

The Proginers



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Chapter 1: The River may be Running, but I have no Urge to Chase it

The sky was glorious.

A bare and stark blue, wiped clean this rare day by the coastal winds. There was nothing but the blazing sun above me and the ivory and granite peaks of the Rockies off past my shoulders.

I could just lay here and take in the cool, crisp air forever. There's no scent of the city, no endless mixing of odors from thousands of people endlessly milling about.

There was the smell of the grass, the pine, and...

Huh. Do I smell a rabbit?

Bugger it all, *no*.

I do *not* want to move, I do *not* want to spoil this moment.

Bugger. It. All.

We all have to live with who we are, what we are, and the canine part of my brain just wouldn't let that scent go.

Rolling slowly over onto my stomach, I reached up a hand to brush out my whiskers.

Well, I suppose it wasn't a bad day for a chase.

Where in all the gods' names did that blasted rabbit go now?

The trees flashed past me like frames in an old film, slats of light and shadow nearly blinding me.

I'd practically been on its tail just seconds ago, where had it disappeared to?

I, better than anyone, should know what a difference even a single heartbeat of inattentiveness can make during a hunt.

Closing my eyes for just a moment I took a deep breath. It was off to the left.

Running on all fours I had enough traction to skid to a halt in the thin mountain soil, sending the turf flying up before me. In no more than two strides I'd turned practically ninety degrees.

There you are.

The rabbit had stopped dead in a shadow, nearly throwing me from its trail. Now that it saw me

coming it took off again. But not before I saw a flash of primal fear in it's eyes.

I couldn't help but grin.

By the way, my name is Tommy Taggert and I'm a wolf.

Okay, okay. I couldn't help it now, I was panting, my tongue hanging out. This little bugger was fast, if not particularly smart.

I must have chased that blasted rabbit all the way around the entire mountain meadow. If the creature was smart enough to make a break and just run for it she'd be long gone by now, but she kept stopping and changing direction.

And the wear seemed to be getting to the rabbit even worse than it was to me.

One last lunge, a sudden burst of energy, and I leapt over the small stream that separated us.

And landed right atop the rabbit.

Ouch!

"Hey! Stop that. No biting!"

You'd think a herbivore like this would go down fairly easy, but it seemed they grew them tough up here in the Rockies.

I'll admit to feeling a pang of regret, but the only way I could keep my hands free of the little beast's teeth and claws was to hold the rabbit by its ears while it kicked and struggled away.

And speaking as a fella who's been yanked my his tail no too few times, I can sympathize with just how much something like that *hurts*.

And then the rabbit looked up at me.

Okay, this is going to sound a little corny, but she looked scared.

Keep in mind I'm talking about a real rabbit here, not someone like me. Life's been a little more confusing since the Cataclysm a hundred or so years ago. I'm a wolf, what we call a Class Three. I can walk and talk like a man but have a fur coat and fangs. But what I held in my hands was a *rabbit*. There was no human there.

But yet when she looked at her I could see her fear.

"Bugger it all." I rolled my eyes as I let her ears slip through my fingers. "There goes my dinner."

Her feet hardly even touched the ground before she took off straight as a gunshot without a glance back.

I guess Rebecca and I were going to be having dried meat and biscuits again tonight.

Letting out a long breath, I smiled.

I'd been having a good day already, and catching that rabbit had made it all the better.

Hands shaking slightly, I turned and walked back to the stream I'd leapt just moments before. I needed to wash some of this sweat from my fur.

You wouldn't think the Rocky Mountains would make for the greatest honeymoon getaway, but they seem to be doing none too poorly for the Babe and I. We were only a few hours walk from the city, but it felt like it was a whole 'nother world out here.

Just the thing for two newlyweds like us.

Stepping up to the the stream, I knelt on its shear, rocky edge. The water was clear, reflecting back a near perfect image of my face as I peered down into it. It was hardly distorted by the fast flowing current at all.

Brown fur, check. Brown eyes, check. Big, strong wolfing demeanor as benefiting the former mayor of V-town and the son of the late hunter's alpha, not so much.

My smile faltered for just a moment as I looked down, but I managed to keep it pinned in place.

Rebecca may like me just the way I am, but I've always thought I looked just a little bit too teadybearish, too puppy-like, or dare I say *domestic*, than I might care for.

Yeah, but then again, this skinny little fuzzball is one of the best bounty hunters in all of V-town, so it's not like I've got all that much self pity to wallow in.

A splash of water on my face and the reflection below me shattered into a million discordant shards.

Gah! The water was cold!

Well, I guess that's one way to get the sweat out of my fur. Now I was just about ready to start shivering.

The air was pleasantly warm up here, but the stream wound its way down the cliffside over kilometres of snow and ice, and it felt like it.

And speaking of snow...

A single fat flake was falling from that faultless blue sky above me. I smiled.

It had been a mild winter this year, but I was happy to see the end of it none the less. We hadn't had a good snowfall in over a month now and this single flake was a pleasant reminder of the long nights I'd spent with Rebecca in the apartment.

Reaching out, I let the flake land on the back of my fur covered hand. I still had most of my winter coat, it didn't melt.

For a moment it sat there, caught on the strands of brown fur, then a slight gust of wind tugged at it and it was gone.

I was about to get up and turn from the stream when something below me shifted.

"Oh bugger..."

I didn't even get enough time to let out a proper curse before the steep bank beneath me crumbled away.

The plunge wasn't far, but even the split second of freefall was enough to take my breath away, memories of plummeting from a twenty story building coming to mind...

But the ice cold water that met me just a few feet down took my mind off the whole thing.

It was less than a heartbeat before I was soaked halfway through to the skin. My coat may be good for keeping me warm, but it definitely wasn't waterproof.

I'd never call myself a champion swimmer, but I can doggie paddle with the best of them. My head never even went under the surface.

Though that might have more to do with the fact the stream was only about four feet deep.

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my lips. Well, I was planning on heading back to camp and this was as good a way as any I suppose. The river ran right past where Rebecca and I'd set up our tent downstream. I'd followed it to get here.

Twisting around onto my back, I sucked in a breath to get myself up and floating. That might not sound like much, but this stream had a bloody good current going. I was floating down at a brisk walking pace almost before I could right myself.

The fact I nearly managed to bash my head on an outcropping of rocks didn't help much.

You know, the water isn't all that bad once you get used to it...

I'd begun shivering when I'd first fell in, but now that I was in the flow it almost felt decent.

Laying on my back, eyes open to the sky, I took a deep breath and let the world, quite literally, flow past.

Uh... what's that sound?

Splashing about a bit to raise my head out of the water, I took a peek forward over the chipped

black claws of my toes.

There was nothing there but blue sky.

And I mean *nothing*.

I had about three seconds to realize that the white noise in my ears was the sound of falling water before I remembered I'd had to *climb* this mountain.

I didn't even bother swearing this time.

I've only been on a water slide once in my life – they're not all that popular with people with fur coats – but my dad took me when I was young.

There's that moment when you're sitting at the top of the slide, looking down past your feet at the impossibly long distance to the bottom.

Yeah, this was something like that.

Blue skies above me, green all around, and crystal clear water below.

Bring. It. On.

I think I got water up my nose.

And in my ears. And in places I won't mention.

The fall hadn't been *that* bad, only a dozen meters or so, but more than enough to give me some air time.

It's the pool at the bottom that's of more interest to me right now. A good six meters deep and full to the brim with sparkling clear water.

And I'm at the bottom of it.

Looking up at the sky from where I am I could still see the clear blue, but now it was distorted in a million different ways by the shifting surface of the water that sat between me and it.

It looked like I was staring up into a rainbow on crack.

Kicking up off the hard, pebbly surface below me, it seemed I'd only been down here for seconds but my lungs were already burning. And it felt like a lot further up that it looked.

Only after my head broke the surface did I realize I made a minor miscalculation. I'd gone straight back up to end right under the waterfall again.

That gave me a good lungful of water.

It took me another two minutes of floating down stream, hacking and coughing, before I could breathe properly again. And even then I still felt like brother to a fish.

Though by that point I had something better to be thinking about. The scent of woodsmoke was just touching the air.

The corner of my lip raised in a feral smile.

Scrambling and splashing, I began swimming towards the bank. I only just made it in time.

There wasn't much to see here. A canvas tent, a freshly dug fire pit, and a couple of backpacks hanging from a nearby tree.

And Rebecca.

Her human senses may not be as acute as mine, but even she could hear me as I dragged myself dripping, bruised, and groaning from the stream.

"Have a nice swim, Wolfy?" Her voice was neither soft nor harsh. She never turned to me when she spoke. She was hunched over beside the fire, skinning what looked – and smelled – like a hare.

Odd. I hadn't caught it, she must have. I always had trouble envisioning Rebecca *hunting* anything. I loved her dearly, but she wasn't like me. She was human.

Taking a few steps from the river, I paused well away from the fire. It was only a second too

late Rebecca figured out what was on my mind.

She was far too slow.

Falling back to all fours, I shook.

It's a bit of a canine thing, but you have no idea just how a good hard shake can feel to get the water out of your fur. It's like you're sending all the grime and worries of the day with it.

The fact you get the opportunity to spray everyone else in sight is just a pleasant bonus.

Heh. You should have seen the time I shook myself off after falling face first in a three foot deep mud puddle. English nearly killed me.

But getting back to the here and now, it was Rebecca who was diving for cover.

I couldn't quite make out what she said as she hit the ground behind the tent, but it didn't sound all that ladylike.

Ten seconds later I was bordering on dizzy and my fur was bordering on dry.

"You can come out now, Babe," I called. "It's all over but the screaming."

That was the point I got a pebble smack between the eyes.

I never was much of one for cooked meat, but I'll admit the scent of hare roasting over a fire was more than a little appetizing.

"Sorry about that, Babe," I whispered in Rebecca's ear as I held her close. We were seated on the rock next to the fire. She was leaning back into me, sitting snugly between my spreadeagled legs. "Besides, isn't it getting towards the point you shouldn't be doing stuff like that?"

Reaching down, I cupped my thick, callused fingers over her belly. There was just the faintest beginnings of a bulge there.

She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Don't you get started too." Worming about in my grasp, she half turned to face me. "I don't need you fussing over me. Gods, I get enough of that from Molly already. With how she and Amstys are going on you'd just as soon think this was *their* kid."

I smiled and reached out with my tongue to flick the tip of her nose.

"It's not all that bad, babe. Who'd have thought we'd ever be parents, eh?"

For just a moment I feared she was about to sock me.

Going limp in my arms for a moment, she was soft against my chest. It seemed she could go from diamond hard to soft as velvet in no more than a heartbeat.

"I guess, Tommy." She was looking away from me now, into the fire. "If it were anyone else I'd be terrified right now. Gods, even with *you* I don't know what to think. Kids? I'd never seen myself like this. Families were what other people had. I just fought to live from day to day."

Encircling my arms around her, I pulled her tighter.

"Yeah, Babe. If you'd told me a couple of years ago I'd have thought you were trying to sell something. It's not where I'd have ever seen myself. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to land someone like you."

"That's not what I meant, Tommy." She still didn't turn to look at me. "Kids. It's not that I don't want them. Gods, I could have had them years ago if I *wanted* them just to have them, it's just not how I've ever seen myself."

I didn't exactly have the words to respond. I hadn't exactly been *trying* for kids myself. Well, I'd been going at the physical act more than willingly enough, but I hadn't been thinking much beyond that. The idea of kids had been little more than a speck on the horizon.

"Don't worry about it, Babe," I said, my voice came out deeper than I was expecting, huskier.

"We'll make this work. You know we will. After running a city, and having the gods know how many

people trying to kill us, kids should be no big deal, eh?"

I tapped her nose with one of my cracked black claws. She giggled.

It wasn't long after the scent of the hare roasting on the spit caught my attention.

"I think we're about ready, Babe." Moving her gently aside, I stood and lifted the meat from the flames. "Shall I butcher it up for you, my fair lady?" I made a grandiose bow before her, snickering.

She smiled back.

"I guess, Wolfy." For just a moment she turned a slight shade of green. "But you can keep most of it. I'll just stick to the provisions we brought up."

"Huh?" I spared her a glance over the spit as I slid the carcass off onto a plate. "Aren't you hungry, Babe?"

She shrugged. "It's alright. My stomach's just been feeling a little off the last few days. From what they've told me it'll only get worse as the pregnancy progresses. I might as well stick to safer things than wild game for now."

"But, Babe," I was just about ready to start pleading. "It's cooked *for you*. You know I don't care for cooked meat. And we can't let it go to waste!"

She grinned and winked at me. "Aww, too bad for the big bad wolf. He'll just have to learn how to be civilized. I have to make sure you'll be a good example for our kids."

I rolled my eyes as I reached down with a claw to rip off a section of meat.

"Whatever you say, Babe. Though I don't think *I'll* be the one having problems being a role model. Remember, it's wolf pups we'll be having. Humanity is recessive."

She didn't say anything.

It wasn't long until the sun was touching the Pacific. We could see it sink from where we were camped.

I'd chosen this spot particularly for that reason. That, and you *couldn't* see the lights of V-town.

I was picking through the last of the hare when Rebecca sat down beside me on the ground. In one hand she was holding a carton of crackers, in the other a canteen.

Reaching forward, I took a sniff of her food.

"Gah." I let my tongue roll out. "How can you eat that, Babe? It's like the kibble police dogs seem to love. It's like reconstituted cardboard."

She smiled and flicked a crumb at my nose. "It's not that bad, Wolfy, just a bit bland." Lifting a wafer to her lips, she crunched it between her front teeth.

That simple action, for some odd reason, always intrigued me. Might sound a little bit fetishy, but something as simple as biting off the end of a round biscuit like that is something I just can't do.

My body may be more or less human, but my head is canine. As I like to say, from the nipples to the knees I look human except for a fur coat and tail, but the head, hands, and feet are a whole different game.

Humans have canines – in a manner of speaking – but I have *real* canine teeth. Like a true wolf, my fangs are made for ripping and tearing. Trying to take a dainty bite of cracker is just something I'm not cut out for.

"Want some, Wolfy?" Her voice was coy.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Fair trade? You can have the last of the hare."

Taking the half eaten cracker from her hand, I tossed it into the air and snapped. Rebecca didn't even startle. We'd been together far too long for her to even notice my eating habits.

The cracker, I'm not surprised to tell you, didn't stack up to the hare.

I'll admit it's the wolf in me talking here, but the processed wafer was so bland and nondescript that it hardly earned a mention.

Rebecca, on the other hand, was taking her time with the meat. Picking the last of the morsels from a plate, she let them cool for a moment before cutting them into bite sized chunks and popping them in her mouth.

To say it was a long way from my rip-and-tear approach to eating would be an understatement.

Night in the country is a whole different kind of darkness than you find in the city. And speaking as a kid who grew up on the suburbs of V-town, it's a bloody well whole lot darker out here.

Not that I was unused to it. I'd spent no small amount of time in the country, especially when Rebecca, English, and I were trekking to Edmonton a couple of years ago.

We hadn't brought a proper sleeping bag tonight, too much effort, but the blankets we had packed were just fine.

The spring night wasn't exactly warm, but it was more than tolerable with my fur coat. I had only a single thin blanket over me.

Rebecca not so much. She was snuggled tight to my chest as we slept in the white canvas folds of the tent, but she had a good half dozen covers bundled about her.

And she'd even tried to steal mine a time or two.

Despite the covers between us I'd managed to worm my hands down next to her bare body. She'd eeked at my cold fingers at first but that was long gone now.

I could find the bulge where the baby was, but try as I might I couldn't feel it move.

The next morning came slow and easy, even if the sunlight didn't.

Being up in the mountains the sun comes late, as it has to get up above the peaks. But when it does arrive it's like someone flicking on a switch. One moment you're in shadow, the next you can practically see right through your eyelids.

This was the last day of our vacation, our long delayed honeymoon. We'd been married back in the summer, but our first honeymoon *hadn't gone all that well*. After that we'd decided to put it off to the spring.

We'd been up here for three days and – rather amazingly – nothing had happened.

I was rather sad to think it had to end.

Rebecca was still sound asleep when I gently sat up and crawled out of the tent. It may be late in the morning, but there was still enough dew on the grass to wet down my knees.

Stepping up to the stream, I was a little bit more cautious now as I lowered a pot down for some water. I didn't feel like another dunking.

Making a fire is one of those things that's easy enough to do with a flint and steel if you've got nimble fingers. I don't.

I'd always envied the thin fingers of humans. My own thick digits were short and fur covered, terminating in chipped black claws.

I used half a book of matches to get the fire started.

Setting a pot of tea, I had to laugh. English would have slapped me upside the head if he'd had been here. The lion had a very particular ritual he followed when making his cup. I don't. I just throw the tea bag he'd given me into the pot and let it boil over the flames.

For just a moment I contemplated heading off hunting, but the thought of bringing down prey for just a single meal – and one I wouldn't be sharing with Rebecca – didn't appeal.

Bringing my pack down from where I'd hung it in a tree, I pulled out another carton of crackers.

Well, perhaps they'd at least go well with soup.
Now if only I had some soup mix.

Rebecca woke sometime later, it had to be close to ten o'clock now.

The first thing I noticed was that she wasn't quite as graceful and elegant in awaking as she once had been. She got about three steps towards the fire before turning and running for the trees. The sound of her retching wasn't hard to make out.

"Uh, Babe? You okay?" Being a typical male of any species, I hadn't the slightest what to do.

She was standing at the edge of the campsite, one arm on a tree branch, face turned away from me.

It took her a few moments to catch her breath. When she spoke her voice was rough. "Yeah, fine, Wolfy. Everyone said to expect this. Just do me one thing?"

"Sure, Babe. Anything." I stepped closer, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Hold my hair back." She bent forward again.

And that's just what I did. Averting my eyes for her dignity more than any real disgust, I held her hair back as the crackers from last night made their triumphant return.

"You sure you're okay, Babe?" I asked as we sat next to the dying embers of the fire. I'd already packed up camp as she sat here, nursing a raspberry lemon tea.

Is it wrong that I can watch her drink it and the scent still reminds me of English?

She was well enough past the worst of the morning sickness now that she was able to smile and flick a cracker at me. I caught it midair.

"Who wouldn't be fine with a wolf like you guarding them?" she said, smirking.

Rolling my eyes, I stepped forward to take her hand, helping her from the ground. "I guess this will be our last time out for a while, eh Babe?" Once again I reached out to cup a hand over her belly. She never even flinched at the intimate motion. "You won't be much of one to climb a mountain soon."

Shaking her head, she reached down to heft her pack over her shoulders, almost overbalancing when it wasn't as heavy as she'd expected.

She gave me a glare.

I shrugged. "I lightened it. Figured I could take some extra load."

She looked about ready to say something before taking a deep breath. "You don't have to worry about me yet, Wolfy. Besides, I thought you were the hundred-fifty pound weakling. Since when did you start carrying the big loads?"

"Since I had more important things to worry about, Babe." Stepping closer, I slipped a hand around her waist.

"Speaking of important," some of the humour fell from her voice as we started off downhill, "what are you going to do about V-town?"

"What do you mean, *do*?" I replied, trying to avoid the question. "I'm not mayor anymore. Max has things well in hand. He hardly needs me."

She laughed, but the sound wasn't as carefree as either of us would have liked.

"For now, Tommy." She paused for a moment as I helped her across the stream. "You know what I mean. The city's doing well enough but things just haven't been the same since you and English killed Brian."

I didn't say anything, but even the mention of Brian Ferguson's name was enough to make me stiffen.

The man had been a wolf, much like myself, and had possessed regeneration, again much like I.

But that was where the similarities ended.

Brian Ferguson had been old, really old, over a hundred years. He hadn't looked it as his regeneration had kept him young. He'd been *guiding* – and I used that term loosely – V-town for years, keeping it in an unnatural state of balance, keeping the human population here uncommonly high.

And I'd had to kill him last year when he'd decided he didn't like having me around.

“We'll do fine, Babe,” I said, forcing my tone light. “All the other cities in the world survived without a devil like him watching over them. We'll do fine. For all we know we're better off now that he's dead.”

