the sound of the door sliding open seemed loud in the night's silence.

Not a word passed between us as we rolled off the bed and stalked down the stairs.

What was going on? No one should be able to get in here without the police dogs outside raising the alarm.

The thought that someone could have gotten past them... or eliminated them, was enough to run my blood cold.

We got as far as the bottom of the stairs before a familiar scent made me smile.

“Jon.” I stepped around the corner to see the police dog standing at attention, waiting for me. “How did you get in?”

He cocked his head slightly. “Mr. English gave me a key some time ago. Said I might need it if something were to go wrong. I believe this qualifies.”

I glanced back to English in shock. The lion just pulled a face and hurried the conversation along.

“What's up, dog?” His voice was gruff.

“I finished another sweep of the apartment building. Nothing of note was found. We've improved the security again, and believe it to be safe for you to return at your leisure.” He paused for a moment to pull a paper from one of his breast pockets. “And I assumed you would like to read the letter itself. This is a photographic copy. The decision was made to separate you from the original in the event it has been coated in a compound unknown to us.”

There wasn't much to the letter, really. I only got a second to see it before English ripped it from my hands to read it, his back turned to me.

“Bah!” He ripped the paper to shreds. “There's nothing here of use. No demands other than

'breakup'. It could be from anyone. My advice, Mate? Bugger them. *Bugger them all*. You've survived enough already, and they don't seem interested in targeting the Lass. Let's get this over with and they might just curl up and go away."

I glanced over to Jon.

He shrugged. "The force is behind you, no matter your decision. And personally," He raised one lip in the faintest smile, showing a tooth, "For once I agree with English."

I spent that night in English's guest room, curled up against Rebecca.

I couldn't speak for anyone else, but there was no danger I would ever be caught in the trap... traps that had ensnared English.

It took me a long time to finally fall asleep. Long after midnight. I could see out the window from where I lay, looking out over the large back lawn and the police dogs that patrolled endlessly back and forth.

Chapter 9: Not Everyone Is Into This Whole Free Love Thing

I woke the next morning. English's home was nothing compared to Hotel Vancouver, but it was a bloody well slight better than spending another night on the hard floor of the apartment.

Rebecca was still asleep beside me. It seemed she was able to get a better rest than I. I'd gone to sleep late and restless, and woken early and no better off.

Stumbling down the staircase, I saw Jon curled up on the white sofa in the front room. Heh, leave it to a dog to be able to sleep anywhere. The fact he *just happened* to be right next to the front door I'm sure had nothing to do with it.

English was already awake. He, as per normal, looked like he'd just spent the last hour combing out his pelt. I'd spent enough time on the road with him to know that he nearly looked that way naturally.

"Early morning, Mate." He poured me a cup of tea as I sat down at the table across from him.

Looking out the big double patio door at the back of the kitchen, I could see the dogs still out there, tirelessly walking their rounds.

There were a few scraps of meat on a platter before us. I raised an eye ridge at English.

"Sorry, Mate," He smiled. "I wasn't expecting company. It can be days at a stretch I'm away from here, so I tend not to keep the larder too stocked. Speaking of which," He glanced out towards the deep forests that edged the garden out back, "You feel like joining me in finding our own breakfast?"

"Hunting?" I barked out a laugh, "You? I've never once seen you hunt and not get yourself nearly killed."

That earned me a glare. "We each have our strengths, Mate. What do you say? Just you and I? It beats heading back into town just for a meal."

I polished my claws on the fur of my leg. It's been a long time since I last hunted, better part of a year.

English had become a man when he'd dragged himself from the wreckage of a sinking ship. I found mine when I'd taken down my first prey.

"Let's go."

Jon glanced over at us from his position on the sofa as we opened the back door. His eyes were bright and alert. For just a moment I had to wonder if he'd ever been asleep. He nodded once at me and closed his eyes again.

The dogs who patrolled the grounds let us pass without issue. They did fan out a bit as we dived into the trees though.

"How much of the land is yours, English?" I asked as I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of the fresh air.

He laughed. "All of it, Mate. Or close enough to. Enough folks died off in the riots and quake that their lands were selling for pennies. I snapped up everything I could once SF started making a profit again."

He wasn't lying. We passed a few more homes as we ranged through the forest. They had all been damaged far worse than English's own place. Half of them were close to collapsing.

As for the lion... I must be rubbing off on him. His motions were still little more than a shadow of my own, but at least he was able to dive and dodge through the trees well enough without getting his mane stuck up on anything.

That was light years beyond what he'd been doing the first time I brought him out in the wilderness.

I wasn't really all that concerned with finding food. Sure my stomach growled every now and then, but I was just as happy to run wild without a care for a while. Having English by my side just felt natural.

We made a circle of English's property. Out to the edge and then a slow loop back. There were no police dogs out here. This was closer to hunter's territory than it was police.

We were about half way back to the house when I picked up a scent.

A buck deer.

Falling to all fours, English followed suit behind me, we were both as silent as the breeze.

He wasn't far off. It took me no more than ten minutes to track him down. And what a prize he was, any hunter would be happy to have him.

Grazing on the grass out in a clearing, he'd already begun growing his rack. He didn't even have the slightest clue we were here.

Crouching low to the ground, I signalled with my tail for English to hang back. He was a good friend, but his stalking was still sub par. He'd just scare the prey away.

I was halfway across the clearing, still undetected, almost close enough to spring, when something tickled in the back of my nose.

I tried to ignore it, to focus on what was more important. Breakfast. But the itch just wouldn't go away.

Pausing, I took a quick breath to puzzle out the scent. For a moment I couldn't pin it down. It was odd, alien to this environment.

It was bug spray, shoe leather, and rubber.

My body had been moving on automatic while I thought, the next thing I knew I could feel my back legs tensing for a spring as my tail began to wag.

Wait... a human?

Well, I still sprang, but it was for all of about three feet as my paws slipped in the silty soil.

I landed face first in the dirt as the buck turned and bolted.

Bugger! What in all the...

Oh.

Scrambling to my feet, I waved for English, not wanting to shout lest our new prey be nearby.

The lion was by my side in seconds. He didn't say a word as I pointed to where I'd picked up the new scent.

The trail wasn't hard to follow. Whoever made it wasn't much for outdoorering. He blundered through the woods, pushing aside whatever was in his way and stepping on whatever was underfoot without so much as a thought.

That was one of the problems with humans. They wore shoes. It may not sound like much, but English and I walked on our bare paws. That caused us to be sensitive to what was underfoot, to walk on smooth and dry things. The human didn't notice if he was on stone or mud, and resultingly had a tendency to leave tracks all over.

It took less than ten minutes to track him down. We were in luck, he'd yet to try and breach the perimeter of the police dogs' patrols. A few hundred meters more and they might just have well caught him.

The human was far easier to sneak up on than the buck. English at my side, we were less than a single stride from him when I reached out and laid my hand on the man's shoulder.

He would have leapt five feet in the air if I hadn't held him down.

He did his best to turn about, but didn't manage much with me holding him firm.

It was a human alright. Fair skinned with dark hair and decked out in hiking clothing. He looked like he was about to start hyperventilating.

I just noticed his hand reaching for a gun at his hip before English's ham sized fist smacked him hard in the jaw.

The human made the trip back to the house slung over English's shoulder. The first of the police dogs to spot us didn't even bother asking what had happened. He simply turned and made off running for the city.

It was still early morning, hardly even nine o'clock yet when we tied the human up to one of English's kitchen chairs. All the furniture in the house had been made to support the lion's weight. There was no way the human could break free.

Jon uncurled himself from the couch as we stepped in. Without saying a word he watched curiously as English tied the man up.

"Sir," Jon finally spoke, "You are aware that interrogation, especially through the use of... physical means is prohibited. Only the police force is permitted to do such, and only under strict guidelines."

English didn't say anything, so I turned to the dog.

"Jon," I set my hand on his shoulder, "We found him sneaking about out in the forest. There could be more of them. I want you to go upstairs and make sure Rebecca is safe." I gave him a meaningful stare, "And I want you to stay up there until we know it's safe. Don't come back down."

He paused for a moment, surveying the room.

"Understood, Tommy. You may want to note that the force is aware of the man. A team will likely be here in less than ten minutes to take possession of him." He gave me back the exact same stare I'd just handed out, "And they will be under strict orders to collect him no mater your desires."

He was gone a moment later.

"Well now, time to get to work." English was clearing the table. His accent was gone.

"Tommy, time for you to go up and join Jon and Rebecca. Make sure to close the door behind you." A

frown pulled at his lips. "I'll try to make this as fast and silent as I can."

"No." I let out a breath and dropped down into a chair on the far side of the table from English. "It's me their after. You're doing this for my benefit. I'm the one who's going to take responsibility for what we're about to do."

He glanced over to me. "Are you sure, Tommy? My soul's stained enough that another few blotches won't matter. This might be something you don't want to see."

I took a deep breath. "Let's just wake him up."

English hadn't been kidding.

I'd always respected the lion. Now I feared him.

The man's name was Richard. Even getting that from him had been a challenge.

When he first woke he refused to say a single word, though the fear was obvious in his eyes when he saw me.

I'd expected English to work the man into a bloody pulp to make him talk. I was wrong. The lion had more... gods, the term 'civilized' most definitely did not apply to his methods.

English had to do little more than tap the man with his claws to make him scream.

Those screams were enough to make my fur bristle and haunt my nights for more than a few weeks.

The first time a scream rang out I could hear the dogs outside mobilize. A few barked orders from Jon out the window above us at least kept them from knocking the door down.

Jon's estimate of the new team arriving in ten minutes was just about spot on. We'd only had a chance to just begin when they did, quite literally, knock the door in.

There was only a single thing we managed to get out of the man in that time. The name 'Human Defence League'.

I felt dirty. Not only for what I'd done, but for how little I'd gotten out of it.

The dogs made off with our prisoner soon after. They couldn't figure out why the man's face was contorted so when there wasn't a mark on his body. English and I decided not to enlighten them.

Rebecca and Jon came down stairs a few minutes later. Neither said a word as we watched the man get dragged away in cuffs.

There was a long silence until Jon cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you'd like to return to your apartment, Sir?"

"Yeah," I shook my head, "Yeah, let's head back to civilization."

We took the long way back into the city.

I wanted to get back to the apartment, but I wasn't quite ready to face the empty rooms again.

The normal road we took just went straight back – you could almost see English's house from my apartment. This route was a little more roundabout.

Someone had come along here and done the road up like an old style country lane, complete with white picket fences and fruit trees. It was like they were trying to mix the city and the forest. Like they were trying to take the trees and bend them to the desires of the city.

It made me sick.

Glancing over to English, Rebecca, and Jon, none of them seemed to see the problem.

I started walking a little faster.

The doors to the apartment building were only a hundred feet away when a police patrol

swooped in to surround us. Jon stepped forward to have a few words with the commanding officer. They were soft enough that I couldn't make them out, and in that odd speech the police used so that I doubted it would do me any good if I could.

"Sir," Jon turned to me, voice level, "These officers have orders to take to you to Commissioner Sayer. Immediately. It appears that he has some... questions about the latest individual brought into custody." I could just see Jon chewing his lips ever so slightly.

"Fine." I rolled my eyes. "Let's get this over with." I looked over to English, "You want to hang around for a bit? I shouldn't be long."

"Love to, Mate," He threw me a blinding smile, "But I've got to drop by at SF *sometime*. They just don't know what to do without me there."

And that was that. I gave Rebecca a quick kiss goodbye and went with the dogs back to police HQ. It was a familiar walk.

Through the front door, we never even slowed as we headed up to the third floor. Sayer waited for me in his office, hands folded on his desk, unmoving.

"Mr. Taggart." I could hardly make out his voice.

I settled into the chair across from him. "Sayer. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

There was just the faintest wrinkling of the dog's brow. I interpreted it as a scowl.

"Mr. Taggart. I have received *troubling* reports this morning about a suspect that was just brought in. It was reported he was found on Mr. English's property. You and he arrested him..." He paused for breath, "And then there was some confusion about what exactly happened next."

I slumped back in the chair. "We interrogated him, Sayer. I'm not happy about it, but that's what we did."

"*Interrogate*, Mr. Taggart? I believe you and I had a rather involved conversation along these lines not so long ago. It resulted in you taking away my ability to *interrogate* people in exactly the manner you're describing."

I reached up to rub my eyes with the balls of my fingers. "Sayer, don't get started. It had to be done. There has been how many attempts on my life now? I had to do something."

He didn't say anything for a moment. The only sound in the room was the soft leaves-on-concrete rustle of his breathing.

"Mr. Taggart," He spoke slowly, choosing each and every word, "What you are doing is exactly that you forbid me. My men know what their doing. They're trained to perform the act while causing the minimum of pain. Your friend was not. My men," His voice picked up slightly before he dissolved into coughing, "Could have found your attackers by now if you'd allowed us to use our full powers."

"It's not like that, Sayer," I tried to form my thoughts.

"It's *exactly* like that!" He regained enough strength to raise his hand, dropping it down to the desk with a soft thunk. "*I'm* looking out for the welfare of the city. *You're* looking out for yourself. Yet it is I who is the monster when I follow my carefully written procedures to deeply interrogate a suspect."

"Fine!" I threw my hands up. "Fine. I messed up, okay? I hurt the man. I'm sorry. Alright? I feel bad enough already."

The dog didn't smile, but he did bob his head ever so imperceptibly.

"Thank you, Mr. Taggart, but it is not I you should be apologizing to. It's Mr. Richard Cambell. But I wouldn't worry too much about him just yet. There are a number of other offences to his name. He'll be staying with us for quite some time. You can apologize to him when he's released. You should only be thankful that you had police officer supervision when you interrogated him, otherwise we

would have no choice but to charge you with assault.”

“What? But Jon was...”

Sayer moved his head only imperceptibly, but his stare was obvious.

“So, Mr. Taggert, now that you are using such interrogation techniques, does that mean they are available to us as well?”

I dropped my head. Sayer had suddenly developed the ability to make me feel like a pup. He was starting to remind me of my father.

“No.” My voice was soft. “No. I did a stupid thing. Having the top dog do a stupid thing doesn't mean it's alright for all the others of the pack to do it to. Hurting people is still off limits.”

Sayer didn't say anything, but when I looked up again I could see his lips parted in the slightest smile.

“As you wish, Mr. Taggert. You are the City Administrator.” He paused, eyes darting back and forth, as if looking for someone else in the office. It was only then I realized that his helper dog wasn't here. “And speaking personally, Tommy, you made the right decision. Everyone has to learn sometime. It's only sad that your mistake caused so much pain – even if it was to someone who deserved it. Rules exist for a reason. We break them at our peril.”

I smiled. “Between you and my father it seems I can't get away with anything.”

For just a moment... did I see a flicker of a paternal grin? Couldn't be.

“Your father is a wise man, Mr. Taggert. We do not see eye to eye on many things, but I'm happy to have him as my equal. I would hate to have him as my enemy again.”

“Again?” Wait. What?

Before I could get an answer out of him Sayer had called his assistant in to lead me away. I got one last look at the old dog, sitting at his desk, reading yet another report from his pack. He was crooked and bent, at death's door, but yet he continued to work.

We descended to the second floor, my guards and I. Things had been rough enough – and I'd escaped enough times – that they followed me everywhere now, even in police HQ.

It was here, on the second floor, that I picked up a familiar scent. Rubber shoes. It was as alien here as it has been in the forest.