She didn't say anything, just made a soft, noncommittal grunt. We both knew I was lying through my teeth.

V-town was doing okay, but you could see it bursting at the edges now that the forces controlling it had changed.

It was about an hour later, as we were rounding a crest of mountains, that V-town came back into sight.

I set a hand on Rebecca's shoulder to bring us to a stop.

Gods.

Gods but the city was ugly.

Sitting to the south of Burned Inlet, V-town, previously known as the City of Vancouver, Canada, sat on the slim edge of the coast between the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. The space it occupied seemed impossibly narrow, like the mountains were trying to push it into the sea, but yet it persevered.

And I do have to say it looked better than North Vancouver. Sitting between us and V-town proper, North Vancouver was little more than a wasteland of half collapsed buildings and ancient human streets. No one lived there save a few hearty individualistic types.

“It was worth it, Tommy.” Rebecca set her hand on mine. “It may not look like much, but I've seen the alternative.”

I rolled my eyes. “Salt Spring, Babe? Sometimes that place almost sounds like a paradise of simplicity.”

She shook her head as we began walking again.

“No it wasn't, Tommy. Simpler, perhaps, but not better. I'd take the chaos of V-town over the enforced purity of Salt Spring Island any day.”

We skirted the edge of North Vancouver as we made our way towards the Lion's Gate bridge. It wasn't that there was anything to be afraid of in North Vancouver, but the empty streets and crumbling buildings always put me on edge.

That, and the cracked asphalt made my bare feet hurt.

The dark green of the trees were to our left and the dull grey of the buildings to our right when I heard something.

Both Rebecca and I were comfortable out here, so neither of us jumped, but I suddenly felt uncomfortable with a heavy pack weighing me down.

Slowing to a stop, I could hear it again. There was a skittering off in the woods ahead of us. It sounded like something running.

Something a fair bit bigger than a rabbit.

Raising a hand before Rebecca, I urged her closer as I stepped back against a tree. The sound

was coming this way.

It was about three seconds later a deer leapt across our path. It was a full sized buck, weighing more than enough to be dangerous. I'm not sure he even noticed us. In the blink of an eye the animal was gone. Bounding on his four strong legs, he was back into the trees, blending away into the foliage.

And another sound was coming our way.

This one... didn't quite sound the same.

The deer had been graceful, even in his flight. It took a ready ear to make out the fall of its hooves on the soil. The footsteps that came towards us now were not so soft.

That, and I could practically hear that panting a mile off.

About a minute later a cream furred wolf staggered into sight. He paused for breath, leaning against the tree next to us.

"Did you..." He had to pause and gulp in air. "Did you see a buck go this way?"

It took me a moment to realize, but it was his voice that finally clued me in. This guy was little more than a pup.

"Yeah." I took a step forward and caught his scent. We'd never met before. "Bounded off north. You'll," I grinned, "never catch it at this rate. I think the hunt's over."

He let out a long breath before straightening.

"I figured as much. Looks like there goes my pay for the day." Pulling the back of a hand across his eyes to wipe away the sweat, he finally took a look towards Rebecca and I.

And then proceeded to go as straight as a rod.

"I... uh... you're him?" The kid's voice was tight. He looked at me like I was a train steaming towards him at a hundred kilometers an hour.

I rolled my eyes.

"I guess it all depends on who *he* is, eh?" Taking a step back, I motioned to Rebecca. I think we were about ready to go now.

"Taggart. The son of the old alpha."

I sighed as I started walking, Rebecca by my side.

Great. After all these years, after being mayor and doing the gods knew how much, this pup still thought of me as nothing more than 'the son of Griss, the most famous hunter's alpha'.

"But... but, you're him, right?"

Glancing behind me, I could see the wolf was following step for step, not letting us escape.

"Yeah," I let out a breath, "I'm him." I let my lips twitch up. "Former mayor Tommy Taggart," I added just for good measure.

"Wow," was all the kid said.

You know, when I was young I thought I'd like getting respect like this. I'd long ago learned that worship, whether it be from the hunters, police, or anyone else for that matter, just got annoying.

"So, like you knew Griss?" He'd come closer now, no more than a step from my side.

I rolled my eyes. Rebecca smiled at me, silently reminding me to be nice.

"Yeah, I knew Griss. He was my father. I grew up seeing him every day."

The kid said 'wow' again, but he managed to draw it out to a good four or five syllables this round.

I figured it was high time for a change of subject.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Nick." He answered automatically, seeming to hardly even notice me. I think he was seeing a different wolf right now.

"Well, Nick, Rebecca and I have been out of town for a while. What's the news?"

A moment later he seemed to slip from his day dream. A heartbeat after that he realized I'd asked him something and his pupils contracted to pinpricks. I could almost hear the fear start to rise from him.

"It's... um... that is..."

The gods give me strength.

I stopped in the middle of the faint path we'd been following. Rebecca continued on a few steps after I turned to Nick, just enough to pretend to get out of earshot. She knew by now this was 'hunter's business'.

"Listen, kid... Nick," I reached out a hand to set on his shoulder. He jumped slightly. "I'm not sure what they've been saying about me, about my father, but I'm just a man. You don't have to be nervous around me, eh?"

For a moment he averted his eyes before finally looking me in the face.

"Of course, Mr. Taggart."

That got a chuckle from me.

"It's Tommy, Nick. Mr. Taggart was my father."

Even *he* smiled at that one. No hunter would ever have dared call my father 'Mr.' His proper title had been 'alpha'.

"Things are going alright, Tommy," he began as we began walking again. "The new alpha is... doing as he can."

I sighed. The *new alpha* was Gowan, my uncle. A nice man, but not really cut out for the role. Gowan was a born beta. He'd only been promoted upon my father's death as there was no one else to take the role.

From that point Nick prattled on about this and that. Most of it was of little interest to me, even if I'd been his age.

But what I could pick out from his wandering monologue, and I could see from the set of Rebecca's face she could too, was that things were not getting any better in the hunters.

It wasn't until we got to the Lion's Gate bridge that I was finally able to get rid of Nick.

Walking over the pitted and softly sloped roadbed of the bridge, it looked much the same as it had when I'd first journeyed over it with Rebecca.

Turning to my right, I could see the sun preparing to sink into the Pacific.

"Romantic enough honeymoon for you, Babe?" I asked.

That got me an elbow to the gut.

"Good enough for now, Wolfy." She paused for a moment, looking past me to the sun. "You know, one of these days we should see if we can get you away from the city long enough for a *real* time away. You never know, we could try going all the way to Ottawa someday. I don't think *anyone* has tried getting all the way out there."

I laughed. "You never know, Babe. It could happen, but I don't think it'll be anytime soon."

There was something a bit odd as we came off the south side of the Lion's Gate. The city. It was... closer.

I don't mean in a metaphorical sense. It's not that I could feel the towers looming and the building pushing any closer than normal, but rather it truly was closer than I remembered.

V-town had been regrowing since the quake, and the downfall of Brian last year seemed to have somehow improved immigration. There simply was *more* to the city now than there had been before.

Chapter 2: To Say This Was Unexpected

And at the foot of the long, gentle descent from the Lion's Gate bridge stood a lone figure waiting for us.

For just a moment my heart leapt. I'd swear I recognized the silhouette.

And I did, though it wasn't who I'd been hoping for.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Taggart. Mrs. Taggart."

The voice was close, so very close, and his appearance closer, but it wasn't Jon. It was Constable Pine, his replacement.

I nodded curtly to the dog as we continued past him, never slowing. He fell into step beside me.

Constable Pine was a near picture perfect example of a V-town police officer. I say that literally, I wouldn't be half surprised if his likeness had been used on posters for the force.

A German Shepherd, he looked, in broad strokes, similar to me. Brown fur, but his with streaks of black, a canine head, clawed hands, and digitigrade feet.

His motions and manner, however, could not be more different. I was a wolf. He was a dog. And a police officer at that.

I walked, or at least liked to think I did, with an easy, graceful loup and an economy of motion hard learned over hundreds of hunts. Pine moved with stiff and parade ground perfect steps.

He was almost as perfect as Jon, but not quite.

"I trust you had a relaxing time away?" His voice was clipped and sharp as any police dog's, but there was something else there.

When Jon spoke you could just tell that what you saw was what you got, a police dog through and through. With Pine I got the distinct impression he was a stand up officer, but there was a man – a true and honest to the gods *normal* man – hiding behind the mask.

"Yeah, Pine. Nice and relaxing."

Pine was a good guy and I had no complaints about him, but he wasn't Jon. The other dog was a best friend of mine, second only to English.

And now he was the Police Commissioner.

I had to shake my head when I thought of that. Sayer, the previous commissioner, had died last

year, Jon was his replacement.

Jon had an... interesting history with the force. Sayer had been his uncle. The police had an odd structure that I was more than keen to get rid of. They ran themselves like a pack of dogs. The alpha, or in this case the commissioner, wasn't a heredity position, but genetics *was* a big part of it.

And as for Jon, I hadn't seen his face in months.

Pine was another odd one. Jon had picked him out for me specifically. It's not that I don't like the cops... the gods know I've spent enough time working with them, but many of the dogs are a little to *perfect* for my tastes.

I'd worked with Pine a few times before. I suggested offhandedly to Jon one day that I might like him as my attache and when I got back to my apartment twenty minutes later there he was, standing ramrod straight and waiting for my command.

Walking down West Georiga street with Rebecca on one side and Pine on the other, it didn't take long for the city to good and truly close in around us.

The buildings out here aren't too tall, but they were definitely full. And, odd as it may seem, I was hearing far more languages than I could ever remember encountering before.

Now don't get me wrong, there's always been a lot of different kinds of people here in V-town, and no too few of them having come across from Asia, but I could barely make out one word in five around me.

I glanced over to Rebecca, she didn't seem to notice.

She did notice me staring and smiled.

"Thinking the same thing I am, Wolfy? I call dibbs on the first shower."

Things were a little bit more normal when we got back to the apartment in Monrou Hall. The building was in a slightly quieter part of the city, and – thankfully – there were no protesters to be seen anymore.

Stepping through the front door and into the lobby, I almost didn't notice Pine as he split off from us to head back to his office down here. He'd taken over Jon's old haunt.

But that wasn't before he discretely pressed my apartment key into my hand. I'd left it with him before we'd headed out.

I was getting smarter about these things. I couldn't even count the number of times I've lost that blasted key.

Opening the door, I got about five feet before shucking the pack from my shoulders and letting it fall to the hardwood floor with a solid thunk.

Like an echo, I heard Rebecca's follow suit.

And after that came a quick trail of footsteps. By the time I turned around all I caught was the bathroom door slamming shut.

The sound of running water wasn't far behind.

A smile worked its way to my lips as I shuffled over to a stool by the kitchen counter.

Heh, I never could quite figure it out, but somehow my body *knew* when it was home. I'd been walking just fine out on the street but the moment I stepped through the door my muscles wanted to turn to water. They knew there was a soft bed just feet away and were doing everything in their power to get me there.

Too bad I wasn't quite ready for a good lie down just yet.

I must have been mayor too long. Once you're an alpha of an entire city the whole 'business before pleasure' thing kind of gets ingrained into you.

Someone had been in here while we'd been away, by the smell of it I'd say it was Pine. Only a police dog would have been able to enter my apartment, and only a police dog's scent would keep my nerves from going on edge.

There was a pile of papers sitting on the counter. Nothing too big, but enough that I felt the urge to go through them before setting off on anything else.

The first letter was, unsurprisingly, from Max, the current mayor of V-town.

I have a bit of an odd relationship with the city government. I *was* mayor, but I'm not anymore. I'd stepped down long ago. Or at least tried to step down.

Back then Sayer had still been running the V-town police, and that dog had held of bit of an... odd opinion of me. He basically saw me as just short of a god, whether I wanted to be or not.

He was gone now, just as dead as my father, but his efforts lived on. I'd stepped down, but I wasn't able to escape. Not quite. My official title now was 'City Administrator'. I had no official power, no office, and no staff. I only had a single ability.

I could overrule the mayor.

Yeah, how about those checks and balances, eh?

Ripping open the tough seal on the government envelope, I wasn't surprised to see Max's neat handwriting on the letter within. What *did* rather surprise me, however, was how up beat he seemed.

Max, knowing my hatred for being kept in politics, made his message brief. Basically it was a 'over all we're on the up and up'. Though I did note a passage at the bottom where he – in a round about way – mentioned that there were more inter-species fighting again.

Gods, hadn't we *just* gotten over the last of the riots?

A couple of minutes later and I was starting to feel a bit restless. The small pile of mail hadn't taken me long to work my way through, and there was little else to keep my attention. The fridge was empty.

Creeping my way towards the closed bathroom door, I could smell the scent of steam leaking out. That, and the tang of soap.

I didn't say a word as I softly pressed the door open. Any sound I made was easily covered by the falling water.

Claws ever so softly clicking on the linoleum, I edged closer to the shower. Through the fogged glass I could see Rebecca's silhouette as she soaped down.

A smile was full bloom on my face as my tongue slipped from my mouth.

In a single fluid motion I yanked the shower door open and stepped inside, closing it behind me. I'd bet I was fast enough not a single drop of water got out. All that netted me was a punch to the gut. It would have hurt like a bugger if I hadn't been expecting it.

"Surprise, babe," I whispered in her ear as I folded my arms around her. In a second my coat was soaked through.

She just rolled her eyes. "Can't a girl even take a shower in peace?"

What should have been a fifteen minute process of getting clean quickly drew out to a good hour. Though I'll have to admit by that point our main goal wasn't cleanliness anymore.

"You sure you have to go, Babe?" I asked while still toweling off. One of the advantages of being human was how little hair she had to dry. It took me *forever* to truly dry out after a shower.

"Sorry, wolfy," she said, reaching forward to tweak my nose, "but I've got an obstetrician

appointment in an hour.”

I rolled my eyes. “What? And I'm not invited?”

She shrugged. “You can come if you want, but being a *man*,” she managed to stress that word in a way I'd never heard before, “I figured you wouldn't be so interested. You can go off and do *manly* things.”

I snorted. “Yeah? Like what, drink beer and ogle the strippers?” I was half expecting that to earn me a playful slap, but all it got was a grin.

“With you, Tommy? That would almost be progress.” Pulling on her red leather jacket, she turned to leave. “Why don't you go see English or something?”

She'd hardly left half an hour ago and I was already going stir crazy.

I'm not one to pace, but it was taking everything I had to keep still on my kitchen stool. I wanted to do *something*, but I hadn't the slightest idea what it might be.

Go see Max? No. He'd just rope me into doing government work.

Go see Jon? Good luck, I hadn't been able to net a spot on his calendar in weeks.

As painful as it might be – well, not *that* painful – I might just have to prove Rebecca right and go visit English. Only I knew for a fact if I went to see the lion he'd drag me off on a hunt.

My muscles were already aching.

The walk to SF was a familiar one. I was a part time bounty hunter, and Storm Front was the premier bounty hunting organization in the city. And the entire thing was owned by English.

Turning the last corner in the busy street, the building came into sight. Once, not so long ago, SF had owned a nice place. Big front windows, wide steps, and water fountains in the lobby. They were all long gone, destroyed in the quake.

What stood on the lot now was far more down to earth. Roughly based on the design of police headquarters, the new SF building was a three story square of dull gray concrete.

The construction was well and done now, but the place looked little better for it. It was almost a challenge to even find the front door.

Stepping into the main lobby, the room looked about as removed from its old design as possible. Bare whitewashed walls and a pitted wooden bench down the middle. There were a couple of burly bounty hunters standing behind either side of the counter along the far wall, keeping an eye on the half dozen or so people who milled around waiting.

I nodded to the fox who manned the counter and walked through the 'employees only' door next to it. No one even batted an eyelash.

That deposited me squarely in the belly of the beast.

The new SF building was labyrinthine at the best of times, and it's been a couple of weeks since I'd been here last.

Heading off in what I *thought* was the right direction, I quickly hit a dead end while looking for the stairs.

Picking another hallway, I suddenly had to duck under a mass of pipes coming out the wall up ahead that I never remembered seeing before.

The building wasn't all *that* big, but it still took me fifteen minutes before I managed to find someplace I recognized, even if it wasn't where I was heading.

The office door to my right had a masking tape label. On it was scrawled 'Human Resources' in a messy hand. Beneath it, not that much smaller, was written 'A.K.A. The Meat Grinder'.

Poking my head through, I could see a familiar form within. Graham the leopard was sprawled

forward across his desk, snoring softly, his one remaining arm under his chin, fingers still clutching a fountain pen.

I couldn't help but smile.

I'd have to see how much English was paying him and arrange for a raise.

Okay, I was never going to find my own way to the third floor.

Another ten minutes of searching only got me as far as the second story. That's when I had to give up and ask a passing fox for directions.

English still had the best office in the whole place, a wide room that looked down over the street, I was able to track it down once I got in the general vicinity by homing in on the sound of swearing.

Creeping the last few steps to the half open door, I could hear the lion talking to someone. Well, I say 'talking' but it was mostly English cursing and the other man getting a single word in every minute or so.

"Sir, I insist. We really must cut expenditures."

Oh gods. I knew that voice. I hadn't seen that man in years. I hadn't even known he was still alive.

Rounding the doorway, I found the huge leonine form of English towering over a scrawny squirrel seated in the guest chair.

"Don't you even dare, Tin! I've already laid off a dozen good hunters. I can't cut anymore."

The smaller man just cocked his head. "Then we'll simply have to cut pay, or reduce perks. It's your call. The money has to come from somewhere."

I was getting the distinct feeling that English was about to throw a chair at him. I took that moment to clear my throat and step into the room.

"Mate!" The change in English's mood was both instant and palpable. In a single fluid motion his lips went from a baby eating snarl to a wide smile.

I wasn't sure which displayed more teeth.

"When did you get back?" he asked. "And where's the Lass? How have you been?"

Three strides and he'd crossed the wide room to wrap me up in a crushing bear hug. You'd almost think I'd been gone for a year rather than a week.

Now it was Tin's turn to clear his throat.

"Get lost, bean counter," was the only response he got from English. The squirrel was smart enough not to argue.

"What was all that about?" I squeaked as he pressed the air from my lungs.

"Huh?" A moment later he set me down. I had to lean against the wall to catch my breath.

"That? Just the paper pushers trying to take over the world again."

I gave him a hard glare. There was no need for me to say the name *Vanderhoom*.

"Nah, nothing like that, Mate. The bean counters are telling me that the company's unprofitable for the first time ever. And they won't shut up when I tell them to."

I cocked my head. "Really?"

For just a moment I saw something cross his face, then it was gone. In its place was the mask of easy confidence he always showed the world.

The same mask I'd learned to peek behind long ago.

"Never mind it, Mate. It's money they want? Let's earn some. I've got a hunt I've just been waiting on you for."

A moment later he'd fled the luxurious office like it was a cage. I had no choice but to follow.

To say this was an uninspired hunt would be an understatement.

English must have thwacked himself at some point while I was gone, for the moment we got out of sight of the SF building he started limping.

"I'm..." we were only a few blocks and he was breathing hard. Some of the sheen was gone from his golden coat, "Getting too old for this, Mate. Bugger. I really am, you know that?"

Reaching out a hand, I was surprised when he threw an arm over my shoulder. The English I'd meet a few years back would never have admitted physical weakness.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He snorted. "What? Everything." Then a moment later he laughed. "Okay, Mate, you've got me. It's not *that* bad, I'm just starting to feel my age at a bad time. Do you know who our mark is today?" I shook my head. "A parole jumper, Mate." He spat. "A bloody parole jumper. Not even a dangerous offender. Some lout who tried to steal a cart-full of machinery and got caught. Gods, for all we know the man could just be asleep in his bed, having forgotten to show up for court."

I cocked my head. "Why are we after him. Or, for a better question, why *you*? It's your company, you have the pick of the jobs. Why bother with something so trivial?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Because it's the only thing on the docket, Mate. You heard Tin back there, business isn't so great right now."

I almost laughed at that. "How do you figure? There's more immigrants in the city than ever before. Crime has to be on the rise."

He shook his head. "If you say so, Mate. Not that I've seen though. SF doesn't deal with *crime* per se, we only deal with a specific kind of problem. We deal with the stuff the cops don't want to."

The walk across town took a good two hours, the mark's home wasn't in the same high rent district as SF headquarters. You could see the money drop away with each block we walked. So we worked our way west, towards the docks. The city was rougher here, workmanlike, salt-of-the-earth and all that.

Finding the man's place wasn't all that tough. It was right where the address said it would be, on the fifth floor of a decaying walkup apartment. I almost had a flash back to my old place.

"Care to do the honers, Mate?" English asked, crouched behind me in the dark and narrow hallway.

The lion was panting now. The climb had not been good to him. And, oddly, in the dim light I could see the silver strands stand out vividly on his mane. Less than a year ago I would have taken great pleasure in pointing them out to him. Now, not so much.

"On it." A moment later I stepped up to the apartment door. I really hated doing this, but I didn't want to take the time to pick the lock.

Bracing one foot against the floor, I kicked out at the latch. My foot hit home with a solid crunch.

Particularly solid as *both* the door and my foot crunched.

Ow, ow, ow. Oh bugger.

Biting my tongue, I fell back into the hallway as the door swung sedately open.

"Herman Ruben, you're under arrest." Well, there was one thing in English that was going strong, his voice. I should have been the one to shout that line, but right now I was occupied with the sensation of all the little bones in my foot slowly popping back into place.

Thank the gods for regeneration.

Now that the hunt was on, the years seemed to drop from the lion. In the beat of a heart he was

past me, little more than a blur as he lunged through the door.

I caught only a flash of his face, but this was still a man I'd be more than hesitant to meet in battle. Teeth barred, ears down, he looked like the picture perfect ideal of a bounty hunter.

I couldn't see what happened next, but there was a crash and more than a little swearing. All of it English's.

A moment later I could make out his words again. "It's alright, Mate. Clear. No one's home."

Limping around the door, I had to lean on the frame to keep upright. Every so often my body twitched as another bit of my poor foot slipped back into place.

The apartment wasn't much to speak of. Dull gray walls and dirt brown furniture, both likely older than I, were all there was to see.

And sitting on the floor in the middle of it, amongst the tatters of what must have recently been a geriatric end table, sprawled English, pulling splinters from his fur.

What a sight we must have looked, two of V-town's most famous bounty hunters, and we were both down for the count, nearly put out of action by an empty room.

"Find anything, buddy?" I asked as I nosed around the kitchen yet again. I could pick up our mark's scent, a monkey I'd wager, but hadn't the slightest where he might have gone.

There was no answer for a long moment, then English came limping in from the bedroom.

"Mayhaps, Mate," he said holding up a glass mug. It was adorned with the logo of some bar or another. "There were a dozen of these next to the bed. Looks like our friend might just be a professional drinker." He paused for a moment and flashed me a perfect white, if rather toothy, smile. "Care for a pint?"

The logo on the mugs wasn't exactly an original one. It was for a place I'd never heard of called 'The Blind Duck', but it was easy enough to find. All English had to do was offer a few coins to a crowd of kids near the front door of the apartment building and we were on our way two blocks down and one block over.

The brick facade on the front of the building was still cracked from the quake a few years ago. Someone had come by and plastered it up with a paste white mortar, but it clashed with the red bricks.

I could only assume the owner either didn't care or thought it somehow gave the place *character*.

English hid his limp away as we stepped up to the entrance. There had been a window in the door once. Now it was boarded over with a cheap piece of plywood.

"Looks just like a place for us, eh Mate?" English laughed. "I have a feeling I'll feel right at home here."

With that he pushed open the door and stepped into the smoky darkness within.

This place didn't even rate the neon signs that you see in most dive bars. All that illuminated the room were the more persistent beams of light that found their way through the gaps in the wall and a single dull incandescent bulb that hung back behind the bartender.

Even with my night vision I couldn't make out anything more than the vague shapes of the other patrons. And, frankly, once I got into a situation like this eyesight wasn't going to get me far. I was able to tell more from my nose now anyway. I couldn't tell who the other people were, but I knew *where* they were well enough by their body odor.

And I didn't feel like getting any closer to them.

Following behind English step for step, we bellied up to the bar. Somewhere, back around

when we'd entered the place, the lion's gait had changed.

When he'd been at SF he stood straight and proud, looking every inch a captain of industry. Then, while we'd been stalking around the mark's apartment he'd moved quick and sure, a hunter in motion.

Now? He slunched forward and all but stomped his way towards the bar. In the dim light I couldn't tell him from just another joe off the street, fresh from an eight hour shift at the docks.

"Hey, some service?" English's voice had lost its upper-crust accent, replacing it was a wide, unremarkable slur. The voice could have come from a bear as easily as it could a moose.

The bartender turned around a moment later. I couldn't make out his face with the light behind him, and I was sure English and I were positioned carefully enough that neither could he see ours.

"What can I get ya?" His voice had a deep reptilian rasp to it. It suited him perfectly. He was a gator.

English hardly even blinked. "A couple of whatever the house beer is."

A few seconds later our order was filled. I couldn't see the bill that English set on the bar, but I knew it wasn't what the bartender was expecting.

The fact the gator just sighed and shook his head made me smile.

"What is it you want?" Reaching out, he managed to pull a minor magic trick and make the bill disappear. "And for that matter, why is it *everyone* thinks it's a good idea to always come to people like me when they're looking for something?"

English snorted. "Because it's *people like you* that have the answers."

A few quick grunted words and English began talking to the bartender while he sipped his drink. I wasn't much interested in mine, so I turned to look around the bar. Well, that was useless. I'd almost forgotten just how dark it was in here.

I was about to turn back to the conversation when my nose twitched.

That was strange...

I couldn't quite place it, but there was something *off* about the scents in here. I knew it should be as plain as the nose on my face, but I couldn't quite put my claw on it.

I was about to think about it and take another breath when the tone of the bartender's voice changed. "Sorry, buds. I... ah, can't help you. Yeah, gotta go." With that the man tried to back away.

He got about half a step before English reached across the bar and grabbed him by the strings of his stained and worn apron.

"What's the problem, *friend*? Something you can't tell us?" With a sudden jerk the lion pulled him forward.

Taking in a deep breath, English sniffed the man. His eyes went cold.

"Where is he? I can smell him on you."

The gator let out a long sigh.

"Basement. He's my brother-in-law's son. He came here when he skipped court."

"Thanks, *friend*." English let him go a might bit gentler than he'd grabbed him. "And the stairs would be?"

The gator jerked his thumb.

And I thought the bar was dark.

The stairs were over in a corner of the room. My nose kept twitching all the way there. I told myself it was just the scent of my mark, but it wouldn't listen.

Pulling up the trap door, I descended into the pitch blackness, English at my back.

My whiskers *should* have been of help here, but my half-human half-wolf body defeated their

purpose. I had to stumble forward with my hands stretched out before me. Thankfully, the hallway wasn't long. There was a door just a couple of turns ahead. Light spilt out from behind it.

Letting English nimbly step ahead of me, I could see his silhouette as he crouched before the door.

I didn't feel like breaking my foot again.

He smashed into the flimsy wooden door, it shattered before him.

"You're under arrest!" In the darkness his voice sounded as strong as that of an avenging god.

The primate yip from the other side of the room told me that we'd found our mark at last.

I was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the man started throwing things at us. I hate it when they fight.

The bar wasn't so dark when, twenty minutes later, English and I climbed the steps back up. Someone, likely the barkeep, had turned on the overhead lights. It wasn't exactly *bright* in here, but at least now I could see my hand in front of my face.

English had the monkey, bound and gagged and out cold, thrown over his shoulder.

We stepped up into the bar expecting trouble. This was the only way back to the street and neither of us knew how the patrons would take to us dragging one of their own off.

Surprisingly, not a single one of them made a move towards us.

"Good riddance," I heard the gator mumble from behind us. "He was drinking all my stock and wasn't paying. I'd 'ave turned him in myself if my sister wasn't involved."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I wasn't really looking forward to another fight.

Half way to the front door, I took a closer look around me, trying to pin down what was still nagging at my nose.

Now I could see it.

Despite the barkeep being a gator, it looked like three quarters of the patrons in here were human. I wasn't sure if they recognized me in the relative darkness, but I remembered no small number of them.

And behind them hung the banners of the Human Defense League.

I suddenly felt the extreme need to get out of here. *Right now.*

It was only a few seconds before we made it to the door and out to the street, but it felt like hours.

Leaning back against the wall as I drew in a breath of fresh air, I couldn't help but think back to the League. The HDL and I were not exactly on the best terms.

They'd grown out of the Horseshoe Bay population, a group of humans who'd felt they'd been mistreated. Well, okay, they had a point there, but they'd *still felt* they'd been mistreated after my time as mayor.

And I'd put no small amount of effort into getting them on even footing with everyone else.

The HDL wasn't an illegal organization, but they were definitely on no too few watch lists. They'd been, among other things, manipulated by Brian Ferguson last year in an attempt to have me assassinated.

Yeah, I was glad to be out of there.

English didn't say a word as we started down the street, but I did notice him glance back a time or two more than he normally did.

I expected us to head back to SF headquarters to process the capture, but instead English led me to a downtown police station. It wasn't police HQ, but it was one of their larger locations.

We'd been here before, English favoured this station.

"Don't you have people who do this for you?" I asked.

He gave me a dour look. "I *did*, Mate. I used to have a whole department. I had to get rid of most of them in the last round of layoffs."

I didn't bother saying anything more.

We didn't have long to wait in line. That was good, our mark was starting to come to.

The police dogs here were fast and efficient, as it seems every cop in the city is. They were all pressed and perfect, professional in their dark blue uniforms. They were all German Shepherds. They all looked like Jon. Or Pine for that matter.

There was a pain in my gut when I thought of Jon. Gods, it's been forever since I last saw him. How must he be doing these days?

All of a sudden I felt like a cad. Jon had been one of the few people to stay by my side when I'd first become mayor. I wouldn't have lasted two days without him. But now that he'd been promoted to Commissioner of Police I was nowhere to be seen.

I *really* had to go see him.

A few moments later we were at the front of the line and English was manhandling our captive over to the cops. In return they wrote him a cheque.

I didn't quite get to see how much it was for, but even at this distance I could tell the amount was pitiful.

English was in a pissy mood when we left the station.

"You want to go for a snack?" I asked. That was a near fool-proof way to cheer him up.

He very nearly growled at me.

"Woah." I stepped back. I couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. "It's not so bad, Buddy. Here," I put an arm over his broad shoulders, "I'll pay."

With a sigh he rolled his eyes and forced a grin to his lips.

"What would I do without friends like you, eh Mate? I could use some happy food right now."

I was just about to swing us around the next corner towards the nearest fast food outlet when I heard the frantic scrape of someone running our way.

English and I turned in unison, instincts still running in hunting mode.

The pure white blur that sprinted our way though was no threat.

Well, no threat other than she seem determined to run right into me.

"Tommy!"

It was Molly, a pure white wolf. She was an old girlfriend of mine and a friend of Rebecca's.

"Tommy," she gasped again as she leaned against me, panting for breath. "You... you've got to..."

Rolling my eyes, I reached out to steady her. Molly was known to be a bit over dramatic.

"What is it?" I asked, gently guiding her off to the side of the road. People passing by were giving us odd looks.

"It's Rebecca..." she gasped out.

My blood ran cold.

"The appointment. They... they found something."

Oh bugger.

From behind me a felt a sharp shove. English's claws nearly cut into my back.

"Go, Mate. Go look after the Lass. I'll help Molly here."

I wasn't one to argue. Three seconds later I was already down the street and around the corner, sprinting the ten blocks to V-town General.

Those were perhaps the longest ten blocks of my life. And that was despite the fact I managed to clear them in superhuman time.

V-town General was likely the most modern building in all of Vancouver. We needed it. With dozens if not hundreds of species in the city we needed at least one place where we could all go for medical treatment.

And this was it.

There was a nice lawn out front of the steel and glass building, dotted with benches and garden paths. I ran past them without a second glance.

In through the wide front entrance, the doors boomed back on their hinges as I hit them full force.

It wasn't until I'd skidded to a stop in the middle of the lobby that I realized I hadn't the slightest idea where I was going. I didn't know where the obstetricians were, or even who to ask.

I nearly snapped when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

Whirling about, I saw an orderly standing there, a mouse by the look of it. It was hard to tell for certain with the shapeless scrubs he wore.

"Tommy Taggart?" he asked, voice meek.

I had to fight to keep my lips down. "Yes. Where is my wife?"

Turning, he gestured for me to follow him. Much to my annoyance he moved at only a brisk walk, not the sprint I would have preferred.

Down one set of hallways, across another and up a set of stairs, I was already lost and the heavy antiseptic scents of the hospital were clouding my mind, giving me an instant headache.

"Right this way, Sir," the orderly said. "She's waiting for you."

He pushed open a door to a small waiting room but didn't step in.

Two paces further and I had Rebecca in my arms. She, to be honest, looked rather surprised to see me.

"Tommy? Why are you here?"

I blinked. "Didn't they... but... Molly said there was trouble."

She snorted. "Right now the only *trouble* is the blasted doctor's left me waiting in this little room for over an hour and a half. I was just getting ready to leave." She paused for a moment before speaking again. "But I did come here with Molly. The last I saw her was before they took me in for an ultrasound."

"And that's what we have to talk about, Mr. and Mrs. Taggart." I'd never even noticed as a mountain lion in a lab coat joined us in the room. He had a name tag that read 'Dr. Peter Nesbit'.

I'll be honest, I took an immediate dislike to the man.

"What's the problem, Doc?" I asked.

The man sighed. "We got the images back from ultrasound. There seems to be an... oddity. I just wanted to make sure you were here when we presented them, Mr. Taggart."

I bristled. "Why?"

He cleared his throat and averted his eyes. "It might be best if you looked yourself."

With that he pulled a letter sized film from an envelope and tacked it up in front of a light box in the wall.

To be honest, it didn't look like much to me.

A grainy black and white image, all I could make out were a couple of indistinct blobs.

"Sorry, Doc," I said, "You're going to have to give me some help with these."

Glancing over to Rebecca, I took her hand. She held me tight.

The cat cleared his throat again.

"Ah, well, you see..." He reached forward with a claw, tracing the curve of the blob on the left hand side. "This is the outline of a fetus."

I cocked my head.

Rebecca beat me to the question. "Then what's the form on the right?"

The doctor shrugged. "A fetus."

"Oh." I said.

"So we have twins?" Rebecca asked, letting out a breath. "That's good news... I guess."

The doctor cleared his throat again. "Ah, yes... I suppose it is."

I closed my eyes. "But what? That's not what you called me here for."

The cat reached down and grabbed a hold of the end of his twitching tail. I'd never seen a man do that before.

"There is..." he gestured forward with his free hand, "Something more. Do you see this faint line here? That's the beginning of a tail. Normal for canine development at this stage."

My eyes nearly crossed as I tried to make out the blurry forms.

"Alright... but where's the other one's tail?" I asked.

The doctor was clearing his throat so often now that I almost thought he was having a coughing fit.

"That's just it, Mr. Taggert. The other fetus is... not what we'd expect. Do you see the head here? It's noticeably larger than the other fetus'. There's only one species who's head is of that size during this stage of development."

I blinked.

He didn't cough this time. "A human."

Okay, this is just something that *doesn't happen*.

Every time a human and a non-human get together the children are *always* the species of the non-human. That's just the way it is. That's why the human race has been shrinking for the last hundred years.

There are no exceptions.

Except that the ultrasound on the wall before us showed one wolf and one human fetus.

You know there has to be *something big* going on when the hospital brings in over two dozen doctors, one at a time, to look at the ultrasound and confirm we were seeing what we thought we were seeing.

I glanced over to Rebecca and yet another doctor shuffled out of the room with a bemused expression on his face.

We were both thinking the same thing. This had to have something to do with Edmonton.

The last of the conga line finally filed out, leaving just Rebecca, I, and Dr. Nesbit.

I was about to take Rebecca and get the two of us out of here when Dr. Nesbit discretely laid a hand on my shoulder and led me from the room. Well, I'd bet money on him *thinking* he was being discreet, but it's kind of hard to pull that off when Rebecca's the only other person in the room.

Closing the door behind us, he spared a quick glance up and down the corridor. There was no

one else in sight.

"Mr. Taggert," he cleared his throat again, if anything even more nervously. "In a case like this it might be easiest if we looked at the simplest solutions first." There was a expression look on his face. "I've never heard of a recorded case of a human giving birth to another human with a nonhuman father. While dual pregnancies from different sources are not unknown, it is a more likely explanation than..." He petered off a moment later. The man was watching me closely.

"Are you suggesting the cub could be mine and the human child someone else's?" I asked, trying to hold back a laugh.

"Well," he glanced up and down the hall again, "That would seem to be the simplest answer."

Reaching out, I set a hand on the cat's shoulder. He jumped, seemingly expecting me to slug him.

"Doc, have you ever dealt with humans before? I know they're a minority, but have you *ever* dealt with a human pregnancy?"

"Well... no. But I am, I can assure you, a qualified doctor," he replied, becoming indigent.

I didn't bother trying to hold back my smile now. "Sorry, Doc, no offense. But I can tell you right now the biology of a human is different than that of a feline. They have babies, not litters. You can't have a pregnancy with more than one father. It's just not possible. The kids are mine. Both of them."

"But that's not..." he began.

I patted him on the shoulder and turned to open the door. Rebecca was waiting for me within. The expression on her face told me she was as ready to get out of here as I was.

"We've been through a lot, Doc. Don't worry about it."

With that I stepped forward and offered Rebecca my hand. We turned and walked from the hospital without a glance back.

I think the Doc tried to stop us at some point, but he was smart enough not to lay a hand on me. Or Rebecca.

Back at the apartment, dinner was a rather subdued affair of whatever was laying around. We both knew she should be eating better with two kids on the way, but it was just too much to take in right now.

Laying awake next to her that night, sleep it seemed just wouldn't come to me. Rebecca had dropped off somewhere around midnight but I was still wide awake.

My one hand was draped over her, reaching down to cover the slight bump in her belly.

Then, all of a sudden I could feel something move.

And something else.

No, not something. *Someone*.

Sleep came easier to me after that.

Chapter 3: A New Breed of Cop

The next morning was, also, quieter than I would have liked it.

It wasn't that a dark cloud had fallen upon us, but simply that neither knew what to say.

That, and there was nothing left in the apartment to eat.

"Feel like breakfast out, Babe?" I asked.

She smiled as she pulled on a thin black top. "I don't think we have much of a choice, Wolfy. And," she paused for a moment, "I heard what the doctor said to you yesterday. Thanks for not believing him. You know I'd never do that."

I snorted.

"Babe, we've been together long enough now that I think it's just short of physically impossible for either of us to even think that." Reaching out, I kissed her forehead, pulling her close. "At least it is for me. Don't thank me, Babe. It's all just a matter of trust. You've saved my life enough times that I'm pretty sure you would have let me know if you were unhappy, eh?"

She just shook her head and punched me in the gut.

It was past rush hour by the time we got out on the street, but most places were still serving breakfast. I tried to get Pine to stay back at the apartment but he insisted on tagging along.

He must have heard about the pregnancy by now, even if he didn't mention it.

Stopping by one of the endless number of stalls, I picked up a pair of wraps that included everything from fried eggs to bits of apple in them. I figured we could both agree on that.

Taking another turn as we munched on our wraps, I must have misjudged. I *thought* this was the way to Stanley Park. Instead we found ourselves smack in the middle of an open air market.

I was about to turn around when Rebecca took my hand and led me forward with a laugh.

"Come on, Wolfy. We could use a little socializing after how long we spent up in the mountains."

The market was packed. Gods, I never remembered anything like this from a few years ago. Most of the people here spoke other languages I couldn't even begin to make out.

Bobbing and weaving through the crowds, I think we just about gave Pine an aneurysm as he tried to keep us in sight.

We were just passing yet another set of stalls when Rebecca came to an abrupt halt.