Coming to the next intersection, I stopped, lifting my nose to the air.

One of the dogs tried to bar my way from turning down another hall. I simply ignored him and walked straight until he leapt out of the way.

Thankfully, I didn't have far to go.

The police have an odd tendency to put large picture windows in their interrogation rooms. Well, their *normal* interrogation rooms.

The human I'd caught earlier was seated not five feet away from me, on the far side of a thick sheet of glass. He was talking to a police dog. Or rather the dog was talking to him.

The human didn't look so worse for wear, but there was pain evident in his every motion.

The dog inside glanced my way as soon as I stepped up to watch. Obviously I was unexpected. The human glanced over a moment later. His reaction was somewhat more visceral than the dog's mild surprise.

It's been a long time since I've had someone run in terror from me. The human had been at odds with the police dog a moment ago. Now he cowered behind the canine like he was a big brother.

When I was a youngster I wondered what it would be like to be treated like this. To have people fear me.

I knew now it was not pleasant.

I turned and walked away without a word.

The walk back to the apartment passed in a blur. I didn't really think much of it. The next thing I knew I was opening the apartment door.

There was something wrong.

My fur was up and teeth barred before a thought could even form in my mind.

There was the scent of someone else in my apartment. Again.

I flew in with a snarl, falling to all fours to attack anyone who might have been stupid enough to be here.

Strangely enough, that put me at the perfect height to run nose to nose with Sunny and the other Class Fives.

They were all here. Even Gold.

I must have looked at least as pissed off as I felt. Sunny's ears immediately fell back. A moment later he was on his side, showing his belly. All the others followed suit. Again, even Gold. Oddly, it was Gold who moved quickest.

"Tommy!" A whack hit me in the back of the head. I was a heart beat away from turning and snapping when I realized it was Rebecca.

"What are *they* doing in here?" I forced the words past the snarl in my voice as I rubbed the back of my head with one hand and used the other to steady myself enough to get back on two feet.

"They were in the lobby when we got back. They were just coming out to see you when the police carried you away." She stepped in front of me and lowered something to the floor. My nose started twitching again, but for a different reason. Cub Caf takeout. My favourite.

"We came here to speak to you, Tommy," said Sunny around a mouthful of food.

The term feral had never really crossed my mind to describe the Class Fives, but I couldn't help it now. They ate like dogs. Like animals. Each pulling down as much food from the bowls that had been set in front of them, as fast as they could. It was a surprise they weren't sick.

Taking a seat on one of the stools, I looked down at them. "Didn't the city send out a negotiator?"

He looked at me oddly. "Yes. But we want to talk to you. You're alpha. Not some rat."

I just reached up and rubbed my temples. "Sorry. Can't help you. I've got someone trying to kill me right now. Talk to the government. They'll do whatever needs to be done. I'll help as soon as I've stopped fearing for my life."

Turning, I looked over to Rebecca with big eyes. "Babe? Any of that left for me?"

All that netted me was an empty takeout box thrown in my face.

I hustled out the Class Fives as quickly as I could. I did, however, make sure Jon called them a rep from the government to make sure things were getting done. Pissing off *another* group was the last of my desires.

I was just about ready to settle down with Rebecca when we got *yet another knock on the door*.

It was the last two people I'd been expecting.

"Doggie!" Molly threw herself at me the moment I opened the door. The pure white wolf wrapped her arms around me and kissed me flat on the nose. I could just see her looking over my head, daring Rebecca to say something.

"Young master." Amstys followed her in more sedately. The salt and pepper wolf was as massive as I remembered. "It's nice to see you again."

There was something in Amstys' speech... life with Molly had been good for him.

Clasping the wolf's shoulder, I led him into the apartment.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked.

"I called them, Wolfy." Rebecca perked up from across the room where she sat with Molly. "I figured you and Amstys could get the apartment back in order while Molly and I put the finishing touches on the wedding. It's just in a few days now."

I nearly fell flat on my back. I'd been so concerned with the wedding *coming up* that I hadn't realized it was so soon.

"Anyway," she continued speaking to Molly, "You want to see it?"

"Sure, why not. I'm sure it's beautiful."

"Tommy," Rebecca looked over to me, "Could you grab the dress?"

I let out a mighty sigh as I went to the closet, Amstys at my heels. For better or worse, the dress was still there, pristine in its box.

I pulled it out and spread the dress across the floor between Rebecca and Molly. Its smell still made my nose wrinkle.

"Wow!" Molly reached down to brush the back of her fingers against it, "It's amazing! They just *gave* this to you?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Yeah. They see it as good advertising."

I turned my back to them. I could hardly stand to even look at that thing.

Amstys was beside me a moment later. "Are you alright, young master... Tommy?" He reached out tentatively to set an arm across my shoulders. "You look uneasy."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's see what we can do about some furniture, eh?"

Seems we didn't have all that much to do. Jon had already ordered some basic replacements for what we'd lost. They were sitting down in the lobby, still in boxes. All Amstys and I had to do was carry it up two flights of tight, steep stairs to the apartment.

Frankly, we *could* have used the elevator, but the exercise made me feel good.

We'd just carried the mattress in when I overheard Molly and Rebecca talking.

She'd just offered Molly the position of being our bride's maid.

"It's not like I have all that many friends left from before the exodus." Rebecca's voice cracked for a moment, "I'd love to have you with me when I get married."

I never heard Molly's reply, but it must have worked out. When next Amstys and I walked past they were embracing.

It was twenty minutes later, while Amstys and I were navigating a sofa up the stairs, I spoke to him.

"Uh, Amstys?"

His deep voice was calm and unemotional. "Yes, Tommy?"

"Thanks for all your help on this. I just want you to know I'd appreciate it if you'd come to the wedding. I'd like to offer you the position of being the best man, but I already asked English."

The wolf shrugged. Somehow he managed to do it even while hefting a sofa.

"You needn't worry, young master." He smiled when the title slipped out, "I already owe my new life to you. That's more than enough. I'd be honoured to just attend."

I smiled. "You will, Amstys. I'll make sure you get a seat in the front row."

Molly and Amstys stayed with us for the rest of the day. Amstys and I had the furniture done by noon, but Rebecca and Molly were still working away on wedding plans. They seemed to want to keep them to themselves. They just said that us boys would meddle if they told us before they were ready.

It was with that that Amstys and I were chased from the apartment.

I stepped in with Jon for a few moments. He was happy to talk to Amstys. The three of us – plus Rebecca and English – had returned to V-town together a year ago.

It was while they were catching up that I slipped away. I didn't quite have any idea where I was going, but I was restless.

The police were doing everything they could to find my assassins, but I needed to make sure the problem was solved before the wedding. And I knew there was more to it than the single human I'd found.

Hopping the trusty garden wall, I was out in the world again. I'd have to sit down and have a long cry when the dogs patched this hole in their security. Then again, knowing Jon, the only reason this hole existed was for me.

There was a problem with heading out to investigate my own assassination. While most folks didn't really recognize me – I'd lost a lot of weight over the last few days due to regeneration, I hardly had an ounce of fat on me any more – I could safely assume that those who wanted me dead would still pick me out of a crowd.

Wandering through alleyways, I ended up in an industrial district. And, much to my delight, stumbled across a box of coal. Not that we burn coal much around here anymore – most of our power comes from dams to the north – but it did still have its applications here and there.

A quick peek up and down the alley to make sure no one was watching and I dove into the box.

Bad idea. I'd forgotten just how hard coal was. I nearly knocked myself senseless.

I did accomplish my goal though. There was enough powder and dust in here to rub into my brown and cream fur. In a matter of moments I managed to cover myself from nose to toe in coal dust, dying myself a midnight black.

I nearly looked like my uncle Goawn.

And there was another up side. Coal doesn't have *that* much of a scent, but its enough to help disguise my natural one. Anyone who knew me well would be able to still tell it was me, but anyone with just a passing familiarity would likely be fooled.

A smile edged to my lips as I strode confidently out of the alley and into the living river of people who walked the streets of V-town. Not a single head turned. I was just another wolf.

About two hours later I realized just what a raw deal being anonymous was.

I'd become used – despite what I may have thought – to being former mayor Tommy Taggart. Now I was just another wolf, and a relatively thin and puny one at that, meandering down the street.

There was at least one bright point. I'd remembered to bring my belt and wallet – and keep them clean from the coal dust. At least I could afford to do whatever I wanted.

Problem was I didn't know what that was.

I was trying to track down my assassins, but I didn't even have the slightest where to start. I was no private investigator.

I tried checking some of the dive bars that English and I had frequented when we were bounty hunting, but not a whiff of the people I was looking for. I must have spent a week's wages in drinks for people without even a nibble.

Changing tactics, I tried the more upscale places. These were harder to get into with my current appearance, and far more expensive to buy drinks at. I got about the same results.

It was the middle of the afternoon now and I was just about ready to call it a day. I never realized how bad dark pelted people had it off – I was just about frying alive under my newly black fur.

Ducking into a mid-class coffee shop to get out of the heat, I was reading down their menu to try and find something cool when I heard voices behind me.

“So Richard failed? I haven’t heard anything from him in over a day.”

I glanced backwards discreetly as I pretended to scratch an itch. There were two humans sitting at a table, sipping coffee.

Paying with the last of my money, I took my iced coffee and began walking slowly towards them.

“What were you expecting, Victor?” the other human muttered. “He wasn’t a animal, didn’t have regeneration. He didn’t stand a chance against that wolf. At least the other man has regeneration – not that it’s helped him much. Richard’s only selling point was that he was cheap.”

“Couldn’t help but overhear you fellas are looking for someone with ‘gen. May I offer my services?” Sauntering up to the table, I took a seat without waiting to be invited. I roughed my voice up when I spoke, making it sound like I’d spent a decade working under a smokestack.

“This is a private conversation, dog. Get lost,” the first human growled.

I just about laughed. Perhaps I did look like a dog.

Shrugging, I picked up my coffee and took a swig. I had to hold back a face from its bitterness. “Fine with me, fellas. Just couldn’t help but notice it sounded like you were looking to hire someone. With all the attacks going on recently...” I smiled as I let my voice peter off.

The one human scowled as the other went white.

“You wouldn’t dare go to the cops.” He whispered under his breath.

“Not if I have a job.” I smiled.

Thirty minutes later we were knocking on the door of a townhouse in one of the more damaged parts of V-town.

The door popped open a moment later, held by a strong chain. “What’s the animal doing with you?” came a gruff voice.

“He’s good. He’s our next... employee,” replied one of my companions.

The door slammed shut and opened again a moment later just long enough to allow the three of us in.

The inside of the building was a tad more comfortable than the outside lead me to expect. Ushered into a sitting room, I reclined on a sofa as a good dozen humans clustered around me. They were all holding weapons.

Frankly, I was more interested in the ghost of a scent that hung in the pillows under me. It was that of a wolf. A scent I’d never forget. The same one that had invaded my apartment.

“Hey! Wake up!” I was jostled out of my thoughts by a harsh human voice.

I vaguely recognized the human who sat in front of me. I think he had been one of the elders back at Horseshoe Bay. One of the ones who had wanted me to teach them how to hunt.

“Do we have a deal or not?” He leaned forward with a scowl.

“Huh?” I had to force my mind to focus on him with the scent of the other wolf around twisting me.

“Gods, how stupid are you? We want you to *kill* someone. Can you do it?”

I shrugged, faking nonchalance. “Sure. If there’s enough money in it for me. Who’s the target?”

“You know the old mayor? Taggart? We want him dead.”

And that’s where I just about broke out laughing.

A slight chuckle, despite my best efforts, did escape my lips. “Him? Why?”

The man didn't look happy. "None of your bloody business. You kill him and we'll make it worth you're while. You don't even need to worry about the current mayor. Just kill Taggart."

I smiled, a long, predatory smile slipping to my lips.

"Sure. I'll kill him. No problem."

And that's when the world seemed to implode.

I had just enough time to cover my head and dive for cover under the sofa as all of the windows and doors around us crashed inward.

It was followed by the sound of barking. Hard, harsh, clipped barking.

Looking up, I had to brush glass off my mussel before I could see the dozens of police dogs that swarmed into the small sitting room.

I was about to smile before two of them hauled me off the floor and snapped a set of reinforced cuffs around my wrists.

"Hey! Wait, I'm--"

I never got a chance to finish before they snapped a mussel around my face.

And, honestly, I'd *never* seen the police snarling and snapping like this. Every other time I'd encountered the police on an operation they had been cool and clinical, almost robot like. Now they snapped and growled like they were going to eat us alive.

Chapter 10: Bell Tower Fire

The journey back to police HQ was neither easy nor pleasant.

Hands cuffed behind my back, mussel clamped shut and legs in shackles, I was used to being surrounded by a pack of police dogs, but not like this.

There was more than one point I truly wondered if one of them was going to reach over and bite a chunk out of my shoulder. It was their training alone that kept them in check, though not by much.

This was a side to the dogs I'd never seen before. Even taking down mass murderers they were clinical and professional. Not now.

Into HQ, this was one of the few times I'd ever entered through a side door.

I got one last look at the humans I'd been captured with. They looked even more frightened than I did. For good reason too. I'd be able to walk away from this the moment I got my tongue free. They wouldn't.

I doubt the cops could keep me for accepting an assassination contract *on myself*.

Shoved unceremoniously through a door, I found myself in an interrogation room just like the one I'd seen so recently.

There wasn't much in here. A table, two chairs, the door I'd entered through, and a large window. That was, quite literally, it. There wasn't even a scrap of paper or a couple of dust bunnies.

It was only now I realized that they'd still to release the mussel that kept my lips clamped together.

Hobbling over to the chair, I had to take it slowly on account of the chains that still bound my feet. I let out a long breath when I finally sat down. Some days I just have a talent for digging myself in the deepest hole I can find.

Sniffing the air, it was air-conditioned and moved through the room at a quick pace to keep scents from lingering. Even then I could make out the background of years worth of people who had come through this room. They had all been petrified.

I just closed my eyes and wondered how I was going to explain this.

The case must be a top priority one for the dogs. I never even got a chance to nod off before the click of a lock informed me that I had a visitor.

I'll admit I was more than a little bit relieved to see my interrogator was a normal, uniformed, police dog. Not one of the *special* dogs they used to use for high level interrogations like the kind English and I had undergone so long ago.

He closed the door behind himself and walked around the table to sit before me. The smooth, measured click of his claws told me everything I needed to know.

The dogs who had arrested me had been at the edge of their endurance, nearly ready to snap the leashes of their training. This one was not so frenzied.

The click of his claws on the hard floor had been ever slightly off though. The officer who sat across for me was not immune to the same stress that affected the rest of the service. He just hid it better.

I nodded to him, cocking my head as I tried to mumble past my gag.

He took his time, seemingly ignoring me. It was a good five minutes before he'd set out all his papers and paraphernalia on the table between us. I noticed there was nothing sharp laid out.

At long last he reached across the table to unsnap my mussel, but only just enough to speak, not enough to open my mouth to bite.

"I am officer Ash." His voice was measured and clipped. "You did not have any identification on you. Who are you?"

A slight grin pulled at my lips despite all this. I'd taken some money with me in my wallet, but no ID. I hadn't really planned to be arrested today.

"My name is Tommy Taggart." I didn't even bother to laugh when I said it.

The dog wasn't smiling.