"What is it, Babe?"

She pointed out a hand to a pair of pint sized pajamas on display. One was blue, the other pink.

I just started laughing, pulling her close.

"Gods, Babe... I almost forgot. We'll have to remodel the apartment for *two* kids now!"

Her face pressed deep against the fur of my chest, I could feel her start to cry.

"What is it, Babe?" I whispered. We were surrounded by hundreds of people in the market, but for just that moment we were alone. I led her off to a corner of the street. Pine stepped up silently to make sure we had some space.

"It's nothing... nothing, Tommy." She worked a smile to her lips as she looked up at me. "It's just that things are getting crazy again. I'm worried for the babies now. A day ago everything was normal, now we're back into the gods know what."

I grinned. "Well, what were you expecting? I don't think we've had a *normal* thing happen to us since we met."

I kissed her cheek.

Turning, we were about to head off back through the market when my ears twitched.

What in the world?

I could hear the sound of running feet. That alone wasn't much, but these were no normal feet. I'd spent enough time around police dogs to know the perfect measured sound of their stride even when they were in full sprint.

The saving grace was that there only seemed to be one of them.

Pine picked up on the sound a moment after I did, his head jerking to the left.

Coming through the crowd full tilt was a German Shepard. Odd, despite the fact he showed every evidence of being a cop he wasn't in a blue uniform. Rather he was in the white dress shirt and dark slacks of a government employee.

Pine stepped up to intercept him as he came closer. The two dogs had a quick whispered conversation as Rebecca and I looked on.

Well, if there was any doubt about this guy being a cop it was gone now. The police had half a language to their own and this new dog spoke it fluently.

"Sir," Pine turned to me, "It would appear that this messenger has been sent to find you. There is a matter of some importance at City Hall that requires your immediate attendance."

I just let out a sigh.

"Fine." I spared Rebecca a peck on the cheek before stepping forward. "Pine," I looked to the police dog, "you'll watch Rebecca, won't you?"

"Of course, Sir. I guard her with my life."

I walked away shaking my head.

City Hall, thankfully, wasn't far from the market. We were there in about ten minutes.

The building wasn't grand and regal, not like the old place before the quake, but it was stately enough, in a downplayed and sedate kind of way.

Walking up the front steps, it felt like a equal parts of coming home and stepping into a dungeon.

The fact I'd helped build this place notwithstanding.

The number of people I recognized, and even more who recognized *me*, on the way through the halls was uncanny. It was like it hadn't been a day since I'd stepped down.

Up on the top floor, I tried to straighten my fur before turning the last corner to the office

labeled 'Mayor'.

What in all the gods' names was Max getting me into *this* time.

Alright, that was anticlimactic.

Why in the world had they called me in the first place?

"Sorry about that, Tommy," Max said, sitting down in his richly appointed leather chair. The mayor's office wasn't all that plush, but his chair was the exception. And I could forgive that. I knew from past experiences that the one thing you really needed after fighting your way through hour after hour of endless bickering meetings was a soft seat to plant yourself in.

Max didn't look as run out as he used to, but the lines were still apparent under his eyes.

"I guess I dragged you all the way up here for nothing," he continued. "It's just whenever we have a problem involving the cops I really don't feel all that confident handling it myself."

What Max was politely saying was that he didn't want to step on the toes of the V-town police department, and would rather have me do it now that I was friends with their commissioner.

Max knew just how powerful the cops could be.

I waved him off as I took a seat across from him. My chair was nice, but nowhere as awesome as his.

"Don't worry about it. I know things can get a little... complicated when the cops are involved. We can just be glad it was a case of mistaken identity. But, then again," I said, stifling a yawn, "Why in all the gods' names did *we* have to deal with this? Issues like this are the kind of things the cops should be dealing with internally. Or at least you should just be able to pass the message on to Jon and wash your hands of it."

Max frowned, folding his hands on the desk before him.

"That's a good question, Tommy. You haven't heard anything from Police HQ lately, have you?"

I cocked my head. "No. Why, should I have? I just got back into town yesterday."

Max sighed. "Something's gone strange. The cops are still out there doing their job, but... it's not quite right. I haven't heard from the Commissioner, or anyone in his office for that matter, in over a week."

That made me sit up and take notice. The Commissioner and Mayor should be talking almost every day.

"That's a good question, Max." I set my jaw. This wasn't going to be fun. "Let's find out."

Finding the dog who had led me here, I tried to get the story out of him. He was about as helpful as a paving brick. At first he denied even being a cop, he claimed just to be an aid. I blew that story apart quickly enough when I started barking orders at him. He reacted just as a police dog should.

Next he told me he was under orders not to discuss the matter. When I asked him *who I could ask* he refused to answer even that much.

To say I was pissed off when I left Max's office would be an understatement.

He was a police dog for the gods' sakes. I was the City Administrator. They were supposed to answer my questions. I just wanted to know where Jon was. It wasn't like I was trying to pry into their deepest and darkest secrets.

I'd already done *that* last year. I didn't feel like taking that particular tour again anytime soon.

I'd already been in a bad mood when I was led here. Now, stalking back out, I was just a hair

away from growling.

All the people who had smiled and waved at me on the way in kept their distance now. I didn't have much of reputation around City Hall, but everyone knew to leave this unassuming little brown wolf well enough alone when he was pissed.

It wasn't far to Police HQ, only a few blocks, but it gave my temper enough time to cool off a few degrees.

And I noticed something as I walked.

This was the heart of downtown, accordingly there was a police dog at almost every intersection, standing in the shadows. Watching.

It's been that way since before I was born. Most of the time we all just took it for granted. Now I watched them a bit more closely as I passed by. And there was something not right.

Now don't get me wrong, it wasn't anything big and noticeable. But there was just *something* there. The way they stood, the way they shifted their weight. There was something just not right. The normally rock solid mask of the police force was still in place, but it was just a hair loose and trembling ever so slightly.

I walked faster.

Police HQ was a truly massive building. It took up a whole city block, its unassuming red brick walls rising three stories up and dove at least five underground.

I trembled slightly as I thought of some of the things that had been done in the cold, dark depths of those basement floors.

There was only a single public entrance to the building, a small wooden door in the center of the front wall. All the other entrances and exits were disguised, scattered throughout other nearby buildings that the HQ connected to via underground tunnels like a massive red brick octopus.

Stepping thorough into the simple, nearly unfurnished waiting room, I was rather surprised how empty it was.

The room could easily hold a hundred people between its plain red brick walls, and I'd seen many a person waiting for help on its worn wooden benches. But today there was only a single other person in here with me.

A fox stood in front of the service counter, talking to the police dog on duty. I couldn't help but pick up on their conversation as I lined up behind him.

"I just want to know where my son is!" the man said, his voice was frantic. "He was arrested for stealing a candy bar. I'll pay bail, I'll do whatever you want, I just want to know he's safe."

The officer on duty was, unsurprisingly, another German Shepard. He looked just like all the other cops. His voice, when he spoke, was near perfect and clipped, but I could detect something *off* with it.

"I understand, Sir, but I'm sorry to say I can't help you at this time. I can assure you that if your son was arrested then he's perfectly safe, but the service regrets to inform you that we can not help you at this time."

"Why?" The fox sounded like he was on the verge of leaping over the counter and throttling the cop.

"Because we have more important things to worry about!"

The fox and I must have jumped a good six inches in the air when the officer snapped.

That's... that's just not something the police did.

The fox didn't say another word as he turned around and made for the door as fast as his legs

could carry him. The cop couldn't have gotten him to move faster if he'd slapped him.

For the span of a handful of seconds I simply stood there, stunned.

The cop stayed where he was, planted behind the desk, and raised his shaking hands to smooth down his pelt that had raised during the outburst.

And it was then I realized he was the only cop in sight. I'd never seen the HQ's reception room, no matter how busy or quiet, with less than three officers manning it.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward.

"How may I help you, citizen?" came the police officer's familiar opening. Only I noticed his words were quivering.

"I'd like to see Commissioner Jon Oaks," I said, keeping my voice level.

"No." The man's response was instant and unequivocal. But more than that... I could hear the fear come bubbling up. His eyes narrowed when he spoke.

I couldn't see it, but I'd bet you whatever you want his tail curled around his leg when I said Jon's name.

I narrowed my eyes. "I am City Administrator Tommy Taggart. I am formally requesting a meeting with the V-town commissioner of police."

"And you have been denied." His voice was firmer.

You know, I really didn't have any idea what to say now. I'd never had a police dog deny me something like this since becoming Administrator.

But I'd be buggered if I was just going to give up and walk away.

"There is something wrong with the force, officer," I said, lowering my voice to let in just the hint of a growl. "You *will* see to it I have a meeting with the commissioner."

If I'd been expecting the dog to cower before me I was good and well mistaken.

The police dogs always walked around like someone had shoved a iron rod under their tails, but now this one straightened like I'd just told him I'd raped his mother. I wasn't sure what words were on his lips, but I never got the chance to find out. A heartbeat later the door beside him banged open.

And into the waiting room marched Assistant Commissioner Baker. "Mr. Taggart, if you would be so kind as to follow me." It wasn't a request, it was an order.

I decided this wasn't the time to complain. Any progress was good progress.

Following the Assistant Commissioner deeper into the building, I had just a moment to glance back at the dog that still stood behind the reception desk.

He looked as mortified as I about what had just happened.

But that was the key. What was it that had just happened?

Following Baker down a few twists and turns of the Police HQ, it became obvious we weren't on our way to Jon's office. He was on the third floor. We were only on the second.

The fact I knew the way to Jon's office in these unmarked, whitewashed hallways was testament to how many times I'd made the journey.

"Baker..." I reached forward to grab the dog's shoulder. He flinched away before I touched him.

"If you'd just humour me for a moment, Sir." There was a tremor to his voice. I decided not to object.

A moment later we were through yet another unmarked doorway and into a – like all the others – sparsely appointed office.

Though I could tell you this had to be Baker's office. It was a touch bigger than the normal officer's offices I'd seen before. And had a bigger desk to hold all the paper work.

"Please, Mr. Taggart," he said, letting out a long breath, "Would you take a seat?"

For just a moment I smiled. This office was one of the most – if you'll pardon the term – *human* I've ever seen in Police HQ. The walls were as bare as every other, but the mass of papers that covered the desk made it look like a man worked here, and not an automaton.

The hard wooden seat was uncomfortable, but I was used to that my now. The only office in the whole place with padded seats was Jon's, and that was at my insistence.

"Alright, Baker," I said, keeping my tone civil, "Are you going to tell me what in all the gods' names is going on?"

The dog's already pinched face grew more strained. "I'm sorry, Mr. Taggart. You know I would do anything I could for you, but you must simply take my word for it that Commissioner Oaks is unavailable at the moment and may remain that way for... some time."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Is Jon dead?" I had to suppress a shudder.

Baker's reaction was visceral enough to answer my question. His mouth nearly dropped open. "No! That is to say... no, Sir. You have my personal word that Commissioner Jon Oaks is alive. Simply... unavailable."

I sighed. "Then what's happened? He's my friend, Baker. You know I have the right to be told. And whatever happened to him is affecting the force's performance. We had a problem down at City Hall Jon could have sorted out in seconds. Instead it took me a good hour."

Baker averted his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Taggart. I can't tell you. You simply need to take my word for it that he is alright and the force is doing *everything* we can to help him. That is... ahem... why we are operating at reduced capacity."

I lowered my head for a moment. "So you brought me all the way up here just to tell me you can't tell me?"

At that the dog worked up at least the shadow of a smile. "I had to, Sir. The officer at the front desk was not trained to answer sensitive questions like this. And, to be honest, we're all under undue stress at the moment."

I took a closer look at him as he said that. I could see the bloodshot veins in his eyes and the worn way he held his ears.

There are some battles, I've learned, that I'm just not going to win. At least not just now.

"Fine." I stood up. "Will you at least pass the message I was here onto Jon?"

He nodded, the relief of my acceptance obvious in his motions.

"Of course, Sir. I'm sure he will be happy to hear you were looking for him."

I was just about to turn and leave the office when a thought came to mind.

"Oh, and Baker, where's Able? Shouldn't he have been the one to receive me with Jon out of action?"

Baker's tongue came out to lick his nose. "That *would* be proper procedure, Sir. But I'm sorry to say we've had to make some changes. Assistant Commissioner Able is occupied at the moment. I am the most senior officer available."

And that was pretty much that.

Next thing I knew Baker had escorted me out of the building and I was once again out on the street, alone.

Okay, now what?

I was starting to wander my way home when I realized I was close to a house I hadn't been to in sometime.

My uncle Gowan, the current Hunter's Alpha.

I had no idea if he'd be at home at this hour, but there was only one way to find out.

His home was, unsurprisingly, somewhat like my parent's.

Off on a small side street, it was, however, quite a bit larger and more impressive.

Now don't get me wrong, it's no mansion, but it's a fair bit nicer than the modest bungalow my Dad bought so many years ago.

Walking up the gravelled front pathway, I took the ten strides to get to the big white door.

There was one thing that both this home and my parent's had in common. The sense of peace.

I paused there in front of the door for a moment, listening. We were in the middle of the city, but yet the only sound that came to my ears was the gentle brush of the wind through the trees and the occasional call of a bird.

Some small measure of the stress dropped from me as I rapped my knuckles on the door.

A few moments later I heard something heavy crash to the ground followed by a muffled curse.

Too be honest, I was a little surprised. I hadn't really been expecting Gowan to be home.

A few moments later the door clicked open. Within stood my uncle, leaning on the frame and holding one foot clenched in a hand.

"Tommy!" His face alight when he saw me. "What are you doing here?"

I smiled as he ushered me in to the spacious front room. Everything was neat and clean and trendy. Gowan, a beta to the bitter end, was always one to keep up on the latest fashions.

"I was just in the neighbourhood," I replied. "I thought I should drop by and let you know I was back in town." The next words took some effort to force from my lips. "I am a hunter, after all. And you're my alpha."

His eyes clouded over when I said that. He shook his head. "Don't you get started too, Tommy. You know..." He sighed. "You know I'm not a real alpha."

I cocked my head as we walked deeper into the house. He was limping, leaning on my shoulder to avoid putting weight on his wounded foot.

"You're not giving yourself credit, Gown. You ran the hunters for years after Dad hurt his leg. There's no one else in the city who's anywhere as qualified as you."

He snorted.

I was about to head into the front sitting room when Gown gave me a tap and we turned to the kitchen instead.

"You know Griss never really left the hunters, Tommy. This is... well, this is the first time I've been alone. Even on his death bed your father was helping me run things. He did things I never could. Inspire people, lead them, plan. That's just not the kind of stuff I'm good at. He always planned. I made the plans happen." For a moment he laughed. "That's likely where you got it from. Only the son of an alpha could ever be mayor."

We were in the kitchen now. It was a big, fully furnished room almost the size of my whole apartment. A flagstone floor and dark, wood paneled walls complimented the brushed steel appliances.

And sitting on the table was the better part of a ton of paper. The whole surface was covered with reports, maps, and books.

And laying on the floor next to a table was a tome that looked like it weighed a good fifteen pounds.

I reached down and put it back on the table. It was aged and leather bound. The plain writing on the cover read 'The laws and customs of the Hunters of the Greater Vancouver Area'.

Gowan chuckled as I brushed a hand over it.

"Your father wrote that a good forty years ago. Well, he *started*. We've been adding to it ever since. I had to look back at the laws. I've got some young cat who's contesting the hunting range assigned to him. The gods only knew how your dad was able to remember all the rules and bylaws."

"What's he contesting?" I asked. "Is someone else hunting in his territory?"

"Yeah," Gowan replied, limping to a chair. "He thinks someone else is poaching in his range."

I flipped the book open, feeling it's worn pages slip between the rough pads of my fingers.

"That's chapter twenty-seven. Disputes on territories and pack granted lands. Right here." I pointed to the passage with a claw.

Gowan's eyes grew wide. "How did you find that? I've been looking for that for two hours!"

I took a seat next to him and shrugged. "I grew up with my dad. I was there when he wrote some of these laws. They're practically bedtime stories to me."

I stopped to snort for a moment. The term 'wrote' is a little bit of a misnomer here. My father had been illiterate. Many of the laws were written in english, but not by my father's hand. All of his work had been in pictograms and drawings.

About three hours later we had worked out his answer to the territory dispute.

Gowan may have his answer, but it was I who found the proper passages. And it was I who told him who was in the right and who was in the wrong.

And the smile on the other wolf's face couldn't be wider.

"You're more like your father than anyone's ever told you, Tommy," Gowan said, leaning back in his chair, picking the last scraps off a bone he'd pulled from the refrigerator as a snack. "Having you here, it's almost like..." He petered off after that, voice fading away. "Tommy. I'm sorry."

Huh?

"About what?" I asked.

Closing his eyes, he sat up straight.

"Last year. The poisons that almost killed you. The ones that devil Brian Ferguson found. He stole them from me."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. Really. I came out of it okay, and it's not your fault someone robbed you. You had them just as safe as my dad did. It could just as well been him."

"Thanks, Tommy." He looked at me, eyes tired. "You don't know what that means to me. The thought I almost caused you to... I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd been responsible for your death."

Reaching out, I set my brown furred hand atop his black. It was only then I noticed the traces of grey showing through.

Back out on the street again, it was getting close to five. I'd best be heading home if I wanted to catch Rebecca in time for dinner.

And bugger it all, *this* was supposed to be the day we sat down and talked about the babies. How in all the gods' names had I managed to forget about *that*?

The walk from Gowan's place to mine was a bit of a hike, but I made it in good time. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to just be able to walk from one place to another without a guard watching over my shoulder or some new crisis demanding my attention.

Stepping through the front doors of the lobby, Pine was there waiting for me.

"Is it even worth me asking you what happened to Jon?" I said, not really expecting an answer.

"Commissioner Oaks?" He cocked his head. "I'm sorry, Sir. I really don't know. Has something happened? I've been isolated from the force somewhat since taking on this position. I've not been informed about anything happening to the Commissioner."

I just sighed and shook my head. Sometimes the cops were just a little too efficient for their

own good.

Into the apartment, the scent of takeout was heavy in the air.

"Babe," I stepped up behind Rebecca sitting at the kitchen table, "whatever did I do to deserve you?"

I was just about to break into the little white boxes when something nagged at the back of my brain.

There had been a scent out in the hallway, just outside the door.

I hadn't noticed it at first, it had been so familiar that it just faded into the background. Now that I thought about it there was something... wrong with it.

"Just a second, Babe," I said, heading back to the apartment door.

She put down her fork and turned to me. "What is it, Wolfy? It must be something big to distract you from food."

I didn't answer. Three steps from the door, I heard a knock.

And now I knew something was wrong. The scent I'd picked up before was stronger now. Whoever it was stood just on the other side.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

And there stood a human.

I blinked.

He was tall and thin with tightly cropped brown hair and piercing blue eyes. His skin was a pale white as though it'd never seen the sun. He stood still as stone, watching me.

And he was dressed in a baggy police officer's uniform that was at least three sizes too big for him. There was no name on the breast.

"May I come in?" His words were perfect, but his diction was off, as though he wasn't used to speaking.

I took a deep breath. I *knew* him.

Flexing my fingers, making sure my claws were free, I asked, "Who are you?"

He took a glance up and down the hallway nervously. "Please, Tommy," his voice was little more than a whisper, "let me in."

For just the flash of an instant I saw the scared, defenceless face of a friend in need under the soft lights of the hallway. "Get in here." I stepped aside.

He skuttered in, and with that motion I recognized him.

Rebecca was standing now. "Who is it?" She looked at him at a loss.

I closed the door softly behind me and the human jumped as if I'd slammed it.

For a long moment he didn't speak. He simply walked about the apartment, pulling down blinds and making sure all the windows and doors were locked.

When at last he stilled I could see the effort it took him to sit at the table and fold his hands before him.

His voice was soft and trembling when he spoke.

"I am Jon Oaks."

I pulled up a stool next to him as I glanced over to Rebecca.

There was only one question on my lips. "Project Phoenix?"

He nodded glumly.