"No." His voice was level. I noticed him check a box on the paper before him. Craning my neck, I was just able to make out the text beside it. 'Uncooperative'. "We are aware of your arrangement with the Human Defence League. We've had them under surveillance for the last twenty-four hours. They were looking for someone to assassinate the City Administrator. You offered your services. Who are you?"

As you can guess, the conversation went downhill from there.

You'd think it would be easy enough to convince the dog who I was, but it seemed I'd done a little too good of a job rolling in the coal. I'd never met this officer personally – I had no reason to as he was a professional interrogator – and he didn't recognize my scent.

It didn't do me any good that the only dogs who might be able to pick me out under the coal weren't likely to come see a would be assassin.

Sayer was out of the question. Pine was currently off duty, and Jon was back at the apartment.

I was nearly running out of ideas when, I kid you not, I started banging my head against the table just to prove I had regeneration in some vague hope it would help prove who I was.

All it earned me in the long run was a mother of a headache and some blood loss. The dog was unimpressed.

"Fine." I let out a long breath. "I'll tell you everything. I swear. But I want to see Constable Jon Oaks. He's in charge of the Administrator's protection, right? I'll spill everything, but only if he's here."

The cop wasn't exactly happy to call in Jon, but I hadn't spent this much time around the police dogs without picking up a trick or two in the way their hierarchy worked.

Jon was in charge of my – being the City Administrator's – protection. He was *supposed* to be involved whenever someone said they had information about me.

It was the better part of an hour later than Jon came to stand before the window beside me.

I'm pretty sure he recognized me right away. He doesn't face palm normally. That's a trait he

picked up from me.

Officer Ash was called out of the room, and about ten minutes later he was gone. Jon came in to untie me. You have no idea how good it felt to get the mussel and handcuffs off.

"Do I even *want* to ask?" His voice was low.

"No," I grinned, happy to finally be able to move again. "Probably not. Can you cover for me while I get out of the building?"

He shook his head and rolled his eyes, but his final answer was, "Yes."

Making a quick stop in a nearby washroom to wash at least a little of the coal dust from my fur, I was starting to look a dirty brown again and get back to smelling like myself.

Getting out the front door of police HQ was another matter, but I managed to steal through then a group of people stepped in.

On the street, I'd just breathed a sigh of relief when a hand closed around my shoulder like a vice grip.

"Eurk." I wasn't at my most eloquent today.

"Don't worry, kid. It's just me."

I had to rack my brain for a moment to recognize the voice before I turned around. It was Brown. One of English's friends and a SF bounty hunter.

"Gods man, it's been a long time since I've seen you." It had been. Last I'd seen Brown was before the quake, back when English, Rebecca, and I had to fight our way past him to get to Vanderhoom.

"It has, kid. Ol' English sent me to find you. He had a feeling you'd be here when he couldn't find you at home."

I let out a sigh and followed him.

Well, It was obvious why Brown had been retired from active duty. The bear could barely walk. He made it without a cane, but his leg was messed up enough that it was obvious he'd never be able to run again.

"Where are going?" I asked.

Brown just pointed up the street. "SF headquarters."

We were about halfway there when my nose began twitching. That's rarely a good sign.

Another ten steps and I could hear people yelling. That's *never* a good sign.

There was smoke bellowing out of the building down the street.

Falling to all fours, I broke into a dead run. I only spared a quick glance behind me to see Brown struggling along.

Skidding to a stop in front of the flames, I could see they were already billowing out of the windows of the building. There were no firefighters to be seen, though I had no doubt they were on their way. The damage was already so bad that I couldn't even tell what kind of business this was.

Grabbing a man as he stumbled out the smoke choked front door I dragged him to the relative safety of the street.

"Is there anyone left in there?"

He couldn't speak, his throat scratched with smoke. All he did was nod.

I didn't even bother to think about it. The fire chief would have my hide, but I could worry about that afterwards. Five seconds later I was back on all fours, diving through the door and trying to keep under the smoke.

I couldn't see more than three feet in front of my nose with the thick black smoke that swirled

around. My lungs itched enough to want to make me vomit. Not only was it the tingling sensation from the smoke that I breathed in, but also from my regeneration trying to heal the damage it caused.

The building, thankfully, wasn't all that big. I was able to push forward into the main room and down the centre aisle. There was someone passed out here. It looked like he'd been running only to fall from the smoke while he tried to escape.

Scrambling forward, I caught the hem of his black shirt with the tips of my claws. I couldn't tell if he was still breathing, but I wasn't about to leave him here.

Pulling him towards me, I was only just in time. I no sooner had him thrown over my shoulder than a flaming timber fell from the roof, crashing down where he'd been seconds ago.

This was quickly becoming an unpleasant place to be.

Turning, I made it most of the way back to the door before I heard an ominous creak from above. This did not bode well.

Rushing backwards, another part of the ceiling came down only inches from my nose. It was blocking the entrance.

Oh bugger.

The flames licking at my tail *were not* helping. You'd think by now I'd be smart enough *not* to run head first into a burning building, but no. Apparently that's just who I am.

Now what?

I still couldn't see worth a darn, so I just picked a direction at random and tried to ferret my way forward. What seemed like forever but couldn't have been more than a few seconds later I was pressed up against a stained glass window.

Well, okay, I *think* it was a stained glass window. Pretty much *everything* in here was stained by now. Setting down the man I'd found, I only waited long enough to make sure his head was still attached and wasn't going blue before turning my attention to the window.

Well, it was a pity to break was likely an expensive installation, but too bad.

Pulling back, I punched forward at the glass.

And nearly broke my fist.

Bugger! What were they making these things out of?

I hit the glass again, but I was too weak. It wouldn't break. I didn't do much more than tap on it.

Okay... got to think. My mind was going hazy from all the smoke in the air. There has to be another way out...

Looking around, all I could see were the flames closing in on all sides.

I was just about ready to call it a day and slump up against the wall next to the man I'd dragged here when I heard something from the other side of the window.

It was hard to make anything out over the cracking of the flames, but it sounded like someone tapping on the glass.

I reached up and tapped back.

A moment later, with an ear shattering crash, and massive brown furred fist punched through the window. It sent shards of multicoloured glass flying through the air. Some of it landed on me, most of it landed in the fire where it popped and sizzled.

"Are you in there?" It was Brown's gruff voice.

"Yeah, yeah." I was moving slowly now, but the fresh air let in by the new opening did perk me up somewhat. "Here." I shoved the man at him.

A moment later the man was safe and Brown came back to lift me like a pup to throw me over his shoulder.

"You shouldn't do stuff like that, kid," He chastised me like a friendly uncle, "It'd break English's heart if you died."

I coughed up a laugh.

The firefighters arrived shortly there after, along with the paramedics. This must be the biggest thing going on in the city right now, the fire chief and his A team were on sight. They began hauling all the people away. Including the fella I'd dragged from the flames.

It was only now I got a good look at him. I'd been too busy before to even notice he was a human. And now, seeing his face, this was the same man who'd accosted me in the apartment a few days ago about having my wedding in his church.

Turning, I tried to make out what the building was that still burnt cheerfully away.

It was hard to see much of it now, but it was a church.

A thought occurred to me as I began collecting my senses. It was just a little too convenient that this place should burn down after offering to host my marriage. I tried to sniff around the building as people ran back and forth, fighting the fire, but my nose was too choked with smoke to find anything but the scent of ash.

I didn't really have anywhere else to go, so when the paramedics insisted I come with them to the hospital for a checkup I just kind of followed along. I got a glare from the fire chief when I tried to slip quietly away. The dalmatian and I had more than a few run ins when I'd been mayor. He smiled pleasantly enough, but I knew he'd drag me off by the tail if I skipped out.

English must have gotten a tip off that something was up. He appeared by my side as we walked along and sent Brown back to Storm Front.

"You just can't seem to catch a break can you, Mate?"

I swatted at him, but he dived away. I did notice he kept an eye open for anyone who got too close to us.

We didn't talk much until I got discharged from the hospital. My lungs were still filled with soot and even just a couple of words would scratch my throat raw.

We were just short of stepping out the front door when I saw a familiar black tail disappear around a corner.

Huh?

Grabbing English's hand, I ran in pursuit. Skidding around the corner, I only managed to see the tail disappear around another bend.

Then up a flight of stairs.

Okay, now I knew he was playing with me. And, by the scent in the air, I knew who it was. My uncle Goawn. One problem. He didn't smell happy.

We were up on the third floor before I finally got a good look at him. My uncle was one of those people who tended to have a happy-go-lucky kind of attitude. Exactly the type that benefited a beta.

He wasn't smiling now.

Stepping up to him, I glanced into the room he stood beside without a word.

I knew who was in there without ever needing to see him.

Closing the door behind me, I sealed out both Gowan and English. I needed to do this alone.

The hospital room wasn't large, but it did at least have a window. The bed was pressed up beside it.

For just a moment I almost thought the bed was empty, the skeletal form that lay there was so thin it hardly raised the sheets.

“Dad?” My voice was cracked, and it had nothing to do with the smoke in my lungs.

Almost comically, I could see his ears pop up over the horizon of the sheet, swivelling to track me.

“Son.” His voice was weak, but stronger than I'd feared. “I wasn't expecting you.” A moment later his grey form pressed into view as he levered himself up on one arm.

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

A scowl cross his face. “Apparently I had another heart attack. Not a major one. I don't remember it. I'd just helped your mother move some jars and then I woke up here.” He let out a breath. “It's a damned annoyance.”

I sat on the edge of the bed beside him and helped him sit up next to me.

“Your mother was supposed to contact you...” he began.

I smiled. “She's not that fast. I was here anyway and saw Gowan.”

He sniffed at my fur. “What have you been up to, Son?”

I rolled my eyes and told him of my last few days. He just laughed at points.

“Keep going like that, Tommy, and you'll end up dead before I do.”

I was about to tell him not to talk like that when there was a quiet scratching at the door.

Who could that be? It wasn't English or Gowan, nor my mother, and few other people would be let in.

I didn't have long to wait to find out.

“Come in.” My father tried to shout it, but the words came as little more than a croak.

Jon poked his head around the door a moment later.

“I'd been told I'd find you here, Sir.” He glanced over to my father and nodded. “Hunter's alpha. May I come in?”

“Of course, Jon.” I spoke before my father had a chance. “You're always welcome.” I smiled. “I owe you anyway. How did Sayer take it?”

Jon scowled. “It would appear that he was less than thrilled you were placing yourself in danger.” He cleared his throat, “But we came to an understanding. I had to make him a few promises, but the matter has been dropped.”

I didn't care much for the vague term *promises*, but I decided not to bring it up.

“I thought you might be interested, Tommy, that the search of the service's records has been completed. There were no matches.”

“Huh?” I scratched the back of one of my ears.

“The list of citizens with regeneration.” Jon took a few steps into the room and, not seeing a chair, fell into a parade rest stance. “The service keeps exhaustive records of every citizen born with regeneration.”

I cocked my head. “So it wasn't a citizen? Could it be someone fresh off the boat? Or even someone from inland?”

Jon shook his head. “While anything is possible, it would be highly unlikely. You're not aware of this, Sir, but regeneration is one of the few things we keep an open dialogue regarding with all the other fractions in the city. Including the hunters.”

Glancing back to my father, he averted his eyes for a moment before nodding. “We all know of the dangers a rogue wolf with regeneration could be.”

I let out a long breath. “What about you, Dad? Did the hunters turn up anything? *Someone* has to know who this wolf is. Everyone takes records when their born, it's not like this guy could just have

popped out of thin air.” For just a moment I had a flashback to the fight I'd had with him. His wounds healed so fast that my claws nearly got stuck as I struck him. “That wolf had the strongest regeneration I've ever seen. *Someone* has to know who he is!”

“Sorry, Son. We've nothing.” For just a moment he barred his teeth in a snarl that the years could never soften. “We'll wait for him to attack again. And we'll rip him limb from limb, all the hunters and I. One does not attack a hunter without retribution. We *will* find him, Son. Don't doubt me. And when we do his regeneration will be a curse rather than a blessing. I'll make sure he lives until he tells us everything. Then we'll make certain he's dead. Regeneration doesn't do much good when your head isn't attached to your body.”

The ice in my fathers voice reminded me just who I was talking to. He may be old and grey, but this was still the hunter's alpha.

My mom arrived shortly thereafter. She was a little surprised to see me. She'd just sent the message that they were in the hospital.

Jon headed off when we were ready to go. My father was set to be discharged from the hospital.

The police dogs tried to form up on us as we stepped out the front doors, but they were beat by a pack of hunters.

The police may be ordered to guard me, but they weren't suicidal. They let the hunters fill the first ring. The police then fanned out a few steps away.

My parents and I were making our way slowly down the street when my father tugged at my ear.

“There is one thing, Son.” His voice was soft, hardly a whisper. I wasn't sure if he was being covert or just couldn't work up the energy to speak louder as he pressed on my arm. “I only know of a single wolf with the regeneration you described. His name was Agamemnon. Or at least that's what he called himself. It couldn't be him though. I remember him from when *I* was a pup. He wasn't a hunter, but I did run across him now and then. He wasn't a pleasant fellow. All I know is that I saw him recover from wounds faster than I ever imagined. That... gods, Tommy, that must have been sixty years ago, and he was fully grown then. He must be long dead now.”

The walk back to my parent's house took forever. There were more than a few moments where I seriously considered just picking my father up in my arms and carrying him.

The thought passed quickly, though it did make me smile.

I was one of only a handful of people who my father would ever so much as lean on, show a sign of weakness near. To pick him up and carry him would net me little more than a bite to the shoulder.

The only way I'd ever carry my father would be hefting his dead body during the funeral.

At long last we made the final turn down the tree lined street and walked up the steps to the house. When I turned around to dismiss the hunters they were already gone, melted into the shadows of the street.

My police guard, however, were still there. Looking at me with expectant eyes.

“Just wait for me here.” I ordered them as I slipped into the house.

There wasn't much to do here, but it just didn't feel right to leave so soon. Every moment with my father was precious now. It was a bit of an odd concept, I'd never really thought of life without him.

Helping him the last few steps, I eased him into the bedroom and retrieved his cane. When I turned around he'd already fallen into a peaceful sleep.

I took a moment to dive into the shower. I'd had the coal dust on me all day and it was starting to itch. I'd done my best to wipe it away at police HQ, but a hot shower was what I really needed.

And I wanted to get it here. Rebecca would take one look at me when I got home and kick me out before I could track coal across the newly cleaned floor.

It was a bit of a blast from the past to be back in the old house. I'd spent my life growing up here, my parents constants throughout my childhood.

My father was always the hunter, the provider. The big bad wolf that I could look up to no matter what. He was always there. Even after he'd been wounded he was always in my corner no matter what.

My mother was the other side of the coin. Quiet and always just around the corner. She wasn't loud or aggressive. No one knew her name or trembled when she entered the room, but yet she always got her way. There had to be *something* about her, otherwise how would she have ever met my father?

I watched as the black coal dust slowly sloshed away down past my feet. Decades ago my father had ripped out the human style shower that had originally been installed here and replaced it with a large tile stall over twice the size. That, and he'd replace the shower head with one that put out far more water. He'd often come back from his hunts hot, sweaty, and smelling of blood. Both the prey's and his own.

I could still smell him, reeking and victorious from yet another hunt.

It was rare he ever came home anything other than victorious.

I'd still been fairly young when he'd hurt his leg, but I could remember the night clear as if it was yesterday.