'Phoenix' was what the police called their attempt to recreate the technology that had caused the Cataclysm in the first place. Rebecca, English, and I had discovered the computers that had caused it. For the better part of two years the police had been working to understand the phenomenon. I was

getting the sneaking suspicion they'd had a breakthrough.

"Prove it," Rebecca said from beside me. Her voice wasn't hard, but it was obvious she didn't believe him. She couldn't smell his scent like I could.

For just a moment he had that deer in the headlights look. Then, like the man I knew he was, his brain kicked into gear.

"Tommy," he turned to me, "I was the one to call you over the radio when you were in Edmonton. I was the one who doubted you when you said you'd been turned into a human and Rebecca into a cat. I... I was the one to relay it when your father had a heart attack."

I glanced over to Rebecca. She nodded, satisfied.

"Welcome to the transformation club, Jon." I put my arm over his shoulders. He shied away for just a moment before relaxing. "It's a pretty exclusive group."

We welcomed Jon to our takeout. I wasn't sure what he was eating these days, but he took to the food like a drowning man to a lungful of air. I think he managed to eat more than I did.

It was only between mouthfuls of chowmein that we were able to get the story out of him.

"The machinery came in last spring," he said, "You know that much. But it took us months to get even a single one of the systems operational. Even getting them adapted to the power we use here in V-town was a challenge. The systems are all over a hundred years old. The fact *any* of them work is a miracle."

"And that's what we've had the finest minds on the force working on for the last year." He paused for a moment to chew on a bun. It was obvious he didn't know how to get it down. I felt pity for him. Trying to get used to a whole new set of teeth is not fun.

"Why'd it take a year?" I asked. "The three of us were able to get the systems up and running in a day when we were in Edmonton. All we had to do was radio Ornithi and he walked us right through it."

Jon looked away, blushing. I'd never seen him blush before.

"You got it right there, Tommy. I didn't even know of the project until right before I took over the force. My uncle had... his own opinions on exactly how it should be handled. He wanted it to be controlled from beginning to end by the force, no outside influence whatsoever. He even made the hunters who helped us carry it here swear to silence."

"And that, in a nut shell, was why we didn't get anywhere. Not a single member of the force has a sufficient education in electronics. We were all at a loss but too proud to admit it." He snorted. "Or, I should say, we *were* at an impasse. I resolved that as soon as I took control."

I shook my head. "Jon, why didn't you tell us what was going on?"

He sighed. "I was going to, Tommy. Truly I was. But you already knew we had the equipment and until just recently we'd yet to accomplish anything of value."

I gave him a look up and down, taking in his dead-fish white skin.

"I'd say you managed to accomplish *something*."

He laughed. The sound was uncanny coming from him. I'd heard Jon laugh, rarely. This was nothing like the soft chuckle I remembered. He laughed so hard tears came to his eyes.

"You're right, Tommy. Oh gods, you're right. I was invited down two weeks ago to witness a demonstration. It didn't," he laughed again, tears coming freely now, "it didn't go as planned. I was in the front of the crowd, given the best view of the machine. When I came to," he closed his eyes, "When I came to I was surrounded by dogs."

"What?" Rebecca asked.

Jon shrugged, forcing a watery smile to his lips. "When I came to again I was one of only a

handful who'd changed. Almost everyone else in the force was unaffected. When I woke up again, it couldn't have been more than a minute later, I wasn't surrounded by the force anymore, not my friends and extended family. I was surrounded by a pack of dogs."

"It wasn't them who had changed, Tommy. It was *me*. They were exactly the same as they'd been before. But I was no longer one of them." The sucked in a deep, trembling breath. "They knew who I was, and I them, but the *connection* was gone. Tommy, I've been trapped, just short of a prisoner of my own men because I can't *communicate* with them. They know who I am, on an intellectual level, but they can't accept I'm still the Commissioner."

I cocked my head. "Why?"

He gestured to me. "There. That. I know that motion, but I have to *think* about it. A cock of the head, the folding of an ear, the twitch of a whisker. *I can't do that anymore. It's no longer part of who I am.* And that's not even to include the scents and unconscious twitches of a tail. I'm no longer what I was. Practically the entire force is canine. You once asked me why that was. Now, now I know. We all speak one language."

Reaching out, I set a hand on his. "But *I* can understand you well enough."

He shrugged. "You're not a officer. The force is a strict hierarchy. There are expectations and obligations. To us it's quite literally second nature. Now it's lost to me. And," he worked up a grin, "You have more experience dealing with humans and their idiosyncrasies than most people."

Sparing a glance over to Rebecca, I snorted. "Well, you could say that."

Getting up from the table, I walked to the window, tugging the blind aside with a claw.

Down below I could see at least three different packs of police dogs scouring the street. They all had their noses to the ground.

I'd never seen the cops move like that. Their actions were quick and frantic, missing all their normal precision.

"Jon, did you cover your trail on the way here?" I asked.

"No," he said from behind me. "It... it never occurred to me. I'd forgotten about my scent."

I let the blind fall back into place as I returned to the table. "Then we'd better keep the conversation going while we still have time. What have you been doing since the transformation? Gods, don't tell me they locked you in a cell."

Jon shook his head. "Nothing quite so barbaric. I am still the commissioner, technically. No one will follow my orders directly though. I was put on a leave of medical absence and reprimanded to a secure holding zone in the third sub-basement. They weren't *trying* to impresen me, but they couldn't let me free and had no idea what to do with me in this form. I'm the Commissioner and the force *needs* a commissioner, and alpha."

"And that's where Able was?" I asked.

He nodded. "He was there with me. I'd write an order, and he'd issue it. Translating it into a proper command for the force, so to speak."

"Then how'd you get here?" Rebecca asked.

Jon hid a shy smile. "I was told you'd come to see me today, Tommy." The smile died away as quickly as it'd come. "And when they wouldn't allow me to talk to you... That's when I knew I was a prisoner no matter what they said."

For just a moment a glimmer of pride appeared in his eyes.

"I decided it was time I took leave of the station." There was something in his voice as he said that. It was *Jon*, don't mistake me, but it wasn't the *police dog Jon*, it was the *human Jon* who said those words. The dog I knew would never have betrayed the force like that.

"They never even expected it," he continued. "I waited until Able was away, then crept out

behind the very backs of those set to watch over me.” The smile that slipped from him now would have looked predatory if he'd still been canine. “It was only a matter of moments until I was free. I have no doubt the force will be by presently to collect me, but I escaped. That's what matters.”

And, by the sound of the footfalls out in the hallway, I'd say Jon was right. The only people who could ever step so perfectly were police dogs.

A moment later there was a polite knock at the door.

I glanced over to Jon. He just shrugged, not getting up.

Opening the door, Pine stood at the head of a column of dogs. He was doing his best not to make it obvious, but he was holding them back.

“Mr. Taggert,” his voice was strained. “The officers here would like to speak to you. They are searching for an escaped...” he coughed before he could say the word *prisoner*.

“That's fine, Pine. Let them in. I have nothing to hide.” I stepped aside, letting them see Jon sitting at the table. “Rebecca and I were just having dinner with our good friend Jon Oaks.” I lowered my voice, “The Commissioner of Police.”

Chapter 4: Pot Marks and Ashes

That was a month ago, and right now I had problems closer to home to deal with.

Namely rearranging the furniture *again*.

“Rebecca, Babe,” I pleaded, trying to catch my breath as I moved one of the cribs against a different wall, “Aren’t *I* supposed to be the one with the denning instinct?”

That got me a soft slap across the back of the head.

“We were only planning for *one*, Tommy. And a wolf at that. You know we have to get this right.”

I grinned and rolled my eyes. “Whatever you say, Babe.” Reaching forward, I had to lean in to get around her bulging belly to kiss her.

She had another appointment at the hospital, but I promised to keep working.

Out in the kitchen, not even *that* room was free from getting rearranged.

Reaching down to move a stool, I noticed it felt heavier than it should.

That was odd.

Flipping it over, I noticed the padding under the seat had been sliced open and was now over stuffed.

Worming a hand into the opening, I could hear the rustle of papers.

What in all the gods' names?

A moment later my hand came back clutching a dozen or so sheets. And in their top left corner was the logo of the V-town police department.

I had to pause and blink for a moment. This was the same seat Jon had been sitting on. What was he playing at?

It was about a half hour later English arrived. I'd sent out a messenger to find him.

“What ya got, Mate?” He asked, stepping into the apartment. “The bloody rabbit would just tell me that you had something you wanted to show me.”

I was starting to feel a bit like Jon now, going around the apartment, checking to make sure all the blinds were closed.

I handed him the papers I'd found. He just about went cross eyed.

"Uh, Mate, that's great. What are they?"

I scowled. "What do you think? There from the police department. Jon must have left them here." English was one of the only people I'd told about Jon's visit.

He sighed. "That's great, Mate. So what? In case you haven't noticed, I don't do paperwork. Or have your forgotten what got us in that mess with Vanderhoom?"

I growled.

Okay, I'll admit it. Maybe the golden lug had a point.

I'd thought reading these papers wouldn't be much of a problem. Hey, I'd been *mayor* for gods' sake. I should be able to decode just about any overwrought jargon.

Yeah, I got about three paragraphs in before getting good and truly lost.

I was able to pick out references to 'Prometheus' every now and then, and I knew that was the police department's plan to develop the Cataclysm technology, but there were also references to 'Iapetus' whatever in all the gods' names *that* was.

"I think, Mate," English said, stifling a yawn, "That you called the wrong person. Neither you nor I were there when the dogs salvaged this stuff. We used it, then we broke it. That's where our story ends. You need someone who was there when they tried to get it back up and running again."

I was just about ready to start snapping. "Who we need is *Jon*, but there's no way the cops will ever let me talk to him again."

English raised an eye ridge. "Didn't you say something once about your cousin tagging along on the cop's journey to Edmonton?"

And that was how I found myself, an hour later, with Lucy sitting in my kitchen.

"What is it, 'cuz?" She was older now, but still spoke and moved like a teenager. One of the best hunters in the entire city and she looked like she was barely eighteen.

"You were with the police when they went to Edmonton?" I asked.

She shrugged and nodded her head. "Yes. Didn't give them much choice. Good thing too. They didn't know how to survive outside the city. They never would have made it there, likely back, without help."

"What happened out there, Lucy?"

She reached up and scratched behind one of her upstanding ears.

"Well, that's the stick. I had to sign off on a paper when we got back saying I wouldn't tell anyone about it."

I sighed and leveled her with a stare. "Lucy, you know I'm the City Administrator. The old dog Sayer wouldn't let me retire. That's makes me the single ranking government official in the city. Above the cops."

She grinned. "I never was much of one for following orders."

I smiled back. "Must have something to do with being the daughter of the beta."

She cuffed me in the ears before settling back down.

"Sorry to tell you there's not much to say, 'cuz. We went up there, followed your trail and spoke to most of the same people you did." She paused for just a moment when English and I exchanged glances. "Except in Calgary. There was no one there."

"Once we got to Edmonton," she continued, "We found the same hole in the ground you did. I'm not too sure what happened after that, only the dogs went down. They came back up with a good dozen crates full of the gods knew what and we all had to strain our backs to haul the stuff back here.

And I'll tell you, whatever they were, they were *heavy* pulling them across the Rockies.”

I huffed out a breath. “That's all you know? No idea if any of the stuff was still working or what they took?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, Tommy. They wouldn't let me look in the crates no matter how hard I nagged. And the one time I tried to sneak a look they threatened to arrest me.” She laughed. “Right out there in the middle of nowhere, they threatened to arrest me.”

She was gone soon after, out hunting again. That just left English and I alone in the apartment with the papers.

“Any idea what 'Iapetus' is?” I asked.

English shook his head, mane rustling.

“Not a clue, Mate. Sounds like it might be Greek or something like that. You want East African, Japanese, or British mythology and I might be able to help you, but Greek isn't my thing.”

I sighed. “We'll just have to get a hold of Jon again and figure out what in all the gods' names they have going on in that HQ of there's.”

Not having anything better to do with the papers, I stuffed them in the bottom of one of my government dispatch pouches. That was as good a place as any. *No one* ever looks there.

I was just about to invite English out for some lunch when a knock came at the apartment door.

Opening it, I already knew who'd be standing there. It was the hard, perfect knock of a police dog. Though, oddly, Pine wasn't among the half dozen officers standing in the hallway.

“Sir.” The dog at the front of the pack nodded to me with a sharp, quick motion. “We are here to ask you about your... visitor.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What about him? What happened to Jon?”

The dog ignored me as if I hadn't said a word.

“We have discovered documents missing from Police Headquarters. It is possible that the person who visited here may have had them. We need to search the premises.”

I narrowed my eyes. “And why should I let you do that? This is my home. You have no right to come in here.”

It was a foolish response, I knew, but the thought of the dogs pawing through *my* things caused my hackles to rise.

“Sir,” he pulled a paper from one of his breast pockets, “We have a order from Assistant Commissioner Able to search your apartment.” For just a moment his face softened. “I'm sorry. This is critically important.”

And that was pretty much that. They didn't push me aside, but neither would they move until I let them in.

English stood off to one side, watching. He didn't say a word.

I'll give the dogs credit, they knew how to do a search.

The six of them managed to cover every square inch of the apartment in less than half an hour. And when I say every square inch I mean *every* square inch.

With the exception of my government dispatch pouches. They looked under and around them, but never so much as asked to see what was within.

That was the one thing I could count on with the V-town police. They followed their orders to the letter. They weren't allowed to look at classified government documents, so it was as if the pouches didn't even exist.

They found the slit under the bar stool, but there was nothing there now.

"You know, Mate," English said around a mouthful of cold cuts, "I would have smacked them a good one for trying a trick like that, order or not."

We were seated in Cafe Bristol, a platter laid out before us. I was working out some of my stress by tearing apart a leg of beef.

"Don't get me started, buddy. I'm going to be heading back to Police HQ and see if I can force my way in this time. I already know what happened to Jon, so it's not like they can hide him from me again."

English snorted. "To each their own, Mate. Their den would be the last place I'd be headed. The mutt might be a decent enough fella, but the rest of them are still downright buggers as far as I'm concerned. Sure you wouldn't rather go on a hunt with me?"

I cocked my head as I ripped a shred of beef off the leg before me.

"A hunt? I thought business was down."

He shrugged. "It is. Just not as down as it was a few weeks ago. We're still below average, but things look like they might be ticking back up again."

Bidding English farewell, I tried not to think about what broken bones the lion might sport next time I saw him. He'd still shown signs of what happened last time we'd gone hunting.

Police headquarters was no small number of blocks away. Cafe Bristol was downtown, but it was located about as far away from Police HQ as it could get.

That was likely for the best. They didn't care much for English, and English didn't care much for them. But yet the lion's entire income was based on the bounties the government and police put out. Go figure.

I didn't really care for downtown too much myself, too many people all crammed into one place.

Taking the long route, I struck out east a couple of blocks to where the boulevards were a bit wider and the trees a bit more abundant. I was still well in the city, but at least now I had a little elbow room.

It was about five blocks from Police HQ I stopped dead.

No.

Whipping my head around as quick as I could move, I caught just the barest of red flashes from the corner of my vision.

There was no way. There was no bloody way. I'd *seen* him die.

No more than a heartbeat later I was on all fours, racing towards the glimpse of red fur that had disappeared around a distant corner.

Brian Ferguson could not be alive.

Skidding to a halt in an alleyway, I lowered my nose to the ground and took a frantic breath.

My blood went cold.

I'd sworn once before, a year ago, that I'd never forget that wolf's scent. He'd broken into my home, violated everything I had. I'd sworn to kill him.

And it was his scent that clung ever so faintly to the pavement here.

But yet it wasn't. There was something more to it. I had to still my nerves and force myself to take another long and slow breath. There was Brian, of that there was no doubt, but it wasn't *him*.

I didn't know how to describe it. The wolf had been here, but yet the scent wasn't quite right. Like it had been changed somehow, if ever so slightly.

The last time I'd seen Brian Ferguson he'd been dead. I'd thrown him out of the window of a

twenty story building. I'd *seen* him hit the ground. I'd seen the blood explode from his body as he touched the pavement.

But yet now I could pick up his scent clear as day.

I didn't have a choice. I had to follow the trail. It was a fine V-town day, but the clouds above threatened rain, and I couldn't afford the possibility that there was the slightest chance the trail might be washed away.

Nose to the ground, walking on all fours, I made slow progress.

The only thing I was thankful for was that there was no one here to see me. The streets were bare and I was still far enough from Police HQ that there wasn't a cop every block.

Then again, this would be the perfect time to encounter a cop. If it was Brian I was tailing I could *really* use the backup.

Last time he'd very nearly been able to overpower both English and I at the same time.

If I didn't know better I'd just as well say whoever laid down this trail was drunk. It weaved back and forth, went up one street and then down the other side. The only thing I could tell for certain was that it kept away from the forest. Every time the path got anywhere near the edge of the city it turned away as if the man had been burnt.

I followed it anyway. One saving grace was no matter how careful it was to avoid the forest it was at least equally careful to avoid the busy streets and byways as well. Brian seemed to be trying to keep a low profile. That was good for me. If he'd crossed through a market or main thoroughfare the scent trail would have been torn to shreds and that would be the end of that.

It took me something like two hours, and we were well into the afternoon by the time I looked up from the pavement again.

My eyes were bloodshot and I could feel my nose swelling. I hadn't had to do anything like this in years.

Oh gods.

Looking up into the sky, I knew where we were. The twenty story behemoth of Brian's old home towered before me.

The sun shifted slightly as I stood there, casting me into the long shadow of the building.

I shivered.

Whispering a prayer for whatever good it would do, I stepped forward.

Brian's apartment building had been completely closed off after my battle with him, but it did little good. The homeless had been living in the first few floors of the place when I'd first tracked Brian here and they'd never truly moved out.

Their scents tore Brian's away, killing off any trail, but at this point I didn't care. I knew where I had to go.

Twenty stories is a long climb. It's made ever worse when you're on the ladder inside an old elevator shaft with not even a sliver of light to be seen. I couldn't have been in there for more than forty minutes but it felt like hours.

And I didn't want to think about what I might find at the top.

Prying open the doors on the top floor, I immediately saw familiar police tape.

I'd been up here once more after Brian's death, to show it to the cops. They'd immediately

cordoned the area off, but none of us had any idea what to do with it.

I'd left it in their hands, and it seemed their best idea had been to just leave it be.

I'd have to have a talk with Jon.

There was enough light streaming through the windows out front to paint the antechamber in shades of septa and grey. Last time I'd been here the room had been bright and clean, lit by incandescent light bulbs in the ceiling, and spotless to the point of obsession.

Now... not so much. There was police tape up, but it was obvious that I wasn't the first to force my way through it. Though I did have to give the dogs credit. None of the vagrants from below seemed to have come up here. The place looked nearly untouched.

But then again, that may be less due to the police tape and more the large handwritten sign that still stood here.

It promised a death most foul to anyone who dared enter. And I knew Brian well enough to know he hadn't been lying. He'd likely killed off more than a few explorers who'd decided to ignore the warning.

The light was dim now, all the power on the floor out, but yet in some ways the place looked less disturbing.

The months of emptiness had allowed the building to reclaim this space, pull it back to reality. There was dust collecting in the corners of the room and I could smell the scents of police dogs having been up here.

Last time I'd been here it was like stepping into a time warp, jumping back to a point before the Cataclysm.

Now, now the place was just empty.

Pushing forward through the dark, I followed my footsteps from my last visit. Up the main hallway and out into the living room, this was the outer edge of the building. There was a set of floor to ceiling windows here covering the entire wall.

I knew those windows well.

One of the panes was sealed over with plywood. Heh. I'd been the one to knock it out, Brian and I as we'd flown through it.

Stepping hesitantly up to a remaining window beside it, I set my fingers to the cold glass. It smudged.

Looking down, twenty stories to the ground far below, I could see the pavement where Brian had impacted. I would have been there right next to him if English hadn't plucked me out of midair.

There was no sign of where he'd hit. No blood and guts, not even a dent in the blacktop where he'd smacked it. It had been months ago and all evidence of him was long gone.