I'd been sitting, looking out the front window with my tail wagging, waiting for him. I couldn't have been more than twelve. That was the age that most kids began to doubt their parents, become rebellious. Heh, I didn't have that problem. Other kids only grew up *thinking* that their father was a god. I *knew* it. He was the hunter's alpha. He was the strongest wolf in the city. And he was my father.

And I sat there and waited, and waited. He was hours overdue, but that wasn't all that uncommon. He lead the hunters, sometimes things came up. He *always* came home. He was just a little late today. He'd be here soon enough with a smile for me and an embrace for my mother. And he'd bring dinner.

I'd fallen asleep by the time a knock came at the door. It was well past sundown by then.

It wasn't my father that came home that night, it was my uncle Gowan.

I couldn't hear what he said to my mother, but soon enough she was gone. That left Gowan and me alone in the house.

I knew Gowan, he was my favourite uncle. He was my *only* uncle. He tucked me in that night and told me a story about being out hunting with my father. I always liked that story, I'd been told it dozens of times. Gowan always had a way of making me feel like I was five years old – in a good way.

He didn't say a word about where my father was. But I didn't worry. This was my father, he was indestructible.

The next morning I woke up and Gowan was asleep in the front room, curled up on the couch. My mother – and father – were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't until I got home from school that day that I saw my mother again. My mother wasn't much of one for hysterics. She didn't even look sad when I came home.

I asked her where Dad was and she just told me he'd been hurt. She'd take me to see him that

evening.

That night was one of the first times I could ever remember that I didn't eat freshly hunted meat. Instead my mom had picked up some at the store. It wasn't the same.

That evening we went to see Dad at the hospital. My father, the man who was close to one of the gods in my eyes, lay broken and beaten in a bed, his leg plastered and elevated.

And yet he was still awake. He'd refused sedation just to see me. I could hardly make him out under the cuts and bruises that covered him, but he was still my father.

He reached out for me, taking my hand in his still firm grip. His first question was how my day had been. He said he was sorry for not coming home last night and apologized for having to send Gowan.

And he told me I'd have to be strong and wait a few more days until he could come home again.

Gods. I had to wipe the water out of my eyes as I snapped back to present day. I was only glad I was still in the shower. I didn't have to worry about crying. The water may be warm, but I still felt cold.

Fresh and clean from the shower, I stepped out into the front room. My mom was sitting on the sofa, tending to her plants.

"Thank you for coming, Tommy." She looked up at me with a half smile. "You're just what Griss needs now. Having you around gives him something to focus on."

I sat down on the sofa next to her, taking a long look into her face.

I knew she was a sprigen, a spirit of the plants. She aged different than most of us did. She looked *exactly* the same as she'd when I'd grown up. Her face today was still as smooth and gentle as it had been in my first memory of her.

The only difference was that my father had stood beside her in that memory. He wasn't the same now.

"Yeah, Mom. No problem." I slid closer to felt her warmth against my side. "I should come by more often, I really should..."

"Shh..." She reached out an arm and set it across my back, pulling my head down to rest on her shoulder.

I didn't feel the least shame when I started crying.

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 off 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."

Chapter 12: The Only Time You'll Hear a Wolf Pack Howl In Harmony

I don't remember much of the walk back to Jon's apartment, but it couldn't have been easy. Jon was still shaky on his feet, and both English and Amstys were dead drunk.

I practically had to carry them up the four flights of stairs to Jon's Place.

Remembering that both Amstys and English are twice my size, that made for a very bad evening.

The say the next morning came early would be an understatement, both literally and figuratively.

It felt like I'd only just set my head down on Jon's sofa when a loud knock came at the door. Checking a nearby wall clock, it wasn't even seven in the morning yet.

What the... oh bugger it all.

I was just about to peel myself off the sofa when Jon came through from the bedroom, stepping over English and Amstys where we'd set them on the floor. I could have reached out and slapped the dog. He was dressed neat and clean in his police uniform, fur combed back like the night had never happened.

It was only when he walked past me did I see his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes?" The policeman's tones were evident in his voice as he stepped up to the door, not opening it.

"Open this blasted thing, you mongrel! We have a wedding to prepare for!"

I smiled. I'd recognize the angry tones of Smith anywhere.

English must have recognized the voice too. Snorting from sleep, he rolled over to look at me.

"Is that who I think it is, Mate?"

I just rolled my eyes.

Considering I didn't have much to put on, I thought we'd be out the door and on the way to the wedding in a matter of moments.

I was wrong. Oh so very wrong.

Smith stood out in the hallway surrounded by multiple packs of police dogs. Looks like they were taking no chances today.

Stepping in, the fox took one look at me before turning to spit on the floor. I saw Jon grimace.

It was three hours before Smith was happy. Between him and English they must have gone over every square inch of my fur twice, combing and powdering me until I felt – and looked – like one big fuzzball.

I didn't look like a wolf anymore. I looked like a stuffed toy.

The final thing Smith did was to loop the belt around my narrow hips. It was obvious that it had been set for English at some point in the past. He had to cinch it down again and again to keep it from slipping off to lay on the ground.

“Here you are, my son.” The fox brushed his hand across some scroll work set in the age worn leather. I couldn't read a word of it. “Tommy and Rebecca Taggart.” He smiled. “You may not be of my family tree, but I can't think of anyone better to wear this.”

I did manage to get my revenge on English, and then later on Amstys. They both had to sit through Smith's tender meat-hooks as I had. Though their sessions weren't as intensive.

Ready to face the world now, at least according to Smith, we stepped out into the street.

Um... oi.

There had to be a good fifty police dogs out there. And each and every one of them was armed. I didn't even know V-town had that many working guns.

And the way the dogs held them, I had no doubt they'd been specially trained in their use.

We were off walking down the street before it even occurred to me to ask where it was we were headed. I knew where we *weren't* hosting the wedding, but Rebecca and I had never decided on where we *were*.

Jon leaned in from behind me, “Don't worry, Sir. It's all been dealt with. Most of the churches pulled their offers since the fire. The hunters, however, have graciously offered their services. The alpha will be overseeing the wedding.”

I just about laughed. My *father* would be ministering the wedding? The same man who had more blood on his claws than any other in the city?

He'd be marrying us?

I glanced over to English. He shrugged.

Well, I guess it fit. Who better?

We got some pretty open stares as we walked down the street. I guess it's not everyday you get to see a wedding procession like this.

They weren't as far as I could tell though... hostile. Despite all the attempts on my life, no one seemed to take much of an exception to me now. Folks just pointed and stared like we were a parade.

The cops around us became nervous and skittish the moment we stepped from the asphalt of the city and set foot on the soft earth. But, to my surprise, they stayed with me. The cops had always peeled off before, leaving us to ourselves when we left V-town.

It was a testament to their devotion that they stayed with me now.

We were no more than a few feet into the woods when the first of the hunters appeared. I had no doubt there were more watching us, unseen, but one by one they came to stand shoulder to shoulder with the police.

Then appearing beside me as if from the very earth itself, Gowan was at my shoulder. The

black wolf looked immaculate.

The hunter's beta, the hunt master, wearing a suit?

Well, that was a first.

In a suit that I could just about guarantee had come from Smith, Gowan was clad from claw to chin in an inculcate black suit that perfectly matched his midnight fur. He grinned at me.

"Glad to see you could make it, pup. We're just here to help you city folk the rest of the way and make sure you don't get lost."

About twenty minutes later we found our way out of the thick trees of the forest and into a large grassy clearing with a cabin in the middle.

It took me a long moment to realize where we were. This was the same cabin the hunters had been based out of after the quake. The slipshod structure had been redone until it looked respectable, and the churned muddy field had been smoothed out with grassy turf and patches of wildflowers strategically placed here and there.

The cops and hunters spread out as we entered the site. They covered the perimeter while the rest of us walked up the soft grass. Glancing back, I could see Jon and Amstys starting to trail further behind me with each step. English, carrying Smith in his arms, was with them.

They kept falling back until it was only Gowan and I. We walked straight to where a small reception table had been setup.

My parents sat there.

Dad was naked as always, his old grey fur brushed up almost as fully as mine. Mom was beside him in a simple brown dress. She was neither dressed up nor down. She simply *was*. I was glad to have them both here.

"Alpha." I bowed my head to him as I stepped up. "I'm honoured that you decided to host my wedding." Slowly, trying to avoid grass stains on my knees, I knelt down before him, lowering my head.

He looked out over me, wise and strong. The frailness that had contaminated his body last I'd seen him was covered over. He was every inch the alpha of the V-town hunters that I knew he was.

"Get up, you silly pup." Reaching out he grabbed me by the ear and pulled me closer. There was a smile on his lips. He let out a heavy breath. "So this is where it ends, does it, son?"

I cocked my head. "What ends? I've already been mated for over a year. This is just a formality."

He smiled, showing his cracked and yellowed teeth. Reaching out, he put an arm around my mother, pulling her close. "You know what I mean, Tommy. You're not *ours* any more. I suppose you haven't been for some time, but now we have to admit it. It's not easy letting go." He pulled back a snuffle.

For a moment my heart almost stopped. It was unheard of for my father to display emotion like this in public.

Glancing around, I noticed that every man and woman was, conveniently, looking away.

"We're gaining a daughter. That's the way we need to think of it." My mother smiled. "It's just a pity that there's no one here to give her away." She glanced over to Griss. Something passed between them. There wasn't a word spoken, but it was there.

And they wouldn't tell me what it was.

"We're proud of you, son." Dad reached out to pull me closer until he ruffled my so laboriously prepared fur. "You've done more to bring the city together than anyone in its history. Not just the humans, but all of us. V-town wouldn't even be standing if it wasn't for you."

I was about to protest when a shadow flirting at the edge of the woods caught my eye.

It walked on four legs.

I let out a long sigh, but forced a smile to my lips.

"Dad, there's someone you might want to meet."

I called to the hunter that was closest to the trees and a moment later he had brought in all the Class Fives that had stalked out there. How they'd managed not only to avoid the notice of the cops, but even the hunters, boggled my mind.

"Mom, Dad, this is the delegation from Powell River. They've come here to talk to the government. I've been putting them off, but they don't seem to want to talk to anyone else."

Sunny bowed his head as he stood before us with the other dogs. There was something about the way they looked at my father. They knew who he was... or, more than that, they knew *him*.

"Good... good day," Sunny stammered. "We didn't mean to intrude. We just took what you said last time to heart. You said you were in danger, so we figured the fastest way to get it resolved would be to find your attacker." He looked down again. "We haven't had much luck yet."

"Powell River?" My father broke in, "Isn't that north, up the coast?"

The dog backed away slightly. "Yes... yes, sir."

My dad raised a hand to his chin, glancing over to my mother again. "I seem to remember being up there once, long ago. Do you remember that, dear?"

She smiled. "Honey, you're making our guests uncomfortable. Let's talk about it later."

Finding a chair tucked away, seemingly especially for me, I sat out in the sun with my parents, watching the rest of the guests trickle in, each and every one of them vetted by both the cops and the hunters. Practically everyone I knew was here, and more than a few people I didn't even recognize, mostly human, likely Rebecca's friends. But there was something missing.

"Dad? Where's the media? You know, the newspaper and pundent people?"

"Who, those rats?" He lifted a lip, "I didn't invite them, did you?"

"Well, no, but won't they find a way in?"

He laughed. "In? Past your cops and my hunters? I should hope not. I'll flay any hunter that allows one past. Your bride and your fried Jon made a rather extensive guest list. And I do believe they made sure to keep out anyone who might cause even the slightest trouble. Trouble," He turned to me, "Son, is something you've had enough of for the moment. I can't promise you much, but I can promise that your wedding day will go smooth and pleasant, just as it should. Now stop worrying. This day is for you and Rebecca, let us take the load for once. My bones may be brittle, but I can still stand to lead every so often. And if I can't manage something as simple as a wedding than I really should be in the ground."

I smiled and sat back. Closing my eyes, I let the sun wash over my face.

"Where is Rebecca anyway?" I asked.

My mother just laughed. "Don't you worry, Tommy. She's just fine. It takes the bride a little longer to get ready on her wedding day than it does the groom."

I wasn't sure quite when it happened, but things had changed from *getting ready* to *getting going*.

I was still sitting at the small table tucked off to one side, but my mom and dad were gone the gods knew where. It was English and I now, and the lion was getting regular updates from people running back and forth. Updates he refused to share with me.

"Uh, shouldn't we be getting up there or something?" I asked, fidgiting in my seat.

The final touches had been put on an aisle. It lead from the cabin to a small stone alter that had been carried by a dozen hunters to the middle of the clearing. There were no chairs out here, but the better part of a hundred people had arrived and found seats on the soft turf.

From what I could tell there were no divisions. Humans sat next to wolves, and both of them next to all manor of other creatures. Every so often a knot of one species would form, but some of the younger hunters, acting as guides, gently began nudging them apart like reverse sheepdogs.

Heh. I laughed at that mental image.

At long last I recognized a form coming towards us. Lucy. Her fur was brushed out and there was a flower perched in front of one of her ears. She stepped up to English and said only a single thing.

“It's time.”

The lion smiled and nodded. A moment later he was on his feet.

“Let's make this happen, Mate.” He held out a hand to me.

“I can walk, you know. I'm not Smith.”

He snorted and brushed a speck from dust of the shoulder of his suit. “That's not the point, Mate. *We're* here to make sure you can focus on what *you're* here for. Think of it like campaigning for mayor. The rest of us are just running interference to make sure you and the Lass make it to the alter together.” There was something in his eyes, a shadow passing over them. “Just humour me, eh? I want to make sure your wedding is perfect.”

There was little fanfare as English and I walked up the aisle to stand before the alter. Just about everyone was here. My mother was in the front row, smiling.

The only people missing were my father and Rebecca.

My ears began itching a moment later. At first I thought it was just me, but then I heard it plain as day. A howling.

Non-canines don't often know this, but a pack of wolves *never* howls in key. That's the way we are. Every member of a pack picks their own individual note to carry, to make sure their heard and represented.

This was the only time in my life I'd ever heard not only a whole pack, but every single canine hunter howl in harmony.

It sent chills down my spine hard enough to cause my tail to poof out.

A single unique note flowed into the song. My father stepped out of the woods a hundred feet from us.

He was running flat out on all fours, like he was in the prime of his life again. There wasn't even the slightest limp to his leg, but I could see the lines of pain etched around his eyes as he neared us.

English stood a step behind me all this time. He didn't say a word. I think he was shivering as hard as I.

In the blink of an eye my father was before us. Rearing up on his hind legs, he looked nothing so much as like the purest representation of the wolf god.

And then Gown, clad in his black suit, stepped up behind him.

The howl cut off mid note. The only one singing now was the alpha.

Slowly, with a long drawn out wail, he fell silent.

It seemed that even the birds in the sky and the bees on the flowers had fallen silent with him.

There was a creek from behind us as we all turned back to the cabin.

Rebecca stepped out. She wasn't in the hideous wedding dress that had plagued me so, but

rather she was in a pair of black jeans, good hiking boots, a tight white shirt, and the same red leather jacket I remembered her in.

She looked just like she had the night we'd fought our way through Storm Front.

She looked spectacular.

There was no wedding march to play while she walked up the aisle towards us, but each hunter she passed began a low howl.

I'd worried how this would look, her walking up the aisle alone, but I needn't have. Smith was on her arm. The old fox did his best to stand straight and proud beside her.

When she made it to the top of the aisle she let go of Smith to let him take a seat. My father began howling.

I was the only canine to hold my tongue.

I didn't need to tell the world I was here, I didn't need to stake my claim.

All I needed was standing right here.

Two more steps and Rebecca was beside me. I reached out a hand to help her the last step. She took it with a smile.

Turning, we looked into the emotionless face of the hunter's alpha.

His voice was low when he spoke, but I had no doubt it carried through the whole of the clearing and beyond.

"Tommy Taggart. You, one of my hunters, have come towards me to ask permission to wed this human. Is this so?"

I struggled to fight down the lump in my throat. All I could do was nod.

"This is no a minor thing you ask of me, young wolf," his voice was grave. "What you ask for today is the blessing of the pack. Every single one of us. This is no moment of fancy, young wolf. A marriage in the eyes of the pack is irreversible, for life and beyond. To break such a vow would expel you from the pack. Is this something you are willing to accept?"

I coughed and sputtered for a moment. I knew what I had to say, I knew what I *needed* to say, but I couldn't get the words past my throat. The larger than life visage of the alpha towering over me, I was terrified to admit, made me want to turn and slink away, give up on all this foolishness.

I could feel Rebecca squeeze my hand.

"I do." The words slipped out, little more than a whisper. I relaxed now, having gotten them out. Again I repeated them, louder now, loud enough for the world to hear. "I do, alpha. I want to be married to Rebecca McCarthy"

I saw just the barest hint of a smile pull at my father's lips.

"Do you, young human? This wolf has pledged his life to you. Will you take it and do the same in return? It is rare we extend membership in the pack to one such as you, but in this extraordinary case we shall."

Wait... what? He was offering Rebecca a position as a hunter...

"I do." Rebecca answered before I could even think. Her voice was strong and clear, not a hint of hesitation or worry.

"Then so be it." Now he did smile. "As with anything in life, something must be sacrificed for something to be gained. What have you brought for sacrifice?"

What?! Oh bugger. I didn't realize my father was going to do a full traditional service. I... I hadn't brought anything.

"Tommy." Amstys was behind me. He pressed a large white box into my hands.

I didn't even have time to whisper a thanks before he was gone again.

Opening the box, my nose wrinkled at the overpowering scent of the wedding dress.

Rebecca looked my way and grinned slyly.

Lifting the dress out, she showed it to the crowd that watched us.

"We sacrifice this. A wedding dress made by the finest seamstress in the city." She gave me a knowing look. "It was our dream that I wear it today, but we are willing to sacrifice such luxuries in order to ensure out time together."

With that she threw it up into the air.

It didn't even have time to reach the ground before a dozen young hunters, hardly more than pups, rushed forward and ripped the dress to shreds. They each came away with a small strip of tattered cloth, carrying it above them like flags.

A growl came from my father. It took me a long moment to realize what was happening. He was speaking in the old language of the hunters.

Gowan stepped up to translate his words.

"Then... so be it. With the pack... to look after you... I pronounce you... married."

A cheer went up from the crowd behind us. Not only was it a howl from the hunters, but a holler from the humans and barks from the police dogs.

I wasn't listening. Leaning forward, I put my hand on Rebecca's back and leaned in for a kiss.

"I love you, Babe."

She just smiled. "The whole world knows that now."

I was just as happy as not to let the world drift away now, but what seemed like seconds later there was a tap on my shoulder.

"I think your alpha has something more to say, Mate."

Glancing over, my father held a snow white hair in his hands. It must have just been collected from the forest, it still kicked and struggled as he held it.

Once again he was speaking english, "And to this is your final act. A blood bond there will be between the two of you. Hunt the hare and may it bring you good fortune."

With a flourish he released it to land on the ground running. It was out of the clearing and into the woods before I could so much as blink.

And Rebecca was already running after it.

"Babe! Wait!" Bugger it all, I was off and chasing her a moment later.

Another cheer came up behind us, but this one did nothing more than egg us on.

I got a slap from English as I raced off. Ouch that smarted. He nearly made my hindquarters go numb.

Rebecca may be good, and she may have had a head start, but she couldn't move a fraction as fast as I could. Especially once I fell to all fours.

"Thought you'd never make it, Wolfy." She reached out to ruffle the fur between my ears.

"Don't you worry about the hare, Babe." Rearing up, I pulled her into my arms as I took her to roll on the soft ground. "It's just a symbolic gesture. We don't really have to catch it. It's just to give us a head start on the honeymoon."

She gave me a face as I tried to pull her close. "Frisky already? We've only been married five minutes. You can at least wait until I've managed my first real hunt."

"But, Babe," I did my best to make puppy eyes. She only laughed. "That's the *whole point* about being married. I don't have to wait anymore."

"Well you're going to have to wait *now*." She tried to struggle out of my arms.

"Fine." I rolled my eyes and got to my feet. "It went this way, Babe."

"How can you tell?"

"Scent." I grinned. "Remember, I kept us fed last winter by hunting hare like this one."

We spent nearly two hours tracking the blasted hare, but it looked like Gowan had gone out of his way to catch a particularly lively fellow. We never even so much as caught a glimpse of its tail.

"Huff." I was getting run down. It was hot out today, and it's been a while since I've had to chase anything for this long. Most hunts are over in seconds, either won or lost.

Raising my head to the breeze, I could smell water.

"Babe," I glanced over to Rebecca. Her white shirt was stained with sweat. "Isn't it a human custom to be carried across the threshold?"

I gave her just long enough to look my way before reaching over and sweeping her from her feet with a grunt.

Trying to navigate the trees with her in my arms wasn't an easy task, but I managed it. A few moments later we stood before a small, quick running stream.

"I need cooling off, Babe. How about you?" I didn't give her a chance to respond before I took a step forward, sighing as I felt the cool water rush between the beaten pads of my toes. A moment later I sat down. The stream wasn't deep enough to reach my belly, but even an inch of cool water felt great on a day like this.

Rebecca smiled. "Well, I guess we could take a break." She pulled off her boots and socks, then dangled her feet in the water next to me.

"Well, Babe, do you think it was worth it? Getting married and all that?" I closed my eyes and turned to the sky, letting the warmth of the sun soak into my fur.

A moment later I could feel her hands on my face, gently massaging me.

"It's what we both wanted, wasn't it? It wasn't quite what I expected, but I'd never change it."

I let out a long breath. "The only question, Babe, is what now? The world isn't exactly a stable place, but now I have the *obligation* to protect you."

"Obligation?" She mocked my words. "Since when have I ever asked you to protect me? I've saved your life at least as many times as you've saved mine."

I chuckled. "Fine. I'll give you that. But at least give me my moment, eh? I'm the big scary newly wed wolf here. I'm allowed to indulge in my instincts for once right?"

She reached forward and tweaked my nose. "Only if I say you can. Remember, I didn't just marry a wolf. I know what you look like as a human. I married *him* too. I didn't marry a wolf, Tommy. I married you."

I snorted and reached out to pull her down into a kiss. "Yeah, we're odd ones aren't we?"

I was only inches away from a kiss when I heard something rustle in the trees behind us.

It was close, the sound of its approach having been masked by the soft rushing of the brook.

Leaping from the stream, my fur sprayed water everywhere. I half expected to hear Rebecca squeak, but a glance her way showed she'd turned with me, pulling a knife from her belt.

I couldn't see anything in the trees for a long moment... then a golden form timidly walked towards us, its head down. There was something struggling in its jaws.

"Mr. Taggart." Sunny's voice was muffled by the hare he carried. The small animal was still alive, struggling between his teeth. "I didn't want to interrupt you... I found your prey. I..." He paused for a moment, looking embarrassed, "I didn't think you were going to be able to catch it, so I brought it to you. To say we're sorry for bothering you so."

Rebecca stepped forward to take the hare from Sunny's jaws. Yep, the creature was still alive. It didn't take well to Rebecca's handling, but she had enough experience from our walk across the

Rockies to know how to safely hold it.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft. “You needn't have.”

He cocked his head. “It's a gift. It's done because I thought it would be nice. We have skills you don't.”

I stepped forward, falling to all fours to stand nose to nose with him. “Thank you. We appreciate it.”

His tail wagged for a moment before suddenly turning. “You're welcome. I'm only sorry we couldn't offer a better wedding gift. Now,” He bounded off, “I should leave you to your honeymoon!”

We watched sunny disappear into the trees.

“You'll have to remember to get them fixed up when we get back.” Rebecca turned to me.

“But,” She reached down to stroke the ears of the hare that still struggled in her grasp, “What do we do with this? I...” She laughed, “I wasn't *really* expecting to catch it. I just wanted to try hunting.”

I smiled. “Well, there's always soup.”

She laughed. “No, I don't think so.” Taking a step towards me, she knelt to the ground. Gently, she released the creature. It took one look at us and sprinted instantly into the trees, melting away as if it had never been at all.

Odd. I didn't have to suppress my instinct to chase it.

“Well,” I rose back to my two feet, “I guess that's as good a sign as any to start our marriage.”

Reaching out, I took her hand and we started the long walk back to the cabin.

Chapter 13: Honeymoons Aren't All They're Cracked Up To Be

I hadn't realized just how much ground we'd covered while chasing the hare. We didn't get back before the sun was getting ready to set.

Not that we were in that big of a rush though. We made a few stops here and there on the way, enjoying ourselves.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect when we got back to the clearing and cabin. A party?

Nope. It was all cleaned up and looking near pristine.

For a moment I thought the place was deserted, but a flash of tawny proved me wrong.

On the far side of the clearing I could just make out English in the gathering darkness. He hoisted a bag of garbage over his shoulder and turned to leave, but not before waving in our direction.

There was no power out here, but as we neared the cabin we could see lanterns lit for us.

Stepping in, the cabin had been completely remodelled. Gone was the dirt floor and hastily assembled walls. This looked more like a professionally made retreat than anything else. Hard wood floor, finished walls and a trussed roof with fabric hanging down to make different rooms.

There was even a fire waiting for us, crackling happily away in the fireplace. With a chop of venison atop it, just coming to perfection.

I glanced over to Rebecca. "So, you think the hunters were out watching us, Babe? I always knew Goawn was a bit odd, but I never thought he'd order them to spy on us on our wedding night."

She laughed and reached out to take the meat from the fire. I'd been right, it was just perfect. I'm not normally one for cooked meat, but just this one time I could make an exception.

The only thing missing was a bathtub full of warm soapy water. Oh well, I guess I can't have everything.

Heh. No, strike that. I've got everything I need right here.

The light died away as the sun extinguished itself in the pacific. It wasn't long until the lanterns were the only light we had.

We sat back and enjoyed ourselves, but, to be frank, I wasn't really all that interested in using the cabin for the purpose it had obviously been provided for. It wasn't that I wasn't interested... just that Rebecca and I had been living together so long already that each others bodies were no longer the mystery they once were.

I knew every square inch of her, as she did I. And, anyway, we'd taken the edge off that pressing need on the walk back.

Stepping out of the cabin for a moment, I took a seat on the ground and looked up to the sky. Oddly, for the first time in weeks I could see the stars.

"What'ca doing out here, Wolfy?" Rebecca was by my side a moment later. Taking her hand, I sat her in my lap as I gazed up, leaning back against the wall of the cabin.

"Just stargazing, Babe. Not much. We don't often get the chance to do that around here."

She snuggled back into my chest. "Oh? What do you see? Looking for our future up there?"

I snorted. "Not quite, Babe. Just staring out into eternity. Look," I pointed out to the north, "Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Two of the most important constellations." I laughed. "We used them when we were out hiking in Alberta. They helped us find Edmonton."

She smiled. "So the stars helped you get in touch with your human side?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure, Babe. Just like they helped you find your inner cat. Though," I bent down to kiss her, "They did give us that one rather... unusual night together. To bad we didn't make better use of it. It would have been educational to have gotten to know each other better during that time."

She laughed, poking a finger at my sensitive nose. "I don't think so, Wolfy. I like you just the way you are. I could have picked a human if I wanted. I didn't." She squirmed slightly, pushing herself closer to me, "We both made our decisions and we'll live by them, eh?"

"Yeah, Babe." I wrapped my arms around her. "There's no looking back now, even if we wanted to."

We spent the next hour or so out there. The night became cool, but Rebecca didn't shiver, I held her too close.

The next morning came smooth and easy. It must have been almost eleven by the time I finally drifted awake.

The bed the hunters had dragged out here was nearly equal to the one in Hotel Vancouver. I'd have to see if I could steal it away to take back to the apartment.

Rebecca was still asleep beside me when I carefully picked my way out of bed.

Glancing out the window, the day was bright and clear. Heh, a good omen I suppose. Perhaps now that we were married we could get some of this nonsense behind us.

The fact yesterday had gone without a hitch was more than I ever hoped for.

Checking the makeshift kitchen, there wasn't much here for breakfast other than a few boxes of bisects and some jellies. And, to be honest, I wasn't really sure the jellies were intended to have survived the night.

Stretching, I let each and every muscle in my body loosen up as a slight moan of pleasure escaped my lips. Even my tail flagged. For the moment, if nothing else, this was my world. I had my wife, my cabin, my world.

I had everything I wanted. Except for some food in my belly.

Well, I'd have to go fix that. A quick early morning hunt should provide us with some breakfast.

Puttering about for a few more moments, I stepped outside to splash some water from a rain barrel into my face.

Gah! The day may be warm, but the water was ice cold.

"Morning, Wolfy."

Smiling, I turned to see Rebecca, already dressed in the same clothes she'd worn yesterday. I guess she hadn't packed a change of outfit with her. Suited me. Her wedding clothes looked better than anything else.

"Morning, Babe." I splashed another handful of water in my face and shook it off. She squeaked a little as some of the droplets flew her way. "I was just going to find us some breakfast. Care to get the fire going?"

She didn't have a chance to respond before I heard something out in the forest.

I assumed it to be no more than someone coming to visit us, so I didn't turn too quickly.

My mistake.

They say you never hear the shot that hits you. Ends up they're right. At least in my case.

I was just about to fall to all fours and head off hunting when a stab of pain ran through my gut.

My first thought was a heart attack. I know it sounds silly for someone my age, but I'd been so worried over my father dying of one that it slipped into my mind before I even had time to think.

The boom that reached my ears a second later cleared that misconception right away.

I'd been shot. Again.

Doubling over, it felt like my muscles turned to water. I tried to raise my hands to clutch at the new hole I had in my gut, but I couldn't even do that much. It was an effort to even keep on breathing.

"Tommy!" Rebecca's voice came from behind me. A moment later I felt her soft fingers on my shoulders, trying to move me.

I couldn't see her. I'd fallen facing out towards the woods.

I could see them coming.

I tried to yell a warning, but my lips wouldn't even move. All I could do was lay and watch as three humans and one red furred wolf ran our way.

They were all holding guns. The wolf's was still trailing smoke.

Rebecca must have heard their footsteps in the grass. A moment later she came into sight, stepping protectively in front of me.

She pulled the two knives that she had sheathed on her belt. I knew for a fact she could use them.

I could see the wolf smile from where he was. Slowing down, he let the humans run out ahead of him.

Seconds later the three humans were face to face with Rebecca.

She didn't even say anything. The moment the three men came in range she slashed out with her blades.

It's been a long time since I last saw Rebecca use her blades in anger. She'd improved.

The humans may be carrying guns, but they seemed reluctant to use them. One of them very nearly lost a hand when he was a little too slow in pulling back.