Only now did I realize that I'd never asked Jon what they'd done with the body.

Drawing in a shuddering breath, I pulled back from the drop off. I'd never had much of a problem with heights before, but then again I'd never had to return to a place I'd nearly died.

Casting about the room, I didn't really know what I was looking for. I'd come here following a scent, but now the trail was too mangled and chaotic for me to track anything. The smell of Brian was everywhere, but it was all old, in the background and pulling my mind in a dozen different directions at once.

With a laugh, I realized that the cups that Brian had served English and I with were still here, laying discarded on the floor. The table they'd sat on had been thrown aside when English had shot at the wolf. It seemed the police dogs who'd been up here had either been fastidious in keeping the space as it was or just hadn't bothered to investigate it fully.

Reaching down, I picked up the glass Brian had served me. There were still crimson stains in it

from the blood he'd expected me to drink.

I shook my head. I still couldn't understand him. He'd known me well enough to predict my actions, beat me at every turn, but yet he'd looked down upon me from his home up here in the sky and thought I drank blood, that I was a beast.

He'd thought I'd been everything he'd feared in a wolf. He'd thought I'd been him.

Ranging back and forth through the apartment, I explored every room. Brian's world had covered the entire top floor of the building, there was no shortage of things to discover.

What amazed me most was just what he did with the space.

He had his kitchen, bathroom, dining room, and bedroom – I hadn't dared look into the bedroom yet – but that took up less than ten percent of the floor space. The rest of the rooms were given over to storage.

It looked like a museum up here. I only regretted there was no power for me to turn on the lights.

The first storage room I poked my nose into was covered from floor to ceiling with paintings. There was hardly a scrap of space on the walls.

I don't know much about art, so it should tell you something when even I was able to recognize a few of the paintings.

And there had to be at least twice as many paintings stacked up on the floor. Rifling through a few of them, I had the feeling I was looking at the pick of the old Vancouver Art Gallery here.

The next room was filled with computers and electronics, the room after it was filled with tools and machinery.

And the room after that... well, Brian may have been a monster, but he went up a few notches in my estimation.

The next room was filled to bursting with books.

It was dark, so I couldn't even make out the titles on most of the spines, but the room had a good dozen bookcases in it and each one was quite literally filled to bursting. It was to the point that the floor beneath them was bowed.

I was positively *drooling* at the thought of getting my hands on those books, and even more at the thought that each and every one of them was likely pre-Cataclysem, but that wasn't what I was here for.

Forcing myself away, I continued on to the one room I hadn't checked. The bedroom. Brian may have been a psychopath, but it felt wrong – from one canine to another – to intrude into his inner sanctum.

Hey, *wait a second*. The memory of him breaking into the apartment and pissing all over my bed when Rebecca and I had been away last year came to mind.

Suddenly it wasn't nearly so hard to cross the threshold.

It was pitch dark in here, but I didn't need too see for my fur to stand up on end.

Three steps to the far wall and my hands were clutching at the blinds. I needed light. I needed it *now*.

I didn't bother pulling them open properly. In about three seconds I'd ripped the satin blinds free from the wall. Their heavy cloth puddled around my feet as I tried to step away from them, nearly engulfing my legs in their pale white fabric.

There was no one in the room save me, *but I could smell him*. He'd been here not an hour ago.

All the other scents in the apartment had been old and faint but his presence here was unmistakable.

And it was him. By the gods I swear it was Brian Ferguson. His new scent overlayed the old near perfectly. They were different, in some tiny way I couldn't put my claw on, *but it was him*.

"Bugger... bugger, bloody bugger!"

My heart was racing now as I tried to calm my breathing. He could be anywhere.

That wolf had nearly killed me a half dozen times. If he got the drop on me now, alone as I was and in his territory...

My heart was beating frantically, but I heard no other motion around me.

I needed to get out of here. Right now.

I'd been a fool to come here alone. The scent of Brian was weaving in my nose, scaring me stiff as I fought to untangle my feet from the drapes that still twisted around my ankles.

I could have come up with a few choice words for the oversized bed that sat up here between a pair of elegant mahogany end tables, I could even have stood in slack jawed awe of the stunning piece of art that was hung over the head of the bed, but I never noticed any of it.

A growl pulling at my lips that was fighting to hide a whimper, I reached down and began clawing at the drapes. They came free only reluctantly.

I was running before I even came totally free, dragging them behind me for a half dozen steps.

I don't remember most of my sprint to Police HQ.

I must have made at least three wrong turns as I headed back to the elevator shaft in Brian's apartment. And I'd bet that was a new world's record. I doubted there were even that many intersections.

Breaking out of the building and back onto the road, I had to pause to peer into the shadows around me. It took everything I had not to see a pair of all too human eyes looking back.

It was a good twenty blocks to Police HQ. I think I made it in something like ten minutes.

Breaking through the front door and into the waiting room of the police building, I was greeted with a little more activity than last time. There had to be a half dozen people in here, all of them in line.

There aren't many times I shove my way to the front of a line, but this was one of them.

I'm not sure if people recognized me as the City Administrator or just saw me as a half feral wolf with the whites of my eyes showing, but no one seemed to want to get in my way.

The raccoon standing at the counter talking to the dog on duty stepped away just in time.

I took one look at the dog there and had only a single thing to say.

"Get me the SERT team. Now. Brian Ferguson is alive."

SERT stands for Serious Emergency Response Team.

It's one of the few things Jon and I were able to set up before he got pulled too deeply into the machinery of the police department. Basically, it's the go to team of the very best the cops have to offer, along with a handful of English's bounty hunters and even a couple of Gowan's men.

Things had spun out of control far too many times in the last couple of years in V-town. The SERT team had been hand assembled to make sure things like that could never happen again.

Brian Ferguson was exactly the type of threat they'd been designed to deal with.

The dog's eyes dilated when I called for the SERT team. There were only half a dozen people in the entire city who could call them into action. I was number one on that list.

The dog didn't even say a word as he turned from me, sprinting out the door behind him.

I took a deep breath and leaned on the counter.

Now it was only a matter of time. This was *their* problem now.

It had been about ten minutes and I'll give Jon credit. He'd done most of the work setting the team up, and he'd done a bloody good job.

The dog I'd spoken to returned to the counter a few minutes later to resume his normal duty, but at the same moment a good half dozen more arrived to escort me deep into the station.

They'd sat my furry behind in an office and debriefed me on what I'd found.

And by their expressions I had no doubt they were taking it just as seriously as I was.

And, well, that was about the last I heard of it.

They came in, pumped me for information, then left. I was alone in the little office with no one more to keep me company than a desk, chair, and a small glass of water one of the cops had brought in when my voice had started going rough.

They'd been more than eager to pay attention to me and hang on every word as long as I was talking about Brian Ferguson, but now that my story was done they'd all cleared out. The last thing any of them had said before they'd closed the door behind them was, "Please remain here, Mr. Taggert. We are aware of your history with Mr. Ferguson and can not guaranty your safety anywhere else."

That had been about an hour ago.

At first I'd been more than happy to stay right where I was. Brian, quite honestly, scared my tail straight. I'd been more than happy to stay where I was. Now, not so much.

Call it the sheer boredom, or perhaps the effect of sitting under an unblinking florescent light for so long, but the memories of Brian's scent, and the fear it had brought with them, were starting to fade.

That, and my legs were falling asleep.

Then, rather suddenly, I wasn't able to take it anymore. Standing, I walked to the door and poked my nose out into the hallway.

"Hello?" My voice echoed softly off the whitewashed walls. There was no one here.

Okay, that was odd. This was *Police HQ* for the gods' sakes. There was no excuse that they should leave me alone here. They *never* let anyone go unescorted in the middle of their den.

Stepping out into the hallway, I started off down one of the paths, expecting at any moment an officer would appear around the corner and politely escort me back to the waiting room.

None did.

Rather to my surprise, I wasn't all that far back from the service counter I'd come in by. It was only a couple of turns before I began recognizing the near featureless hallways.

There were only two locations I knew how to find in Police HQ: The service counter and the Commissioner's office.

Well, I'd been telling myself I had to see Jon again sooner or later.

It took me a few wrong turns, but at long last I was able to bumble my way up to the third floor, and the door I was convinced was the Commissioner's office. Then again, I'd been convinced the last two doors had been right, too. They'd only held storerooms.

Stepping through bold as day, I was pleased to note I'd gotten it right this time.

The outer room to the Commissioner's office held a reception desk for his private secretary. Every time I'd been in here before there'd been a dog diligently working away at that desk.

It sat empty now.

And more to the point it, along with every other surface in the room was covered with papers and files.

This was *not* the way Jon ran things.

Picking my way across the paper strewn floor, I managed to make it to the door to the interior office without knocking anything over.

Across the Commissioner's desk lay a police dog, fast asleep and snoring.

Unsurprisingly, it wasn't Jon.

I cleared my throat loud enough to wake the dead. It did the trick.

He snorted awake in a moment. For just a second I could see the German Shepard sit up, parade ground straight, but there was nothing alive in his eyes. The dog was running on autopilot.

Two blinks and his brain seemed to reboot. I'd expected him to yip when he saw me, or perhaps snort. Or at least *some* reaction.

All I got was a clear and precise, "Administrator Taggart? I don't recall us scheduling a meeting."

Able looked, at first glance, every inch the perfect police dog – and he was – but it took no more than a instant to see he was very nearly run flat.

Sitting down in the chair across from him, I levelled him with a glare.

"Where's Jon?"

He didn't even flinch. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't tell you--"

"Shove it," I growled. "The force is running like a three legged horse, *you're* in the Commissioner's office, something you'd swore you'd never do, and now I've got *Brian Ferguson* cavorting around out on the street."

I watched him flinch with every word like I was slapping him. The dog who had looked so perfect and professional just seconds ago seemed to implode now.

"Mr. Taggart... I'm sorry. I'm doing everything I can. It's just that things are so... unconventional."

"Able," I tried to lower my voice as I reached forward to set a hand on his, "Where's Jon? I know what happened to him. Let me help."

His eyes clouded over for a moment. "This is a police matter. We take care of ourselves..."

I let out a long sigh. "Able. You're not an alpha. You told me that once long ago. You're not cut out for this job. No one's blaming you for doing the best you can. Let me help you."

He looked down at his desk for a moment and the papers that covered it.

"Mr. Taggart... Tommy, I *should* be able to do this. This is what Commissioner Oaks has been telling us for months now. He's not an administrator but yet he can run the force. If he can do it, why can't I? Or at least why can't I long enough for him to recover?"

I snorted. "Able, this is your first time running the force by yourself, isn't it?" He nodded. "Take it from someone who had the experience, it's sink or swim. I didn't do so well when I first got dropped into leading either. And I'd had a whole lifetime training for it. And more than a few good friends to help me along. It's not your fault. You're just doing the best you can."

A small smile slipped to his lips. "Thank you, Tommy." Standing up from his desk, he sent the papers flying. "Please come with me. I'll take you to see the Commissioner. I'm sure he'll be happy for the company." He paused, then added under his breath, "I'm sure he'd be happy to see *anyone* outside the force."

Leaving the office, I followed Able down the whitewashed hallways. I was lost in fewer than three turns.

All I knew for sure was that we were going down. Deep down. I was no stranger to the many sub-basements in Police HQ, but I couldn't say for certain that I'd ever been this far down before. We had to be somewhere around the fourth sub-basement by now.

Stepping from the stairwell, we were immediately set upon by a pair of guards. They weren't normal police dogs. They looked just like any other officers, but were dressed completely in black. And the way they moved... I'd never seen the cops move like that. They moved more like hunters.

Able barked at them. And I don't mean that figuratively, he really barked. That stopped them dead.

A few sharp words and the guards backed away, but only a few steps. They were happy enough to let Able through, but they didn't care much for me.

Through a heavy iron door, we found ourselves in a small room. The only way out was an equally heavy door on the far side.

The first door slammed shut behind us.

For a moment nothing happened. I stood next to Able who waited in the centre of the small space.

Then, a time later, I heard a soft grating sound. A small viewing window opened in the far wall.

"State your name and clearance code."

That was unmistakably the voice of a police dog. The words were so clipped and perfect that he was nearly biting off his tongue.

"Assistant Commissioner Able. Clearance blue. Code," he glanced over at me before continuing, "New dawn."

There was a slight pause, then the voice returned. "Valid. But the other stays here. No non-force personal are permitted into a blue clearance zone. Especially not during lock down."

At this Able stepped forward, his voice dropping. "I *know* that, Maple, but this is Administrator Taggart--"

"No non-force personal are permitted into a blue clearance zone," the voice repeated.

Able's ears lowered as he turned back to me. "One moment, Mr. Taggart. If you'd be so kind as to go wait out in the stairwell?"

I shrugged. Frankly, I didn't feel much like arguing. I'd never seen this face of the police force before and I didn't want to antagonize them.

Stepping back into the outer room, I was once again in the company of the two black uniformed police dogs.

And these guys gave me the heebiejeebies big time.

The door slammed closed behind me, and through it I could hear the other door grinding open.

Then, much to my amusement, I could just at the edge of my hearing make out what were unmistakably raised voices.

Looking over to police dog standing closest to me, I suddenly realized why he set me on edge.

He wasn't standing ram rod straight.

That might not sound like much, but *all* police dogs stand like they're in the middle on an inspection. These two dogs didn't. What was worse was how they *were* standing.

Hunched forward slightly, weight centred and low, their eyes were constantly in motion, their ears twitching.

They didn't stand like police dogs, but nor did they stand like a normal person on the street. They stood like hunters.

The actions would be lost to anyone else, but I'd spent my life around hunters, and I'd grown up

under the most famous hunter in V-town history.

But even more than that... it wasn't that they stood like *hunters*. They stood like one particular hunter.

They stood, moved and breathed like my father had when he'd been in his prime.

I had to hold back a shudder.

"So, uh," I forced a watery smile to my face, "You guys the elite guards or something?" I asked.

They both turned their faces to me, but their eyes kept moving. For a long moment neither of them spoke. When on did his voice was smoother than I expected. Even their speech was less like a police dog than it was a hunter.

"We are members of the Joint Task Force," was all he said.

After that the conversation more or less died.

There was one thing to keep my attention though. I could still hear the raised voices through the heavy iron door.

It was then my ears twitched. A third voice appeared. It was far softer than the other two, and somehow its tones seemed to clash with them, but yet I could still hear it.

The other voices went silent for a moment when it began. But then they started up again, even louder now.

And that was all there was for twenty minutes.

I stood out here with two police dogs that *weren't* police dogs, and listened to voices I couldn't make out.

It was sudden, but the next thing I knew there was the screaming of worn hinges moving. Soon after the door behind me opened.

Able was standing in the lock, not a hair out of place.

"Administrator, if you would be so kind as to join me?" His voice was mild. "I've had the confusion sorted out. You're welcome to enter the blue zone at your convenience."

I had a bit of a sinking feeling as I stepped through the chamber, but anything was better than staying here with the two black clad ghosts. Once again the doors screamed, but this time the inner one opened obligingly for me.

There was a gust of stale air as it opened. I was reminded of nothing so much as Ornthi's under mountain fortress.

I wasn't sure what to expect in here, bare stone walls perhaps? A nuclear fallout bunker?

Whatever it was I'd hoped for I was disappointed. All that greeted me past the massive doors was yet another plain whitewashed hallway. I could still be on the third floor for all I knew.

No, strike that. I *knew* I was underground. You can just *tell* by the way the sound echoes. Or rather, here, where it doesn't. The sound just kind of hits the wall and goes thud.

I'd heard a third voice when people had been arguing, but now whoever it was had gone. The only person who stood on the far side of the interior door was yet another nondescript police dog. He had more pips on his shoulders than the dogs I saw on the street, but nothing more than that.

Able led me down the hallway, but not before I got a dirty glare from the dog manning the door. He, it seemed, still didn't like the idea of letting me in here. Wherever *here* was.

I'll admit one thing surprised me. There didn't seem to be a lot on this level. I was still used to the layout of the upper floors with offices and hallways ever few feet. That wasn't the case here. There was only a single hallway, meticulously clean, that led straight into the living earth.

At long last we stepped up to yet another door. Only this time it was something closer to a

normal office door.

"Welcome to the blue zone, Administrator Taggart," Able said, voice solemn. "You are the first member not of the service ever to set foot here." His face was weary when he turned to look me in the eye, but I could feel the tempered steel of his training just beneath the surface. "I won't ask you to swear, but I trust you won't speak of this to anyone."

I nodded.

Without further adieu he pushed open the door.

And once again I was rather underwhelmed.

There was a large room in here, perhaps a good two-hundred meters square, held up by bare iron columns evenly spaced here and there. Between those columns were work tables covered with computer and electronics equipment.

Most of it I recognized. It was the system from Edmonton.

Or at least what was left of it.

I was just about to step towards the long tables piled high with circuits when something more caught my eye.

Off in the corner of the room, in shadows, a couple of wool blankets had been tacked to the ceiling to hang down. They formed a private room of sorts.

And from that room came a scent that didn't belong here. That of a human.

Turning away from the equipment, I walked towards an opening in the blankets. From beyond it I could hear a vaguely familiar voice cursing.

Well, I say familiar, but I recognized it more from its words and rhythm than the voice itself.

"Jon?" I stopped at the edge of the makeshift door, not taking that final step to look in.

The swearing cut off abruptly. It was replaced with a long drawn out sigh.

"Hello, Tommy."

I lifted the sheet and stepped through.

Sitting on a small field cot was a human of medium height, medium weight, and near perfect build. I could tell, he was only half dressed.

He looked up at me with big blue eyes. I wasn't sure if he was begging me to say something or to stay silent.

I sat down on the cot next to him as he fumbled with his shirt. Only now did I recognize it as a police uniform.

It didn't fit him.

The proportions were all wrong. When the dogs wore them they were a perfect fit, exactly tailored to their near uniform bodies. But now, on Jon's human form, he could hardly even get his arm down the sleeve.

With a sudden thrust he forced his hand through the misshapen cuff. The sound of ripping fabric was loud in the underground room.

There had to be a dozen dogs standing just outside the flimsy blanket walls, but I couldn't hear them. For all the world it felt like we were alone.

"So Brian's back," Jon said, glancing away from me.

"Smells like it," I replied. I tried to keep my voice neutral but it was hard with the pain in his words.

"I should be out there. I should be organizing the force and bringing him in." He paused for a moment to laugh bitterly. "I'm the Commissioner, it's my job. But instead I'd trapped down here by my own men, and at the same time cut off from them."

Reaching up a tentative hand, I set it on his too thin, hairless shoulder.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was brought down here to witness a *demonstration*," he said the word with what for a canine would have been a growl. "I was assured it was absolutely safe. They were positive that the Phoenix project was ready to produce results." He turned to look me straight in the eye. "I was even on the cusp of calling you, Tommy. Despite what it looks like Phoenix wasn't *supposed* to be a secret. Just secure. You discovered the technology, you, English and Rebecca."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "But things didn't go as they should. Everything looked fine until the last moment. Then," he shrugged, "The bubble in reality that they'd told me they'd so carefully calculated began to grow rather than shrink. We had to abandon the room, but not everyone could get out. I wouldn't leave my men in here, so I and two others were caught."

I cocked my head. "Two other cops were transformed? Where are they?"

He cast his eyes down. "In the police graveyard at the edge of the city."

I froze.

"It didn't kill them," he whispered, "They became just as human as I. But..." he shrugged again, "Where I haven't taken to the change well, they didn't take to it at all. Two of my best men, trained and polished to a perfect shine. They knew as well as I did what they were doing when they hung back to get everyone else out. But... they couldn't handle the change. Less than four hours later Beech was found dead. Slit his own wrists." He shuddered. "The next day Cedar followed him. The man escaped the building and ran off into the forest. They found his naked body floating in a river soon after."

"That's why you're being held?"

A watery smile slipped to his lips. "It would seem. I may be human, but I'm still the Commissioner. There's no one to replace me. They can't afford to lose me, and I can't properly tell them I have no intention of offing myself."

I scratched behind one of my ears. "You can't tell them? What, they just don't believe you?"