"Don't be stupid, girly," one of them said. "You're already a traitor. Don't make this worse."

Rebecca didn't even dignify them with an response. Slashing out again, a thin ribbon of red appeared down the man's forearm.

"Yeow!" He pulled back. "You bitch!"

Turning the gun around in his hands, he swung it around like a club. He was far too slow, Rebecca had already stepped out of range and slashed at one of the other men. He, however, was a touch smarter, ducking out of the way.

From the corner of my eye I could see the red furred wolf. He was standing back, well out of

range of the battle. Laughing.

Rebecca mounted a far better defence than I ever gave her credit for. In less than a minuet she had one of the men out of the fight with a slashed open hand and another one holding back and wary with a good cut down his leg.

The last man, heh, he was still fighting like he thought he had a chance. He didn't even see the second of Rebecca's two knives slashing forward towards his chest.

And Rebecca didn't have a mark upon her.

It would have been less than a second before Rebecca would have put the last man out of the battle when the wolf darted forward.

He caught the blade full in the gut. It plunged to the hilt.

And he did nothing but smile.

"That is quite enough, little lady." The wolf's voice was low and smooth. Grabbing the blade, he pulled it free in a single fluid motion and tossed it over his shoulder.

By the time he'd returned his attention to Rebecca the wound was already sealed over and the scar fading.

The look of horror on Rebecca's face would have mirrored mine if I'd been able to move.

"Turn and walk away, girl. We don't need you," the wolf whispered. Darting out, his tongue caressed his lips. "Just walk away and give us the wolf."

Rebecca took a step back, standing right in front of me. A moment later she shifted her remaining knife to her right hand and lowered her centre of balance.

She didn't say a word.

The wolf smiled.

Rebecca was good. The wolf was better.

He set his gun on the ground, then looked up to smile at her.

Never raising back to his feet, he sprang.

For anyone else the move would have been suicide. He came straight in, no attempt to dodge. And she knew he was coming.

She slashed across, her blade shining in the morning sun.

I heard the knife make contact, the sound of tearing silk as she ripped him open. I could smell the scent of his blood splashing against the rich, green grass.

Then, a moment later, Rebecca lay by my side. Her knife fell to the grass beside her.

The wolf kicked it away. He was missing an eye.

It was already starting to grow back.

"Did you...?" One of the humans stepped up to her.

"No." The wolf's voice was level. "There are few enough of us left. I would never kill her."

I couldn't even close my eyes to block out the image of Rebecca laying before me. The only thing that kept me sane was the ever so slight rise and fall of her breathing.

I didn't know how, but I was going to kill that wolf.

One of the humans walked up and rolled me onto my back with a toe. I couldn't even snap at him. I had about as much life in me as a sack of potatoes.

"Good shot," he muttered. "Right in the gut. No question, the poison's hit him good. The only way he'll move again is if we take out the bullet."

"Then make sure it doesn't happen." The wolf glanced our way.

"Sure." The man pulled out a roll of tape and patched it over my stomach. For a moment I almost thought he was doing first aid. No such luck. This was duct tape. He was just sealing the slug

within me.

And the worst part is that *I couldn't feel the bullet*. My entire chest had gone numb to the point that I'd just as soon say I was already dead.

I wanted to yell, to scream. To at least ask them *why*?

I couldn't even do that much.

The wolf walked up to stand in front of me. I couldn't move my head. All I could see were his feet.

"Is he ready?" The wolf's voice was smooth. There was something *wrong* in the way he spoke. He didn't talk like a wolf. All wolves, even myself, have a growl to their voices, a racial accent. He didn't.

"Yeah," One of the humans said from behind me, "He's all taped up. It won't come out."

"Good." The wolf knelt down to take a look at the tape over my gut, but he didn't touch it.

A moment later he slipped his arms under me and hefted me, like a dead body, over his shoulder.

I could feel my spine snap and crack as he set me on his shoulder. He kept the bullet wound away from him at all times. I was atop him, facing up to the empty sky.

"Let's go," one of the humans said. "If we leave now we should get into the city during the lunch hour. That should get us the biggest crowd."

I don't remember much of the walk back to town. I couldn't see anything, and the numbness in my gut spread until it covered nearly my entire body. The only part of me that felt like it had any life left was my face. And even that was quickly fading.

We were most of the way to the city when I heard a howl out in the trees.

The humans around me opened fire towards the sound spraying the trees with bullets.

They didn't hit anything. And even if they had it wouldn't have helped. A dozen more howls sprang up.

We'd just been spotted by the hunters.

Another few hundred meters and the city came into view. There was already a crowd, and it was quickly growing.

I could hear the wolf chuckle.

We kept walking until there was no more than a couple dozen meters between us and the crowd. The wolf set me down on a concrete block that stood in the middle of the road. It was a left over from the city before the Cataclysm, never removed. Worn and weathered now, it was still large enough for me to be laid out on.

"Keep back!" one of the humans shouted from behind me. I could just see the tip of his gun as he waved it back and forth over the crowd.

"You're a hard one to kill, but we need to send a message," the wolf whispered in my ear as he moved me about, setting me so I could be seen by those who gathered. "We can't afford for there to be any mistake who you are." He chuckled. "After all the trouble we've gone through, we might as well get the full effect out of this."

He turned my head to stare out at the crowd. I only had just enough power to blink.

There had to be better than two hundred people of there. They'd taken me to one of the restaurant districts. It was full of folks just looking for food.

And in the back of the mass of bodies I could just make out a tawny form.

English was there, his golden eyes staring straight into mine. One of his hands was set over Amstys' shoulder. The wolf stood next to him. He looked ready to leap over the crowd and come

storming towards me.

"Keep back!" one of the humans yelled. "Anybody comes closer and we'll shoot 'em." Then for good measure he added, "And we'll shoot the wolf, too!"

The longer they waited for the crowd to gather the more and more faces I recognized.

The humans must not know the police force well. I not only saw Jon and a dozen uniformed officers, but at least a dozen more clandestine ones.

"Enough for you?" The wolf asked the human next to him.

"Yeah." I could hear the smugness in the human's voice. "Yeah, this will do nicely. I can even see a couple reporters." He took a deep breath as he shouldered his rifle and stepped forward, in front of me.

"Beasts," he began, voice raised. "We come to you, the Human Defence League. You don't know us, but that will change. Each and every one of you was once human," he snarled, "Before the Cataclysm, we were *all* human. That changed. You were polluted, damaged. You are monsters, all of you. We're the only true ones here." He cast a hand back towards his mates. Oddly, the red furred wolf stood among them. "We're the ones who should be leading you, not *dogs* like this." He nearly spat as he pointed at me.

"He not only made the mistake of assuming superiority over us, he also thought to pollute humankind even further, trying to take away one of ours."

"From now on all beasts who try to take humans as their own will be killed. This is unequivocal."

An outcry came from the crowd. Not only from the non-humans, but the humans too. I knew for a fact that there were many in the crowd who were like me, in love with humans.

"This is not to be questioned!" the man yelled, trying to regain control of the crowd. "And we'll make an example of those who try to destroy us! Starting," He turned to me and grinned, "With this wolf."

Uh... what?

Oh bugger.

Struggle as I might, I couldn't so much as move a muscle. The human turned and levelled his rifle straight at my face.

This... this was going to hurt.

It took the crowd only a moment to realize what was going to happen. Most of the people either stood still as stone or screamed. Those who were of more sound mind, the cops and hunters, rushed forward.

They were all too far away. It was at least a dozen meters to reach us and all the human had to do was twitch his finger.

I didn't bother trying to close my eyes.

Expecting a boom, I was surprised instead to hear a metallic clang.

A knife ricocheted against the rifle. The gun went off a fraction of a second later, but the shot went wide, blasting hot fragments out of the concrete block beside me to spray my face.

What?

I still couldn't move, but in the sudden commotion I was knocked enough to be able to look back towards the forest.

Rebecca, with blood covering half her face, was running towards me, one of her knives held in her hand. And behind her were the Class Fives.

A gun went off only a few feet from my ear, nearly deafening my. I saw one of the dogs go down with a yip.

Rebecca threw her remaining knife and I heard one of the humans cry out in pain.
And that was when the remaining Class Fives leapt over me, rushing towards the humans.
Only to be met by the red furred wolf.

I could only see a small corner of the battle, but the wolf fought back the dogs, opening a safe corridor for the humans who retreated back into the forest.

I might not be able to see the fight, but I could feel the splashes of blood that washed across my face.

"Tommy." When next I opened my eyes Rebecca was next to me, grabbing a hold of my limp hands and pulling me off the concrete block. "Please tell me your alive."

I couldn't do anything more than blink.

"Stand aside, Lass." A moment later all I could see was tawny fur. English picked me up in his arms and carried me away like I weighed nothing.

I could see Amstys behind us, guarding our escape. He yipped in pain. Stumbling, I could see a rose of blood growing on his leg.

We wove between buildings, trying to get some protection between us and the rapid fire gunshots that came from the humans.

This must be make or break for them, they certainly weren't worried about using up ammunition.

I got another good view of the sky again as English set me down on the grass of a small park.

Too bad the numbness of my body hadn't retreated any. I could hardly feel anything past my nose now. Much further and I'd be gone.

"Gods, Tommy," Rebecca leaned forward over me, the blood from her face dripping down on my fur, "Say something!"

Was it wrong that I was more concerned for her than I was for myself? It didn't matter if I died, I just wanted to make sure she wasn't hurt.

She leaned further forward, placing a hand gently in front of my lips to feel for my breath.

It took everything I had left, but I put all the energy I could muster into my tongue, forcing it to lift the scant inch to desperately lick at her hand.

She pulled back with a squeak. A moment later her arms were wrapped around me in a hug.

To bad I could hardly feel it.

The last sensation of warmth in my nose was fading away. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

"Tommy?" I could hear her words, but at a great distance, "Tommy! Come ba..."

And they were gone.

Pain.

That was all there was to my world. I couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't scream, but their was pain.

It coursed through every fibre of my being. There was nothing to me but the nerve searing, red hot agony that grew in my belly.

Like a demon twisting inside me, it burnt and consumed.

And a whimper escaped my lips.

I... that simple motion was like ambrosia. I'd experience a million years of agony over again if I could just move my lips.

"Forceps." The voice was familiar. I could hear again, even if I couldn't tell who. "Forceps!" The voice was harsher now, emotion leaking into its formerly stoic words.

"What do you think this is, a hospital? I don't have any!"

"Then give me pliers, tweezers, a rotting table fork for the gods' sake! Get me *something*, I can't reach the bullet."

"Here, here!" Another voice broke in.

A moment later another burst of agony broke my world of blackness. Someone was digging *into* me.

There was a gasp. It wasn't mine. "I got it. I got a fragment."

Then another burst of pain.

Sight came back to my eyes.

I was once again staring up into the cloudless sky. There were faces clustered over me.

Jon was further down, his arms over my chest.

He narrowed his eyes and a fresh lance of fire tore me asunder.

"That's it!" In a pair of rusty pliers he raised an indistinct lump of metal. It had a faint purple cast to it.

I paused for just a heartbeat, collecting my wits about me, before I took a deep breath *and screamed*.

I must have given people a bit of a shock, they all leapt back. Jon nearly dropped the bullet right back into my wound.

After running out of breath I paused for a moment and started all over again. Only this time I cursed.

I cursed everything I had. I think I even saw English blush.

"Tommy!"

I was only half way through my vocabulary when Rebecca jumped forward, wrapping her arms around me. A moment later her lips were to mine, cutting off my words.

By the time she let me go the agony in my gut had simmered down to merely 'please gods make it stop'. It was low enough now that I could sit up.

"I'm..." I had to pause for breath now that I was thinking about what I was saying again, "I'm here." I wanted to say 'I'm okay', but I wasn't quite sure about that yet. "What in all the gods' names hit me?"

"Another anti-regeneration poison from Gowan's box." The voice was soft.

Turning, I saw my father limping this way, leaning heavily on Gowan's shoulder. The black wolf looked abashedly down at the ground.

"Someday we'll have to sit down and have a talk about that, Mr. Taggart." Glancing the other way, Sayer was there. He was all but being carried by one of his officers.

The two old canines shared a glance.

"My men can cover the forest," started my father.

"And my officers the city," finished Sayer.

"No." It took all of my slowly returning strength to stagger to my feet. "No. Those buggers shot me." I glanced over to Rebecca's blood stained face, "And hurt *my* wife. I don't care what you do to them, they're mine first." I barred my teeth.

"No." The reply came from them both together.

I staggered slightly as something popped in my chest, moving back into place. A moment later and I was able to stand straighter.

"This isn't up for debate." I gritted my teeth. "I'm going after them. You can follow me up in half an hour. Until then they're mine."

"But the poisons..." my father began.

I shrugged offhandedly, happy to notice I could do so now with no pain. "I've already managed

to walk away from being shot twice. Besides,” I glanced over to English, “I’ll take him with me. He won’t be affected by regeneration poisons.”

“Sir!” Jon called from behind me.

“No.” Reaching out, I laid a hand on his shoulder, “I have other plans for you. Stay with Rebecca, make sure she’s safe. That goes for you too, Amstys.” I glanced over to the wolf. “I have experience bounty hunting with English. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

English and I were no more than a block away when I slowed the pace to lean on him. I’d managed to look healed in front of Sayer and my father, but the truth was I was still dangerously weak.

“You sure you’re up to this, Mate?” He glanced down to me.

I forced a smile. “Sure. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. And, buddy,” I stopped to catch my breath, “When we find them, this isn’t a bring ‘em in live type of contract, eh?”

English’s smile was purely demonic. “Works for me, Tommy. I’d be more than happy to watch them bleed out. They nearly did the same to you.”

I nodded. “And the wolf. He’s mine.” I laughed. “No clue how I’ll kill him, but he’s mine.”

Round one more bend, it became obvious why the hunters had yet to bring the humans back from the forest. Not only had they unloaded enough lead into the crowd to leave dozens of people sprawled on the ground to be tended by the medicals teams that were just arriving, they’d also set fire to the trees.

A wall of orange flame stood between us and the direction they’d escaped.

Chapter 14: I Am, After All, A beast

Stepping up to where the humans had prepared to execute me, I found one of their weapons laying on the ground.

It was an odd design. I don't know much about guns, but this wasn't a standard make. The mussel was oversized, like it was designed to fire an odd size of slug.

"Careful, Mate," English grabbed it from my hands before I could look at it, "That's what the wolf was carrying." He flipped open the chamber. An off stained red bullet sat within. "You ever seen a colour like this before?"

I stepped back, careful not to get too close.

"Nope. The green tried to kill me outright and the purple paralysed me. I have no wish to find out what the red does."

He smiled, showing each and every tooth in his arsenal.

"Oh, but I *do*, Mate. He was silly enough to leave it here. I want to return it to him. Personally."

"Fine." I took a deep breath. "But we need to find them. I can't track anyone over the scent of the fire."

English rolled his eyes. "Mate, haven't you learned anything? We've got dozens of witnesses that would be happy to help."

Talking to the people who had watched, they reported that the humans had indeed retreated into the woods, but the wolf had been separated from them in the chaos, losing his gun. He'd taken off into the city, down an alleyway.

It was my turn to smile now. I could track his scent anywhere. Anyone else and their scent would have been torn to shreds by the city. *Him* I would have no trouble tracking.

The bugger's trail wasn't an easy one.

It was obvious he knew we'd be going after him. And there was something wrong.

He was scared.

He must have doubled back and looped around at least a dozen times, but at long last we

tracked him to an abandoned apartment building in south V-town.

Looking up at the twenty story behemoth, I was surprised it was still standing. There weren't many like it left, and even fewer that had no people in them.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked English.

He only growled in response, cocking the gun.

Stepping into the building, it struck me just how much this place resembled my old apartment, back before I moved to my current place.

At first I thought the entire building was abandoned. I was wrong. We got about ten feet into the lobby before I saw something move in the corner of my vision.

Spinning around, I saw an old rat huddled in the shadows, clutching a thin rag to her body.

"Money?" She croaked out, "Alms for the poor?"

I shook my head. "Maybe later."

Pushing forward, it took us a good twenty minutes to find a way up to the higher floors. The wolf's scent was so strong in here that I couldn't follow his trail anymore.

The first stairway we tried was choked with rubble. The stairs in the second had given out. It didn't look like there was anyway up until I at last looked inside the elevator shafts.

The elevators themselves were long gone, having snapped their cables and fallen into the basement. The shafts, however, were relatively clear.

Groping around in the darkness, I was able to find a ladder built into the wall. Climbing wasn't easy in the pitch darkness, but I could still smell the wolf.

I wasn't going to be stopped.

The scents of the city fell away as we climbed higher. I stopped at each floor to check for the wolf's scent, but he seemed to just keep going up.

All the way to the twentieth floor. The elevator doors were wedged open here.

There was just enough light shining down into the shaft around us for me to glance down to English.

"Ready?" I fought to keep my voice level.

He didn't say anything. He couldn't. The gun he carried was held between his teeth.

I did however hear him growl.

Stepping out, silent as the fog, we surveyed the penthouse level of the building.

It was a rather change from the dilapidated lower floors.

The walls were painted, the lights all working. Oddly, the most unnerving was the designs. Everything here was *old*. Like... a hundred years old. Everything was from before the Cataclysm.

We were in a small antechamber. Ahead of us was a single doorway. There was a handwritten sign upon it.

'Go back where you came, beasts. Enter on pain of death.'

The writing wasn't the sloppy style that I was used to. It was smooth and cursive, like it had been written by hands that had studied a lifetime in calligraphy.

But even then... there was something different. I'd seen humans write, and it was *like* this. But not the same. It was a mixture of human writing and what might come from my own hands.

Stalking forward, I pushed the door silently open. To my surprise it wasn't locked.

The hallway beyond was much the same as the antechamber. Bright and in perfect repair, everything here could just as well be stocked in a museum.

From up ahead I could hear a high, pained, voice cursing.

About halfway to the windows at the end of the hallway we passed a widening in the hallway. It wasn't much, but there was a single thing sitting in the centre of this space.

Like a shrine, a photo sat on display. It wasn't large, only four by six. It was obviously from before the Cataclysm. It showed a family of smiling humans.

A mother, father, and three children. The all looked towards the camera, bright and happy.

A few steps further and we grew closer to the cursing.

I knew that voice. It was the wolf.

We were just around the corner from the voice when it grew to a bone chilling howl. Then it died away into an exhausted panting.

Glancing over to English, we both stepped around the doorway. He raised his gun.

The red furred wolf stood in the centre of a large, clean, brightly lit bathroom. He was looking into a mirror and trying to dig something out of his flesh.

There were tufts of fur and squares of skin on the floor around him. He kept digging into his own body like he could hardly feel the pain.

Yet every time he pressed his claws deeper they were pushed back by his own regenerating flesh.

I took a deep breath.

"Agamemnon, I presume?"

The wolf stopped and turned towards us.

"What are you doing in my home, *beast*? Get out." He paused for a moment as he realized who I was.

And, much to my surprise, he laughed.

"You!" He shook his head slowly, rolling his eyes. He didn't even seem to notice English holding the gun levelled at him. "You truly are a challenge to kill." He snorted. "One moment. I can't be looking like this when I have guests."

He turned away from us, back to the mirror again.

With a grunt of pain he forced his hand once again deep into his own flesh. Blood poured out over his chest as his claws cut deeper.

A moment later I heard a relieved sigh of breath from him as he pulled something free. A bullet clinked to the floor. It had a slight red sheen to it that I couldn't attribute to the blood it sat in.

"Now," He turned to me, sucking in a breath, "Where are my manors?" Before our very eyes the gaping wound in his chest knitted back together. It was gone in only seconds. Even the pelt completely grew back. The only thing to suggest it had ever been there in the first place was some blood matted fur.

For seemingly the first time he noticed English.

"You can put that away, *beast*." He looked over to me. "Tell your trained animal that he isn't needed. You haven't anything to fear from me for the moment." He lifted a lip to show a wicked fang. "Not until we're both ready to fight again. As for you, Mr. Taggart, you must have more humanity in you than I ever thought." He laughed. "It's not often I encounter one such as you." He paused for a moment, lifting a claw to his lip, "No. No, I've *never* encountered once such as you. How old did you say you were?"

I just stared at him speechless as he brushed past me out into the hallway. English was only slightly better, turning to keep his gun aimed.

"Fine, never mind. Even an uncivilized compost heap like this city has to have a half useful tool tossed into it every so often. Come on," He glanced at us over his shoulder, "I won't kill you yet. I promise. We'll leave that until *after* we talk."

He disappeared around a corner. English and I turned to each other.
The lion shrugged. "Can I shoot him, Mate? Just to shut him up?"
I let out a sigh. "Not yet."
We followed him.

There was a large kitchen and dining room in front of the windows.
Like everything else of this floor it looked to have been completely renovated from its original design. And, somewhat obsessively, *everything* was clean and working.

"Take a seat," the wolf called over his shoulder from a bar built into the far wall, "I'll be with you in a moment."

Making sure English was covering my back, I turned to look out the floor to ceiling windows.

This had to be one of the tallest remaining buildings in V-town. Looking out the crystal clear glass I could see *everything*.

All of V-town laid out before me like a map.

And... did it look ugly.

Down on the street the city was a fine place to live, but from up here, looking down at the patched and re-patched roofs and dingy walls, it looked like a wasteland.

The sound of claws clicking on linoleum behind me pulled me back to the real world.

The wolf walked back towards us, three glasses sitting on a tray.

One was a tea cup. If anything it was older and finer than what even English had. The second was a large glass of bourbon, the third was a simple, unarmed crystal glass filled with blood.

The wolf smiled.

"I hope the selections suit you." A slight grimace passed over his face, "It's not often that I entertain."

He set the tray down on a small wooden coffee table. The design was old, but it matched every thing else in the sitting room.

Everything here, without exception, was of pre-Cataclysim make.

"You can drink it," the wolf urged me on as English and I found seats across from him on the small sofa. "I promise you it's safe. I'll even try some if you want."

English raised an eye ridge. "I doubt that would do us any good. Your regeneration is even better than Tommy's. You'd likely be immune to anything we could imagine."

The wolf chuckled sadly. "Yes, you'd likely be right. Oh well, you'll just have to trust me."

English reached out and took a sip of his tea. A moment later he smiled.

"You're not touching your drink, Tommy." The wolf noted as he took his own glass of bourbon.

I sniffed at the cup on the table but didn't touch it. "Sorry. I don't drink *blood*."

His eyes widened slightly, as if in honest surprise. "Really? You eat raw meat, hunt wild animals, but you're not interested in blood? It's freshly squeezed from a carcass."

I wrinkled my nose. "No, thank you."

He shrugged. "No offence taken. So," He leaned back, lounging in his seat, seemingly fully at ease. "I'm assuming you'd like to know who I am?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

He smiled again. "You called me Agamemnon. I assume your father told you that name. I haven't used it in some time. I have to change every so often. Otherwise people will realize just how long I've been here."

I raised an eye ridge.

"My real name, Tommy, is Brian Ferguson." He laughed as I cocked my head. "Don't be so

confused. There are no living souls who have ever heard that name. I was a member of the Vancouver police force.”

It was a good thing I hadn't taken a sip of my drink. Even as it was I think English nearly drowned.

The wolf pulled a face, near snarling. “Not the so called 'service' they have now. I was an officer in the *Vancouver* police force. Not the V-town as they call it now.”

I cocked my head further. “Vancouver? The city hasn't been called that in over a hundred years, since the Cataclysm.”

He laughed softly. “Exactly. Look around you, young wolf. Do you see anything tainted by the Cataclysm other than...” He paused for a moment, “Me? *I* was alive when the world came to an end. I was an officer on my beat. One moment I was walking in a fine summer day, the next it all came to an end. And I,” His voice fell to a snarl, “Became *this*.” He raised a hand before his face.

“I became a *beast*. But I, unlike so many around me, retained my *humanity*.” He paused for a deep breath, moderating his tone, “It took me two days to fight my way across town, to get back to my family. When I did I found them all dead.”

He was little more than whispering now. “My wife had become... a rat. My kids...” He trailed off. “James. He'd stayed human. Not that any of it mattered. By the time I'd gotten there the fall of civilization had already begun. They were all dead. Killed by the *beasts* who had given into their new natures when they'd been changed.”

“I... I saw the beasts all around me. I even saw the beast that had taken over my own skin. I tried to join them, to murder myself.” He smirked. “That's when I discovered I had a second curse. I can't, it seems, die in any meaningful way. Anything I do I heal from in seconds. Not even the fangs of time seem to be able to destroy me. I've been looking out at the sunsets over the Pacific for over a hundred years now, and I'm the same as the day the world ended.”

“You were human?” I asked.

“I *am* human.” His fur bristled for a moment before he forced it to lie flat again. “I was born human, unlike you. I *am* human, no matter what my appearance may be.”

I laughed, glancing over to English.

“Don't see what's so great about it, myself. English and I tried being human and all that for a couple of days last year.” I snorted. “Bloody well good it did us. Just got sunburn and mosquito bites.”

The lion chuckled for a moment before speaking.

“But that, Mr. Ferguson,” His voice fell to a shade above a growl, “Doesn't explain why you tried to kill Tommy.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “I don't take kindly to those who harm my friends.” He set his tea cup gently down on the table.

Brian raised an eye ridge. “We weren't lying when we spoke to the crowd. You were encouraging interbreeding, killing off the human race. I can't allow that.”

I had to hold back my own growl now. “And what about all the work I did to keep the humans alive? The exodus, the return to V-town? What about all that? Where were you?”

He shrugged offhandedly. “Just because you didn't see me doesn't mean I wasn't there. I played my role. I do thank you for what you did. That,” He narrowed his eyes, “Is why you're not dead yet.”

I was about to reply with an angry retort when an ear shattering boom echoed through the room. The wooden coffee table between us exploded as a bullet tore through it.

English stood up and walked over to the crumpled form of Brian, smoking gun still in his hand. He gave the wolf a savage kick.

“*That*,” He spat, “Is for shooting Tommy the first time.” He threw the spent gun away. “And

this is for the second.” He raised his claws to swipe down at the wolf’s face.

“Wait!” I leapt to my feet to stop English. I needn’t have.

The bullet had buried its self in Brian’s upper chest, likely in the lung. It must have anti-regeneration properties, he wasn’t healing from it.

Before I could even get the two steps to where English stood the wolf had rolled away from him, kicking out with a foot to knock the lion off balance.

A grim smile spread across the wolf’s face. “Beasts. All of you. I knew it.” His lips pulled up in a snarl. I’ll kill you like I’ve slaughtered hundreds before.

He tried to launch forward into an attack, but pulled up short clutching the wound in his chest.

The look of surprise on his face was obvious. He wasn’t used to having to fight with a wound.

I smiled.

Stepping forward, I slashed my own claws though the air. He tried to step back, but moved too slowly. Four crimson streaks appeared in his red coat.

They began to heal, but not nearly as quickly as his wounds had before.

Turning to flee, he ran down another hallway parallel to the large glass windows.

English and I followed him.

He didn’t get more than ten feet before the lion leapt.

Landing on the wolf’s back, English began snapping, trying to fasten his jaws around the wolf’s neck.

He almost made it before Brian turned and slashed him hard in the nose.

With a roar of pain English fell back, clutching his face.

That just left me.

Stumbling to his feet, the wolf leaned against the crystal clear windows looking out over the city.

I launched myself at him.

I had only an instant to realize just how bad an idea this was before I made and we both went crashing through the window.

For just a moment it felt like we were flying.

Then we were plummeting.

Oh bugger.

I’d never wanted to get *this* good a look at the city.

All around me the world spread out. I took just a split second to see the ocean and the mountains, the city sandwiched between them.

Below me, I saw a mask of near serenity on Brian’s face.

I was just closing my eyes, preparing for the fall when I stopped short.

“Ieahhh!”

Fire lit up and down my spine as a strong hand closed around my tail, sharp claws digging in.

I was dangling out of the twentieth story window of a skyscraper, held aloft by English’s firm grip on my tail.

Far below, I watched Brian, the last survivor of the Cataclysm, as he hit the empty, cracked, asphalt.

His body exploded into a million pieces, not so unlike a minotaur I’d seen so long ago.

There was no way his regeneration could ever recover from that, no matter how good it may be.

It took what seemed like forever for English to pull me back to safety.

The fact he yanked me up by my *spine* didn’t help. Without my own regeneration I had no

doubt it would have been torn clean off.

"So," He paused for breath, looking out the window, "That's the end of him, Mate."

I was still nursing a bruised rear end, jumping every time one of my vertebrae popped back into place.

"I guess so." I winced. "I hope so. But we're not done." Looking out the window again, I could see the black smoke of a forest fire to the west. "We've still got the true humans to find."

The cat grimaced. "This is going to be a long day."

Back out on the street again, the climb down had taken forever. A crowd had already gathered. Among them were the police. And one in particular.

"Jon!" I ran up to him, "I thought you were guarding Rebecca."

He looked away sheepishly, "I escorted her to police HQ. Amstys is still with her. She is safe. I needed to come and help you." He glanced to the blood that covered the street. "But it seems that the particular individual has had an accident."

"Fine." I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him towards the smoke in the distance. "We're going hunting. Come on."

He started slightly, regaining his footing. "Hunting? As in the forest? Wouldn't this... uh, be a better job for the *hunters*?"

I barred my fangs in a smile. There was no joy in it.

"Jon. These are the people who tried to kill me, hurt Rebecca, and break the very city in two. I'm offering you the chance to find them. Are you turning me down?"

He paused for a moment, straightening his uniform. "Someone from the force will have to, of course, accompany you. To make sure your safe. As your personal attaché that would logically be me."

We made it to the edge of the city without much of a problem. It was once we were here that I realized just how great the damage was.

The black smoke that rose into the sky was not just simply from the forest, it had spread to the outermost buildings of the city as well. It looked like every firefighter in V-town was here, and most of the cops too. They were working hand in hand to try and keep the fire from spreading.

I had no doubt Fire Chief Hamish was having a very, very bad day.

Taking a deep breath, I instantly regretted it as ash and smoke clogged my lungs.

Not sure which way to go, I started walking straight across the ash where fire had already burnt itself out.

The ground was hot against my feet, burning, but I kept walking anyway.

With the path clear it didn't take long to make it to the cabin where Rebecca and I had spent last night.

There was... nothing left.

I knew this was the place, but the only indication anything had ever stood here was a small pile of charred wood in the centre of the clearing.

I gritted my teeth and snarled.

About to set off again, at a more or less random direction, a call came from behind me.

Rebecca was running my way.