He snorted, an odd sound coming from him.

"In a manner of speaking. You should know well enough, Tommy. We were both canine. There's so much more to communication than just words. There's your tone, your voice, things I can't replicate with this human body. Then there's your scent and even the way you hold your tail. I can *speak* to them, but I can't *tell* them. And after the first two they won't take any chances."

I shook my head. "Then I guess you're just lucky you've happened upon one of the only men in the whole city qualified to translate human to canine."

Yeah, that was a nice thought.

If I'd had any illusions that I'd just be able to clear this up right away they were quickly squashed.

It wasn't that I didn't make things *better*, but the force was dead set against letting Jon anywhere near something he could hurt himself with. They wouldn't even give him have a knife to eat with for the gods' sakes.

"What about running the machine again?" I asked. "We know that'll change him back."

"That's our goal, Sir," one of the dogs said.

The officer standing next to me was different than most other police dogs I'd met. He was dressed in a lighter blue uniform than the beat cops. The name stenciled on his breast read 'Technician First Class Hickory'.

"But there is an impasse with that plan," he continued. "The machinery we were using was damaged during its last activation. We believe that's what caused it to act unexpectedly."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes, "What does Ornthi have to say about this?"

"Ornthi, Sir?" The dog cocked his head.

"Gods, you haven't even contacted Ornthi? He's the... guy who got it working in the first place."

All in all the process took something like three months.

At least I *think* it was three months. The dogs only let me out of the sub-basement four times, and getting back in became more and more of a production.

I wouldn't have left Jon's side if it hadn't been for Rebecca. Her pregnancy was progressing every day, and it felt flat out wrong not to be with her during this time.

But the thought of Jon sitting cold and alone down there, an alien among the force, kept me coming back.

It didn't take long after I contacted Ornthi to figure out why the machines down here hadn't operated the way people expected.

Ornthi's normally disturbingly calm voice came across the radio strained as he patiently taught me – and the technical dogs standing around me – that, no, the odd ball one-fifteen volt current the Police HQ was wired with *was not* what the computers expected, and the fact they'd juryrigged up a two-twenty system that only kinda worked did *not* cut it.

I was getting the impression that Ornthi was feeling a bit of the pain we'd put the computers down here through. I guess he sympathized for his digital countrymen.

From that point on we had the A.I. check and double check every action the dogs took. At first they seemed to resent this disembodied voice leading them about by the nose, but it was only a matter of time before they realized Ornthi was in a whole different class.

Ornthi had been created before the Cataclysm, he *knew* how things like this worked. He'd had over a hundred years to understand this type of stuff.

Somewhere around the two month mark I sat down with Jon in his little makeshift room. He wasn't helping much with the efforts to rebuild the computer. It seemed like every time he tried to get involved he just couldn't sync up with everyone else – even me – and that left him like an out of time dancer, breaking the whole choreography.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

He sat down on the cot next to me, holding a cup of water in one hand and a bowl of police standard kibble in the other.

The police were the only ones I knew who ate kibble. The only ones who *liked* it. It was palatable for me but tasted like reconstituted cardboard.

"Well enough," he said. "I've been keeping in touch with the force as well as I can. Thanks," he added, "For helping... translating to Able for me."

I shrugged and smiled. "No problem. That's what friends are for, eh?"

He smiled back, an easier motion than I'd seen from him in weeks.

"Anyway," he continued, "I suppose in some ways it's a good thing to have you down here. As long as you're with us we don't have to worry about Brian targeting you."

I grated my teeth. "Don't remind me. Have they found anything yet?"

He shook his head. "They confirmed your finding in his old apartment, but nothing else has been discovered." He, haltingly, put an arm over my shoulder. "And you needn't worry about Rebecca, I've made sure the very best officers are protecting her. And," he winked, "I've heard Mr. English has assigned some of his bounty hunters too."

I sat back and closed my eyes for a moment as I tossed a chunk of kibble in my mouth. It crunch wetly before dissolving into a thick paste I had to force down.

Jon looked at his own kibble sourly for a moment before setting it aside.

"I used to like this stuff," he said. "It used to be nearly the only thing I'd eat." He snorted out a laugh and took a drink of water. "Now I had can hardly force it down. And they won't bring me anything else in fear I might somehow poison myself."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Well," I replied, "now we both have reasons to get out of here. I want to see Rebecca, you want a proper meal."

"Are we ready?" I asked.

"Assuming you have provided me with all relevant information, it would appear so," the cool, disembodied voice of Ornthi came from somewhere above me. We'd patched his radio link into a set of loudspeakers in the ceiling a few days ago.

I still wasn't sure I liked the feeling of him being able to hear everything we said.

"Fine," I said. I glanced over to Jon. "Ready?" He nodded mutely. I could see his pale white, hairless hands shaking ever so slightly.

I looked over to Hickory. "Ready?" I asked. He nodded with a firm and quick motion. His whiskers were trembling.

"Can't we test it first?" Able asked from behind me. "We really can't afford to risk the Commissioner's life like this. I'm sure we could find an officer who'd be willing to..."

I sighed and glanced back at him. "We've gone over this. Multiple times. The equipment was damaged from your last try. We might not get another chance at this."

"But then it makes even more sense not to risk..."

I looked over to Jon. "Tell him."

Jon narrowed his eyes. "We're doing this." There was a slight growl in his voice.

Able shut up.

I'd been working with Jon to be able to communicate with the force again. It looked like it was finally starting to pay off. Just in time to become useless.

"If you're ready, Commissioner?" Asked Hickory. "We'll evacuate the room and you can engage the mechanism. Ornthi will remain in contact with you and inform us when the process has been completed."

Jon nodded, stepped up to the control panel.

He was buck naked. Skin dead fish white from so much time here underground, you could see each and every one of his muscles as he moved now that their was neither coat nor clothing to hide them.

He'd never looked so vulnerable.

Leaving back out through the doors of the lock chamber, they were left open behind me. The first time I'd ever seen both open at once.

We all retreated up the stairs, up two levels to the sub-basement. The field shouldn't reach nearly this far, but no one wanted to take any chances.

I remembered this floor. This was where they'd held English and I.

Thankfully, the cops were smart enough to bench me down in a different room. There was a clock on the wall.

"He's started the process," came Ornthi's voice from a speaker on the desk next to me.

I pressed a button on the clock.
It began ticking down from three hours.

That was perhaps the longest three hours in my life.

Well, I shouldn't say that. It was likely longer when it was English, Rebecca, and I waiting for the computers back in Edmonton.

The last of the seconds ticked away and a small buzzer sounded. I reached out and silenced it with a weary hand. I should have caught some sleep while we waited, but that was out of the question.

I glanced over to Able who sat beside me.

Neither of us said a word as we stood up.

"I'm sorry, but the field seems to have knocked out my microphones in that area," Ornithi said as we descended the steps to the blue zone.

I took a deep breath as Able and I stepped through the two security doors and into the chamber.

The other dogs hadn't wanted us to be the first in, they'd been concerned about health and safety hazards. I'd borrowed a few words from English's dictionary and told them to sod off.

The master control panel that Jon would have triggered was just around this bank of computers.

Poking my nose around the metal box, I was greeted with a picture perfect image.

Standing straight and tall, the German Shepard looked like he'd just walked off a recruiting poster. Already dressed in a perfectly creased uniform that someone must have left for him, the only things missing were his rank pips.

"Mr. Taggart, Assistant Commissioner Able," his voice was clipped and hard, nearly sounding as manufactured as Ornithi's, "I believe we have work to return to."

That had been two hours ago.

Jon had politely asked me to wait for him in a secluded office as the force pressed him through a set of physicals.

Then, after they were content he was in fact Jon Oaks, he gave them no small amount of reaming out.

I was a floor away and I could still hear him screaming.

And Jon wasn't a man to scream.

We were on the street soon after, just him and I.

The normal procedure would have been for the commissioner to have *at least* one aid with him, and perhaps a guard or two. I think Jon had some choice words for that protocol.

I wasn't quite sure where to go, but Jon needed a good meal and there was only one place for that, Café Bristol.

It was early afternoon when we stepped from the front door of Police HQ. Jon took a deep breath as we walked down the street.

"It's good to be able to smell the world again."

I didn't bother asking him if he was talking about being outside again or being a canine.

Unfortunately, English wasn't hanging around when we sat down at the café. It didn't matter much, all the staff here knew Jon and I. We didn't even have to order, they just brought out a platter without a word.

And, perhaps for the first time, I got to watch as a dog ate like a lion.

I said *watch* because I wasn't dumb enough to get my hands anywhere near the food.

Waiting until Jon had taken his fill, I was about to tuck in when the sound of running feet caused my ears to twitch.

It was a cop.

I was already standing when an officer came to a halt before us, panting.

And I was rather surprised when he ignored Jon in favor of me. "Sir..." he had to pause and catch his breath as he leaned on the side of the wrought iron table, "Ms. Taggert. She's..." My heart went cold. "She's in labor."

I blinked once and was off before my brain had even caught up.

Chapter 5: A Wolf for a Father and a Lion for an Uncle

I was at V-town General only moments later.

Well, I say moments, but it could have taken hours for all I knew, my mind was going in so many directions.

I didn't even slow as I passed through the front doors, slamming them so hard I almost thought I'd broken my shoulder.

And I got about three steps further before coming to a full stop. It felt like I'd hit a brick wall.

“Oof.”

Well, close enough. English might have some gray to him but he was still built like a brick house.

He didn't say a word as he grabbed me by the shoulder, nearly lifting me clear from the ground and taking off down a hallway.

Claws skidding on the floor tiles as we took a corner at high speed, I could hardly hear his voice over my beating heart. “You nearly missed it, Mate. Any later and the show would be over. The Lass would have killed you then.”

A couple more turns and we were in front of an unmarked door. I didn't even get a chance to catch my breath before he shoved me through, slamming it behind me.

Frankly, if I hadn't known better I would have thought this was an operating theater.

Plain white walls and bright lights above us, the only real furniture of note was a bed in the the middle of the room.

Noticeably, this one was equipped with a set of stirrups.

And sitting upright on the bed, completely ignoring all the paraphernalia, was Rebecca. She was arguing with Doctor Nesbit.

“We will wait until my husband arrives.” Her voice wasn't shrill, but it sounded like she was at the edge of her endurance. “I don't care what you *think*. These are his children as much as they're mine. *I* don't want it, and *you're* not the one who gets to make the decision.” She had to pause for a moment as her stomach clenched.

When she looked up again she saw me.

"Tommy." A smile crept to her face. Her voice was low and self assured. "Glad to see you made it. Is Jon alright?"

"Yeah, sure, Babe. But right now I'm more concerned about you."

She smiled sweetly, throwing a nasty glare at the doc.

"I'll be fine, Wolfy. But I think the *Doctor* wants a word with you."

Once again I found myself dragged out into the hallway. This man's insistence on talking to me without Rebecca was starting to get annoying.

"Mr. Taggert," he cleared his throat, "We've been watching the pregnancy and it's not irregular. Our initial diagnosis was correct. There is no mistaking now that there is a human fetus and one wolf one." He leveled me with what I assumed he intended to be a confident glare. "This is *not* a normal pregnancy. I must insist that she be put under sedation and the children be delivered via c-section."

I leaned on the wall and took a deep breath.

"Listen, Doc, I know this isn't normal. I don't know how much Rebecca told you, but we're... special. This is no surprise." I paused and laughed. "Okay, I'll admit it blindsided the two of us, but it's not a *complete* surprise. I think we would rather try to do this as naturally as possible."

He glared at me. "Mr. Taggert, there's nothing natural about this."

I matched him glare for glare.

"Fine. You tell me. If there were two human twins, or even two wolf puppies of the same size and health, would you recommend a c-section then?"

He backed up a step, catching his breath. "No, of course not. In all other ways they seem to be healthy, but..."

"Fine," I shrugged my shoulders and stood up straight, "Then let's ask the woman involved. Right now the vote's one-for-one. She's the person you want to slice open, it's only fair she gets the final say."

"There's no way in the world you're cutting me open."

Well, those weren't *quite* her exact words. A direct quote would have been a bit more obscene.

Two hours later the three of us, Rebecca, Nesbit, and I, were ready for the big game.

And in a waiting room just down the hall sat English, Molly, Amstys, Jon, and my mom.

I'd never witnessed a birth before, and let's just say I'll thank each and every god there may or may not be that I wasn't born a woman.

Rebecca didn't scream much, but she held my hand so tight I could feel the bones in my joints grinding together.

The first child to see the light of day was a wolf. The doc didn't say anything, but I could see him relax a measure.

It was a boy.

Tiny, pink, and hairless, he didn't look much like a wolf. He didn't look much like anything at all. If it wasn't for the tail I wouldn't have even known the difference between him and a human baby.

Well, that was until he started crying. Only a canine can make *that* sound.

The doc handed him to the nurse who put him in an incubator. I felt a sudden flash of anger that they didn't immediately hand him to us, but it was only moments until we had something else to take our attention.

The first child had been a long affair, a good two hours of pushing and clenched teeth. The second took another twenty minutes until the head came into view.

And there was no question this was a human, and a girl to boot.

One last push, this time a scream did escape Rebeca's lips, and the child was free.

Before I even had time to wipe the sweat from Rebecca's brow I heard the squeak of a wheel turning.

"What in the gods' names do you think you're doing?" My voice was cold as the peek of Mt. Logan when I turned to the nurse. She'd begun pushing the incubators, and the children in them, towards the door.

"Mr. Taggart," Nesbit stepped between us. Between me and my children. "You must understand this is unheard of. The children look healthy enough, but we must take them for observation. We need to understand what's happened to cause this."

Calmly, almost casually, I stepped forward and put my hand on the cougar's shoulder. My claws cut through his lab coat and into his flesh without the least resistance.

"Doctor, you are going to leave them here." I kept my voice level with nothing more than sheer will alone. Glancing back to Rebecca, I saw her slumped against the bed, half asleep. "These are not some lab rats for you to experiment with. They're my children. Do whatever the normal procedures are, but nothing more. Do you understand me?" I smiled grimly. "I just spent the last three months bottled up with police dogs. Don't play the rules game with me, *I'll tear your throat out.*"

The incubators didn't move any further.

I must have made an impression on the cat, he left the room, a small trail of blood oozing from his shoulder. He didn't come back.

There was an argument in the hallway outside, then a small, dark skinned human walked in, wearing an identical white lab coat.

"Tommy," despite her size she leveled me with a withering glare, "Why didn't you request *me* in the first place?"

"Hello, Doctor Manson," I said, leaning up against the table Rebecca laid upon. I felt almost as exhausted as she looked. "Long time no see."

The doc didn't waste any time before getting to work. Opening the first of the incubators, she turned to the nurse and began reading off statistics, weight, length, stuff like that.

Then, once she was done, she put the wolf in Rebecca's waiting arms.

It was amazing to see how she perked up as soon as the baby was within reach.

"Here you are, dear," Doctor Manson said, voice soothing.

Turning, the doc began the same procedure with the second child, the baby girl. She did the same things, didn't deviate from the standard, but she did take ever so slightly longer.

"Both healthy, and the size we'd expect for twins," she said before handing her over to Rebecca. The two of them were an armful. "Have you decided what you're going to call them?"

The breath caught in my throat. I'd been spending so much time down with Jon that I hadn't had the chance to talk to Rebecca about their names.

Rebecca was looking like she was ready to fall asleep again, but her voice was strong. "Your mother and I were talking, Tommy. What about Gingivere for the boy and Elizabeth for the girl?"

"Ging and Beth?" I said with a slight laugh, "I like it."

I noticed she called them 'the boy' and 'the girl'. Not 'the wolf' and 'the human'.

And that was pretty much that.

With Doctor Manson running interference for us, not to mention Jon and English and everyone else, we were able to sneak out of the hospital a few hours later.

We even managed to miss the bulk of the media. It looked like we were celebrities again. Everyone wanted to know how we'd had a human baby. Most of them seemed to think she was adopted.

I decided not to enlighten them.

Stepping out onto the third floor, we'd decided to take the elevator this time. I was carrying the kids in my arms and Rebecca, still weak, was leaning on me.

I'll admit I wasn't totally surprised to see a team of police dogs waiting at our door. The number included both Pine and Jon.

Jon was having a quiet word with my personal attaché, and what little I could make out it seemed to be a much more positive conversation than Able had gotten earlier that day.

"Mr. Taggert, Miss. Taggert," one of the lower level officers said, stepping up to us the moment we got out of the elevator, "we apologize for the inconvenience, but the commissioner has ordered a clean sweep of all the security in your home. The force has been... preoccupied these last few weeks and we simply wish to ensure you will be safe."

I waved him off and went to go talk to Pine and Jon. Suddenly that little corner of the hallway became far more crowded with the addition of four more souls.

Jon nodded to me. There was just the slightest smile to his lips, poking out from behind his near perfect mask of institutional indifference.

"Congratulations, Tommy," he said. For just a moment he worked up a scowl of annoyance that looked like it would have been more comfortable on Sayer's face. "I think we can all expect they'll cause just as much trouble as you have." He smiled again. "And we're all looking forward to it."

A moment later the dogs stepped from the apartment. I had to hold back a growl at the thought of them having been in there without my supervision.

"All clear," one of them said.

Almost as an afterthought, I called Jon in with me. I had to hand the kids to Rebecca for a moment, but I returned to him the papers on Phoenix he'd given me so long ago.

He nodded his head once and turned to leave without a word.

I did see him lower his nose to the papers, taking a sniff, picking up the scent he'd had as a human.

Thankfully, Rebecca had gotten the nursery finished while I was away. We laid the Ging and Beth down in two cribs, side by side.

Rebecca leaned heavily on the wall.

"Well, Wolfy, I guess we're parents now." She worked up a soft laugh.

I shrugged and put my arm over her shoulders, pulling her close. "Looks like it, Babe."

She leaned into me, almost coming off her feet.

"Come on, Babe. Let's get you some rest. I think we all know you earned it."

About half an hour later she was sound asleep on the bed. Our room was right next to the nursery.

About five minutes after that I heard the first off colour notes of a cry.

Stepping into the nursery, the wail was just starting to wind up. I flicked on the lights as I stepped forward.

This one sounded canine.

I never even got the chance to pick up the crying Ging before Beth woke and began crying in

harmony.

And, oddly enough, I do quite literally mean *harmony*. It was like the two of them were singing, the opposite of a canine's howl.

I had, thankfully, gotten at least a little bit of training in advance of the birth. Their diapers were still empty, so it was most likely they were hungry. Yeah, I'd be hungry too if I'd just been forced to go through the whole act of birth on an empty stomach.

They'd fed them a bit at the hospital and sent us away with some bottles of formula. I fetched a couple now.

It may not sound like much, but it took me about five minutes to warm the bottles over the stove.

Those were some of the longest minutes of my life as the kids cried away in the background.

At long last I had the bottles ready and the nipples cleared. What Rebecca could have done naturally in seconds took me *forever* and a whole list of contrivances.

Thankfully, it seemed I had it right. They both became so occupied with the bottles the moment I lifted them to their faces that they forgot everything else.

Holding Ging in the crook my of left arm and Beth the crook of my right, it was a hard trick to lift the bottles to their mouths as I slowly paced up and down the room, rocking them in my arms.

Hey, this wasn't so hard. I'd been mayor, alpha, to a whole city. What's a couple of kids after you've pulled a feat like that?

About three seconds later Beth let the nipple of the bottle fall from her lips and she began crying again.

Only this time I hadn't the slightest what she wanted.

That night went slowly. And the night after it, and the one after that.

Rebecca and I had fairly quickly worked out a routine without ever really discussing it.

She took the days, minding the kids while the sun was up and my head was buried under the covers. She took them out in a stroller and pushed them down to see my mom and everyone else.

I took the nights. Rebecca got a good sleep in the freshly soundproofed bedroom as I played nurse to the kids as they woke every fifteen minutes – seemingly on the dot – over the night, wanting their diapers changed, or feeding, or just a cuddle.

I may not have the curves – or breasts – that their mother had, but a thick, warm fur coat is just the right thing to cuddle with.