I rolled my eyes with a smile.

"Jon," I glanced over to the dog, "I thought you said she was safe at police HQ."

He just looked away and curled his tail around his leg.

"You're not going anywhere without me." Rushing up, she flew straight into my arms, nearly bowling me over backwards.

"And if I said it wasn't safe?" My voice was muffled by her hair.

She poked me in the nose as she took a step back. "Then I'd just remind you who saved you. So how about you don't?" She smiled and showed off a new set of knives.

I shook my head. "Deal. But we still have a problem. No one knows where they went."

"We may be able to help you with that."

From behind a charred tree trunk, Sunny stepped our way.

"I've dispatched some of my party to follow them. Last I heard they were heading north up the coast."

I smiled, showing my teeth.

"Horseshoe Bay." I glanced at Rebecca before turning my attention back to Sunny. "Thank you. I don't know how to repay you, but I will. Stay here and talk to Max. Tell him you have my blessing for whatever it is you want."

We set off moments later, the four of us. The walk to Horseshoe Bay was a long one, but it was familiar. We made it in record time.

It wasn't long after we neared Horseshoe Bay that I picked up their scents. This was going to be a problem. They knew they were being followed.

The trails split and rejoined time and time again, then looped around upon themselves.

There were a few times we saw the flash of a human in the trees, but they had planned for this.

With their guns I couldn't close the distance to them to make a capture. We needed a plan.

"Babe," I pulled Rebecca to my side, "We need a distraction."

She smiled. She didn't have the teeth I did, but the grin was no less feral.

"Use a human to draw them out?"

I shrugged. "They won't run from you the way they will from us."

Seconds later she was walking out in front of us, making the racket that human's normally do when they walk in the woods.

Sending English off to my left and Jon to my right, I hunkered down and hid in the undergrowth.

All I had to do now was wait. Wait and stalk my prey.

It wasn't long until one of the humans poked his head from the trees. He thought he was being stealthy, but he was plain as day. Feet behind him English crouched unnoticed.

The next human was on the other side. Jon was behind him before he'd even gotten ten steps.

And one last human...

He appeared from the trees on the far side of Rebecca, across from me.

I didn't have a choice. In seconds he'd be upon her.

With a silent snarl I leapt through the woods, catapulting myself between the trees. In the blink of an eye I was before Rebecca. My legs bunching beneath me, I leapt over her to pounce upon the man.

The snap bark of the man's gun echoed through the woods. He didn't hit anything.

I wanted to kill them. I so sorely wanted to rip them limb from limb, but I didn't.

I was not just a beast.

Binding them with handcuffs thoughtfully brought by Jon, we began the walk back.

It was only now that I looked at the few remaining buildings of Horseshoe Bay. They still looked lived in.

"Why?" I had to ask.

The lead human looked up at me sourly, flicking his head to try to brush his long black hair from his face.

"You're a beast, just like Brian said. You'd never understand."

It took every fibre of my being not to turn and maul him.

"*Understand?*" I nearly screamed it. "What's to *understand*? I saved all the humans in V-town not just *once* by getting you out of the city, not *twice* by keeping you alive over the winter, and not *three blood soaked times* by welcoming you back to V-town! How can *I* not understand? You'd be dead if not for me!"

He simply glared at me.

"Right. *Oh great saviour*. We owe so much to you that we shouldn't even *dare* to doubt you." His voice positively dripped as we walked. "It doesn't matter *what* you do. The entire species in doomed is we don't do something radical. Every union between a human and a beast produces a beast. No exceptions. The only way the human race is to survive is to sequester ourselves. We *could* have survived in Horseshoe Bay. We were doing just fine until you came to yank our chain again. It's people like her," He glanced over to Rebecca, "She's what we need. We need her, and women like her, to help us make the next generation."

In a flash Rebecca was before us, her fingers wrapped around the man's jaw.

"What?" Her voice was as cold as the arctic snow. "Are you saying that you want to *breed* me?" Her fingernails were starting to dig into the man's face, drawing blood. "Are you saying you see me as nothing but a... a *bitch* to give you human babies?"

Stepping up behind her, I softly encircled my arms around her chest, lifting her arms and pulling her back into me.

"Jon," I glanced over to the dog, "Get them out of here. It's not that far back to V-town. You don't need us."

"You okay, Babe?"

We were laying out on the exposed stone of the Rocky Mountains, looking down through the trees to the city below us. I could just make out Jon and English as they stepped from the forest.

The cops were around them in an instant, taking the men into custody.

And I could see English looking our way, surveying the trees.

He waved before turning away and disappearing among the buildings.

"I guess, Tommy. I was just thinking about what he said..."

Rolling on my side, I reached out and kissed her, my tongue brushing her cheek.

"Don't worry about it right now, Babe. We've got the rest of our lives to work out a plan to keep the human race going. We'll figure *something* out."

"But he was right. We're dying. The entire human race could be gone in only a few generations."

"Babe," I let out a breath, "We'll think of something. There's still a lot about the Cataclysm we don't know. Remember, we found that machine up in Edmonton."

The slightest smile touched her lips.

"Yeah, I guess. We'll think of something."

I grinned. "Now," I reached out to take her hand, "What would my wife like to do with the rest of this fine day? It's our first full day of being married, we should do something."

She laughed. "Why not help me look for a job?"

I groaned.

Chapter 15: Singing In Discord

The doctor's office was drab enough that it needed something, anything. Even one of those 'hold in there' posters with a photo of a cute kitten would have helped.

And that's saying something. I *hate* those posters.

Dr. Janson was one of the few remaining geneticists in V-town, or the entire world for I knew.

"Well, Mr. Taggart, the projections are back." The mouse frowned. "It took a fair bit of effort. We even had to make use of a computer, but we were right. At current rate the last of the humans in V-town will be gone in a little less than four generations. Something like two hundred years."

I shut my eyes for a moment. "What about humans in the rest of the world?"

He whistled.

"That's even worse. We sent some envoys to other cities. It looks like they have even smaller human populations than we do. You said something about a rogue wolf helping the human cause? I wouldn't doubt he worked to bring as many humans as he could here."

"Fine." I stared up at the tile ceiling, rubbing my temples. It's been two months since we'd killed Brian Ferguson and so far it looked like everything he'd said was true. "What are our options?"

The doctor shrugged. "The only thing we can think of is a breeding program. It would have to be extremely rigorous to even hope to stabilize the population likely so much as rebuild it. We lost a lot of humans just before the quake."

"I know." I sighed. "But I'm not about to start telling people who they can and can't screw." Getting up from my chair, I set my hand on his shoulder. "You'll keep looking, right? We need a better answer."

He smiled. "Sure."

I turned to leave, "Oh. I know it's not your area, but did they ever get back about how all those poisons I survived affected my system?"

I heard a few papers flip on his desk. "Don't know. Everything checks out, but we really don't know what the long term effects will be. We'll just have to keep an eye on you. They could do strange things to your regeneration."

"Thanks, doc."

I closed the door to his office behind me.

Out into the hospital proper, I climbed the steps to the third floor. The private rooms were up here.

I let out a long breath, trying not to taste the disinfectants on the air.

I'd gotten the message today that I'd been dreading for some time.

Passing a nursing station, there were only two rooms currently being used in this wing.

One room was guarded by hunters. The other, across the hallway, was guarded by police dogs.

None of them spoke as I turned to enter the room flanked by the hunters.

When my father had first been moved in here I'd tried to pay for everything – there was no way my parents could do it themselves and I wouldn't let my father have anything but the best care – but to my surprise the bill had already been taken. The hunters had passed a collection pot amongst themselves to cover the expense.

Stepping into the darkened room, my father lay flat on his back on the bed. His face was in shadow.

There wasn't a sound in here, and not a breeze stirred. For all the world it looked like time had stopped.

Kneeling beside the bed, I tentatively reached out a hand. He was barely breathing.

"Dad?" My voice was rough.

His eyes fluttered open ever so slowly.

He didn't say a word, but I knew he was there.

I took his hand in mine. Lifting his arm, it felt like there was nothing there, like he was already a ghost. Nothing like the strong, solid as the earth man I'd grown up with.

"Dad..." I couldn't speak.

Bowing forward, I rested my face on his soft grey chest, just feeling it ever so minutely rise and fall.

And I cried.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

And then the gentle rise and fall stopped.

I looked up. His eyes were closed.

He was still.

I couldn't hold back the cry that escaped my lips as I turned my head to the sky.

A single long, pained note escaped me. It was a funeral dirge.

I held that note until my lips were dry and my lungs were raw. All the other hunters in ear shot, likely the whole city, joined in with me.

We didn't sing together. Every one of us put our own soul into the howl, making a nerve-wracking, painful, and unforgettable cry of anguish.

I started the cry and I ended it.

I was once again alone as I howled.

Running out of breath, my howl came to an abrupt, sobbing end.

A hand came to gently rest on my shoulder, as light as an autumn leaf. It was my mother.

She didn't say anything, but only helped me to my feet.

She'd look after my father now. She'd make sure his body was returned to the forest he'd loved so much.

Back out in the hallway, Rebecca was waiting for me.

I swept her into my arms and held her so tightly I never wanted to let go.

On the other side of the hall I could see into the remaining room.

It was crowded with police dogs. And at their front, the only one next to the bed, knelt Jon.

I couldn't see Sayer, but I knew the moment it happened.

The hunters had howled, showing their mourning to the world. The police dogs simply bowed their heads.

One of them pulled out a radio and whispered a single word.

I had no doubt that every other dog in the city was also showing his or her respects.

With clinical efficiency they moved on. No more than a minute later they had dispersed, returning to their duties.

The lead dog may be dead, but there was a new lead dog. And the city still needed protecting.

Jon stepped out to meet us as I watched over his shoulder. The other dogs were already carrying Sayer's body away.

"So that's it?" I asked.

Jon nodded. "And you?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Yeah."

We descended to the basement of the hospital, where they'd constructed a cafeteria. English was waiting for us there.

It wasn't until now I really got a moment to look at the building around us. This wasn't an old human building, nor was it the slapdash construction that had been the hallmark of V-town before the quake. The General Hospital was a new breed of building. Taking what we knew of the pre-Cataclysm human works and adding to it our own strengths, it was a design like none that had come before.

Sitting down at a table next to English, he was nursing a tea. He nodded to Jon and I. He didn't need to ask. It was obvious.

"So," He took a deep breath, "What's on the agenda for the rest of the day?"

Jon glanced up from beside me. "I'll need to be going in a moment. My uncle did his best to leave everything in order, but taking over for him is a big role to fill." He smiled sadly. "I still wish I didn't need to do it."

I patted Jon on the shoulder. "I understand."

He stood up and walked away. It was no more than ten feet before a guard of police dogs formed around him.

There was something in the way Jon walked now. He was taller. Firmer. He was a police dog through and through, but he wasn't just *a* police officer. He *was* the police.

Glancing back to English, he was sipping from his cup, making a face. He never did like mass produced tea.

I couldn't help but notice the grey strands of hair that were starting to show out on his brown mane.

I shook myself like I was throwing water.

"And that reminds me, Wolfy," Rebecca said softly from beside me, "I need to go see the obstetrician. My appointment is in ten minutes. She just wants to make sure everything is coming along alright with the pregnancy."

I couldn't help the soft smile that slipped to my lips, fighting with the tears that still wet my face.

"That's great, Babe." I pulled her down to kiss her cheek, "I guess it's a new start for us, eh?" She laughed and pushed me back. "It should be, we tried enough times!"

She was gone a moment later, disappearing into the crowd of people around us.

Looking out over the masses that flowed through the hospital cafeteria, some were happy and jubilant, having just started new families of their own, others were worn and broken, having lost those close to them.

Me? I was still having to work out where I was.

“So, Mate,” English pushed his half finished cup of tea away, “Like I said, what are you up to today?”

I shrugged. “I don't exactly have any plans.”

He smiled, showing off his still white teeth. “Well, Mate, how about coming with me? There's always another contract that needs hunting.”

I let out a breath, rolling my eyes skyward.

“Yeah. That doesn't sound bad.”

Author's Note

Well hi there. Welcome back (again).

Here we are, having taken another swing at Tommy and *The Hunters*. It's good to be back. This mark's the forth book in the series, we're past the mid-point now. Tommy's not a young wolf any more, or at least not as young and wide-eyed as he was when this whole thing began. With a little bit of luck you'll continue to watch him grow as the series progresses.

So, after all my vague hints of doom and gloom you've finally seen the new big bad. Brian is the final major antagonist of the series. On a technical level he appeared very, very briefly in the previous book with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo. If you're thinking everything is good now with him gone... well, problems have a way of coming back when you least want them.

We're starting to enter the endgame now, and things are firming up. Tommy finally has someone to face who can truly test who and what he's become over his previous adventures. And more than that, this is an antagonist who'll... Ahh, but that would *still* be telling.

There were so many ideas I wanted to get out in this book. Too many, honestly told. The book likely could have ran on for another three chapters, but it already crested one-hundred thousand words as is. There was a lot of different concepts, plots, and world building in this story, not all of them fleshed out to the level I would have liked. I hope you kept up, this got real busy, real fast.

And with so many ideas running amok, something had to get left out. I feel sorry for Rebeca in this book. I wanted to work on developing her as a character, giving her a life and story that wasn't dependent solely on Tommy. Unfortunately, time just didn't permit.

Everyone else though, yeah, they get *backstory*. I suppose you could almost call this 'Exposition: The Book'. I think it weaves in well enough though. Everybody has to come from somewhere.

I will say, however, that this book contains one of my favourite scenes in the series. The idea of Tommy being hired to run his own assassination may be a little far-fetched, but I couldn't resist it the moment it popped in my mind. That, and I can never turn down the opportunity to give Jon a migraine.

Oh, and the scene of him smacking his head against the table? Yeah, that's pretty much me in

real life – just minus the regeneration.

In a previous essay I nattered on about sequels and how things never seem to change or grow in long book series. This is *not* one of those series. I'm quite proud of the fact that each book build upon the previous, often going in a different direction. Tommy's done his time as Mayor and come out the other end. Some things have gotten better during that time, some things have gotten worse. One thing is for sure, he's not the same wolf that went in, though he might like to think he is. The times are changing, and the old power structures that held V-town in check for so long can't remain forever. Including the ones that were invisible to the naked eye.

And this ain't no comic book, people don't come back from the dead.

And speaking of death. Yeah, the epilogue was a bit of a punch to the gut. It wasn't easy to write, but the two were old. Having Sayer and Griss leave the world in near lockstep only goes to show – to me at least – just how similar the two of them were. The men spent much of their lives trying to pull the city in opposite directions, but in the end they were far more alike than either of them would ever admit.

So, the question is where do we go from here. I've got the final two books in *The Hunters* ready to go, but it'll be a bit before you see them. Tommy's next adventure is *The Proginers*. The wolf will quickly come to find that being the alpha for an entire city was only training for heading up a family.

And woe upon anyone who would ever bring them harm...

But first, here's something completely different. Keeping up my tradition of a *Hunters* book, then a one off story, I present to you *We Don't Just Fade Away*.

A story of minor gods, encroaching darkness, a young magician girl, and a large, white, fluffy dog.

It's borderline for being something that can be posted on FA, but we'll see if we can get away with it. Hey, it's got Anubis as a minor character, so how bad can it be?

You're still here? Well, thank you for reading, and staying with me so long. If you've faved or commented (and you know who you are!), thank you. I mean it.

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