And for those short interludes between looking after the kids I got to sort through government documents and watch the moon rise.

It wasn't so bad. I could get used to this.

On the twentieth day Rebecca came to wake me around noon.

I'll admit to being not in the greatest of moods. The two of us had worked out a pretty good schedule, but even then having a pair of newborns will run you ragged no matter how well you plan it.

"Wolfy?" Her voice was soft as she closed the door behind her, sealing away the light.

For one terrible moment I almost thought it must be evening already and she was here to change shifts.

Nope, the clock beside the bed read 12:24 PM.

"Yeah, Babe?" I said. My voice sounded like it came from the pits of the earth.

"You feel like getting up for a little bit, Wolfy? We've got visitors."

I just groaned. Thankfully, no one had come to see us since the kids were born. I didn't feel

like dealing with bureaucrats trying to curry favour right now.

“Who, Babe?” I knew she wouldn't wake me if it wasn't someone of consequence.

I could just see the flash of a smile in the darkness.

“Amstys and Molly.”

I rolled out of bed without another complaint.

I should have taken the time to brush my fur, but Amstys had already seen me at my worst and Molly... well, we'd dated long ago.

Stumbling into the front room, my eyes were still adjusting to the light when I was suddenly engulfed in a bear hug.

At least my eyes appreciated the pitch black fur blotting out the light.

“Young master, it's good to see you again,” came Amstys' voice from somewhere about a foot and a half above my head.

He still called me 'young master' on occasion. It's... well, it's a long story. We'll just call the big wolf's mind a bit of damaged goods and leave it at that.

He was, however, still a really nice guy.

“Hey, Amstys,” I said, my voice muffled by his fur, “I haven't seen you two in a long time.”

“Honey,” Molly's voice came, “I think Tommy might want to breathe.”

“Oh.” The arms dropped away a moment later. I had to scramble to cover my eyes. “Sorry, uh, Tommy.”

A moment later I got a quick, and much lighter, embrace from Molly.

Both Amstys and Molly were wolves, but they couldn't look any more different. Amstys was a hulking Adonis, his fur black with flakes of silver here and there. Molly was no more than a third his size and her coat pure white. She was as feminine as he was masculine.

A moment later Rebecca, who looked far more awake and chipper than she had any right to be, seated us around the kitchen table. There was a tea pot in the center – just guess who'd bought us *that* as a wedding gift.

Cradling a steaming cup of tea in my hands, I tried to force the fog from my brain.

Molly and Rebecca were making small talk, but I could just *tell* Molly had something she was just itching to get out.

“Alright, spit it,” I said.

Molly looked my way with a smirk on her lips.

“Rebecca, you really should work on domesticating him,” she said with a laugh, “Even I've managed to do more with Amstys here.”

Both Amstys and I managed to snort at the same time. That just made both the girls laugh.

“But if you simply *must*,” she said with a giggle and a flick of a wrist, putting on her best valley girl imitation, “we thought the two of you should be the first to know. I'm pregnant.”

I cocked my head and drew in a deep breath. She didn't *smell* pregnant.

“We just found out yesterday.” She smiled and drew Amstys' arm over her shoulders like it was a shawl. For all the world the bigger wolf didn't seem to mind being treated like a piece of clothing.

“It's true,” came Amstys' deep voice, “We've been... trying since we heard about the two of you. It just took a while for it to be the right time of year.”

I smiled. Well, at least the two of them didn't have to worry about what species their kid would be. They were both pure wolf. And Amstys hadn't been close enough when we were in Edmonton to get caught up in the computers.

“Congratulations,” I said, reaching out to shake Amstys' hand. “How soon?”

It was about three months later we decided I should return to work.

Well, change that. I would have been just as happy to stay in the apartment, but I think I was starting to drive Rebecca crazy. That, and the kids were starting to sleep through the night so we didn't need to play switch shifts anymore.

It wasn't that I didn't want to go back to work at Storm Front, but... well, I hadn't seen English since that day at the hospital.

Don't get me wrong, we hadn't had a falling out or anything, but I hadn't seen whisker nor hair of him since Ging and Beth had been born. We'd gotten a bouquet of flowers from SF but nothing more.

And the letters I'd sent to him had been replied to, but every invitation I'd made to get him to drop by had been politely refused.

He'd claimed business was picking up.

Standing in front of the SF building, I was tempted to believe him.

Last time I'd been here the street had been quiet. Now there was a steady stream of bounty hunters heading out and marks being dragged in.

I took one look in the front room and turned right around to head in via a side entrance. The place was packed.

At long last I stood on the third floor, outside English's office. I was still outside because I had to get in a line to talk to him.

And unlike last time I'd stood here eavesdropping, he wasn't bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"Next!" He yelled from inside the office. If I didn't know better I'd almost think he was enjoying himself.

I only made it a few steps into the office before I was taken off my feet in a flying tackle.

"Mate! It's good to see you again. How ya doing? Gods, I've missed you."

Two seconds later he'd dragged me off the floor and all but carried me over to sit across the desk from him.

I looked around. The office almost looked normal. There were no piles of papers here, no bare walls. The place was nicely furnished, almost looking like an office someone might even do business.

"So I take it things picked back up, eh?"

He nodded a head, a sparkle in his eye. "Almost right after you were last in here. It seems having the old mutt Jon under the weather resulted in a rise in crime. And it's continued to grow ever since. No matter what the cops try they can't seem to stem it. It's not *good*, Tommy, but it *is* good for business."

I shrugged and tried to change topics. "That's great, buddy, but couldn't you have spared a moment to drop--"

He didn't let me finish the question. Looking like a man thirty years younger, he leapt from his chair and grabbed me by the shoulder, dragging me off.

"Come on, Mate. We've got hunts to make."

The lion hadn't been lying.

Gods but my muscles ached. I'd been expecting to ease back into the bounty hunting lifestyle, but he never gave me the chance.

I'd come to see him at nine in the morning, we made a capture by eleven, were back on the street without even having so much time to blink, and had another capture by three.

It was six o'clock now and we'd just tagged our *third* mark for the day.

Gods, what in the world was going on? Not months ago the city had been the safest it'd ever been. Now there were so many bounties out that we couldn't even keep up.

English was sitting beside me on the steps to some run down apartment complex, running a hand through his mane and massaging the back of his neck where he'd been hit during the last capture. He glanced over to me and grinned.

"Feel up to one more, Mate? I can promise you a cut that would make a prince jealous."

I shook my head and yawned. "Sorry, Buddy. It's getting late and I promised Rebecca I'd be home for dinner. I'm probably already late. Things are on more of a schedule these days now that we have the kids." I grinned as I stood up. "It seems all they do is eat and sleep. And they don't like having to wait for their meal."

He shrugged. "Your loss, Mate. I'll see you tomorrow?"

I nodded. "Of course. I'm back on the job now." I turned back to him. "Why don't you come with me? I'm sure Rebecca would love to see you again. It's been too long."

For just a fraction of a second I saw something cross his face. His lips hardened and his eyes clouded.

"Sorry, Mate. Gotta keep making hay while the sun's shining, eh? The bounties don't hunt themselves. Gotta make the city a safer place and all that." He forced out a nervous laugh.

The next day was much like the first, and the day after.

Every morning I met up with English and we hunted. And hunted. There was never a lack of bounties on the board.

My pay cheques were huge, and the lion smiled every time he brought in a bounty, but no matter what I tried he just wouldn't talk to me the way he used to.

Near everything was business, and what wasn't was superficial. He was still the English I knew, but that was just it. He was the English I'd first been introduced to, not the one I'd come to love.

It was on the fourth day I finally got pissed off. Even Rebecca was wondering what was up. In the past English had never turned up a chance to drop by the apartment.

We'd just put our last mark in the bag. English and I were walking down the road towards Storm Front at five in the evening.

This was about the time I normally called it a night, but I had other plans today. All I needed was to find a suitable place...

"So you're off then, Mate?" he asked. "Give my best to the Lass and kids, eh?"

He was just about to turn off down a side street when I reached out to grab his shoulder. This place should do nicely.

I'd almost forgotten about Plato's Rest.

The place looked, if it was even possible, even more run down than the last time I'd been here. And that was years ago.

"Uh, Mate, what's up?" English looked genuinely confused as I dragged him through the door.

The bar was, thankfully, just about empty. You'd think this would be a busy time for them, around the dinner hour, but they didn't seem to have much of a crowd.

"It's time we had a talk, pussy-cat."

I'd picked my words carefully.

"Pussy-cat?" He smiled. "It's been a long time since you've called me that, Mate."

I slid into one of the many times darned vinyl booths.

"Well," I smiled, "I could call you a poof tailed tomcat if you want."

He grunted and pulled a face, but it couldn't cover his smile.

"Come now, Mate. No need for names. You'll hurt my feelings if you keep calling me such vile things."

I snorted. "Fine then, your majesty."

I hadn't been trying to, but it seemed that with that one I struck a nerve.

We both went silent for a couple of minutes as the waitress came by and took our orders. One platter of meat, a beer for English and a cup of tea for me.

He grinned when I ordered my drink.

"It seems I'm rubbing off on you, Mate."

I shrugged. "Well, I can't recall the last time I've seen you order a beer that wasn't during a job."

He shrugged back, but the shadow had returned to his eyes.

"I've got a feeling what this is all about, Mate. And I could use a little buzz to get me going."

We had our orders soon after. English wouldn't talk to me about anything deeper than the weather until he had his beer sitting on the table and a few deep pulls inside him.

"Alright, Mate," there was a slight slur to his voice but I knew for a fact he was nowhere near even buzzed yet. "Let's get this on. Say what we're here for."

I took a deep breath and leaned forward over the table, trying to get a better look at his face. The lighting was dim enough here that his eyes were held in shadow.

"Why are you avoiding the kids?"

I was expecting a nervous laugh from him, perhaps a denial. He simply sat silent for a moment.

"Those were beautiful names you chose, Tommy. Gingivere and Elizabeth. Good, proper, British names."

The silence drew out between us as his voice died away. I didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, Mate," his voice was soft as he gazed down at his reflection in the drink. "I'm sure you're little ones are wonderful." His accent was wavering now, at the edge of total collapse to the rounded, unfamiliar tones of his original tongue. "You know my story already. My parents... I'm not sure I'd be the best role model for *any* kids, likely so much as yours. It's not that I don't like kids, Tommy. I've got nothing against them, like them fine. But... they're *yours*. My father messed me up so bad I'm not sure I could..."

He gazed down into his beer for a long moment before taking another pull.

Reaching out, I put a hand on his.

"Don't worry about it, Buddy. We both figured out long ago you're not your father. Your father was a bugger. You're not."

He grinned at me, showing a full array of teeth.

"You say that, Tommy. I'm a right bugger, I know that for a fact. I'm just a different kind of bugger."

Hailing the waitress, I ordered another cup of tea for myself, along with four shots of whiskey for English.

I was going to get him to meet the kids one way or another.

And at least I knew the lion well enough to be sure he was a happy drunk.

It didn't take long. English knew full well what I was doing and was happy to go along with it. One hour later he was drunk off his tail – though it had taken more rounds than I'd expected – and I was under his arm as we staggered back to the apartment.

It wasn't even seven in the evening yet. Rebecca was up and waiting for us in the kitchen. The

kids were laying out next to her.

"So you finally decided to drop by," she said dryly as we stumbled through the door. Her eyes widened slightly as she picked up the scent of just how much alcohol I'd had to ply English with. "That bad?" she asked.

I nodded as I maneuvered English down onto one of the chairs.

He'd been a beast to get out of the bar. I'd thought he'd just been a bit uneasy about seeing the kids, but he'd been almost shaking with fear until I'd gotten him good and plastered.

Now? Now there was a wide grin on his face as he sat back in the chair.

"Come on, Mate," his voice was slurred but accent back firmly in place, "Let's see these little ones of yours. It's high time they met their uncle Michael."

I raised an eye ridge and glanced over to Rebecca. I couldn't even remember the last time English had referred to himself by his real name.

First making sure English wasn't about to puke everywhere, I walked over and picked up Ging from where Rebecca had set him on a blanket on the floor.

The little guy had grown a lot in the last few months. No longer hairless and pink, he'd grown out a short little brown coat. He opened his eyes when I picked him up and began softly mewling until he recognized my scent.

Standing before English, the lion seemed to magically have purged some of the alcohol from his system. Either that or he'd never been quite so drunk to begin with.

His eyes were clear and tracking as I brought the pup slowly towards him.

His pupils had contracted to pinpoints.

He didn't say a word as I stepped closer. He held out his hands to take Ging.

I noticed that, ever so slightly, he was shaking.

Setting Ging in his strong arms, it was only now I discovered how loathe I was to let go. English's arms looked as steady as a rock, but his face gave me the distinct impression he was about to break down.

At long last I let go and he drew the pup close to his chest.

For just a moment I was sure Ging was about to wail, but instead he reached out his hands and grabbed hold of the fur of English's mane.

It was only then I noticed that both English's fur and mine was still splattered with blood from our hunts. No one seemed to care.

A moment later I went to retrieve Beth. She'd grown too. Not quite as big as Ging, she grew as a human would, not at a mix of human and canine speeds.

If anything she took even more quickly to English. A moment later he was weighed down with two kids in his arms. For a long moment the expression on his face was unreadable.

Rebecca came up to stand beside me. She didn't say anything, but I just knew she was here in case we had to pull the kids away for any reason.

Then English smiled.

Truly and deeply, the lion smiled. For just a moment he reminded me of my father. My father had possessed the most hideous smile imaginable, huge cracked and yellowed fangs he'd show off when he was happy and at ease.

English's smile was in some ways the exact opposite. His teeth were just as large, but straight and pearly white.

And something about that grin told me it wasn't *English* smiling, it was the man behind the mask. That smile came from Michael Jones.

The next morning was different from what we'd had in a long time, but familiar in its own way. We awoke to English passed out in the front room, where we'd left him in the chair.

Surprisingly, he was more than willing to help with the kids. His actions were slow and halting, but he was more than willing to partake in everything from feeding to changing of diapers like it was all a new and grand adventure to him.

Out on the street again, English and I were on yet another hunt.

There was something about the way the lion moved today, and not just the kink in his neck from having spent the night sleeping in a chair. There was an ease to his muscles, a calmness to his motions.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He favoured me with a dazzling grin.

"You could say that, Mate. It's nice to have seen the Lass again. And, well..."

I snorted. "You better be careful. You tell me you *like* changing diapers and I'll give you the job full time. The gods know I'd rather someone else do it."

He cuffed me in the back of the head and we headed off to the SF building to get a listing of contracts out today.

The boarding house was called 'Sundown'. So of course it had to be on the far east side of town.

Gods but this place was a dump. A small two story building, it crouched between the decaying hulks of old pre-Cataclysem wrecks on either side of it.

Stepping into the front office on the heels of English, I followed the lion to the front desk.

Our latest tip placed the mark here. It was a bit of a long shot, he hadn't been seen in weeks, but it was better than nothing.

To be honest, my heart wasn't really in the hunt. This was our fourth contract of the day. Two of our earlier ones had fallen through and the mark we did bring down had been a bummer of a fight.

I left English to talk to the landlord as I wandered around the small lobby of the boarding house. And I use the term 'lobby' loosely. The room was only perhaps five meters square and felt hemmed in with the addition of a ratty threadbare couch in one corner and the drab grey walls and mud brown carpet.

From behind me I could hear English's voice rise. I guess the landlord wasn't being as cooperative as we'd been hoping for.

I was just about to go stand next to the lion, lend my support and all that, when my nose twitched.

It took me a moment to lock onto the scent. So many people passed through this room everyday that it was hard to pick out.

But once I did it stood out like a blinking neon sign two feet from my face.

"English," I stepped up behind the lion, setting my hand on his shoulder. I didn't mean to, but my claws dug in.

"Yeow! Mate, let go!" He turned to look at me. "What is it?"

I narrowed my eyes, taking another breath. "Brian."

What English said didn't merit repeating.

The landlord hadn't been much help in letting us into our mark's room, but he was touch more open to spilling what he knew about Brian Ferguson.

Or at least he became more amicable once I threatened to pull his heart out through his throat.

I was getting smarter this time though. Rather than blindly charging into what could be Brian's

new hideout, first I headed back out onto the street to find the nearest police dog.

This wasn't exactly downtown, so it took me a few minutes of criss-crossing the streets to find a cop, but once I did I got an immediate reaction.

All I had to do was say the words 'Brian Ferguson' and the dog was off like a shot, sprinting towards the nearest station.

I had no doubt we'd have our reinforcements in moments.

But that wasn't quick enough. Returning to the boarding house, English was standing guard, making sure Brian didn't pass by.

The landlord hadn't had a clue who we were talking about when we'd asked him about Brian. The man, it appeared, didn't even know the wolf's name.

Brian had simply shown up one day with a wad of bills and prepaid the room for a whole year. That had been enough cash the landlord hadn't asked any questions.

It was that room English and I stood in front of now.

The hallway was dimly lit, and the walls and carpet were of the same dingy colour as the lobby.

The door was a light gray plywood. It looked so flimsy that it seemed I could almost just shove it out of the way.

The landlord stepped up to it with a key. The sound of the lock turning was loud in the suddenly silent hallway.

I was just about to step forward when English put an arm in front of me.

"Not this time, Mate." He pushed me away. "Remember, last round he had things designed to kill people just like you."

The lion's frame was so large he took up the whole doorway.

He didn't even say anything as he slammed the door open so hard it bounced back on its hinges.

English's roar echoed off the walls as he leapt into the room. I couldn't see him anymore as the shadows consumed him whole.

A second later his voice came from the darkness.

"Clear." He didn't even bother to try and suppress a growl.

I had to hold myself in check as I stepped into the room. I noticed the landlord, wisely, stayed out in the hallway.

The scent of Brian was so thick in here that it nearly left me seeing red. And it was fresh.

The place wasn't large, no more than a quarter the size of my apartment. There wasn't much to search.

One main room with a mattress on off to a side, and a grime encrusted bath.

There was a writing desk pushed up against one of the walls in the main room. That's what attracted my attention. Other than the mattress, it was the greatest source of Brian's scent.

Pinned to the wall in front of the desk was a collection of photographs and news clippings.

English stood beside me as I read through them. The growl grew deeper in his chest.

'Mayor steps down to position of Administrator.' 'City Administrator to marry human.' 'Taggart nearly murdered on honeymoon.' And the most recent, 'Taggart (wolf) and human wife give birth to unexplained human child.' With the clippings were photographs. Every one of the snaps was of me. My face was circled in red.

A chill ran through me from nose to tail.

The cops arrived a couple of moments later. I couldn't fault their response time.

It was only another half hour or so before Jon himself appeared on scene. By this time the

entire boarding house had been cordoned off.

Six months later and there was still no word on Brian Ferguson. The cops had covered the apartment from ceiling to floor.

Both Jon and I had stayed to make sure they did it properly this time. Too bad it didn't do us the slightest bit of good.

"You ready, Wolfy?"

I was jolted back to the here and now as Rebecca rested a hand on my shoulder.

We were in our apartment, I was sitting next to the window, looking out over the city.

"Oh, yeah, Babe." I stood up and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "We'd better get going. I promised Mom we'd have them over there for supper."

She smiled. The long days of minding the kids were wearing on her, but she still looked amazing.

"I'm sure she won't mind if we're a few minutes late."

The walk to the old house was smooth and quiet. Well, as quiet as one could expect with half a dozen police dogs in tow.

Brian may have yet to show his face, but neither Jon nor I wanted to take any chances.

"Tommy." My Mom smiled as she opened the bright blue door. "It's been too long."

You'd never know my mom was in her sixties, for all the world she looked like nothing more than her late thirties. Well, that was one of her advantages, springs age differently.

It was nice, for once in a long time, to have a home cooked meal that neither Rebecca or I had to make. And the fact it was made by Mom was just all the better for me.

Tonight was a gift from her. We were leaving the kids here. Rebecca and I got the night off.

I was just about ready to leave when I looked out the back window.

I didn't even realize what I was doing as I found my feet slowly walking down the back steps and across the meticulously maintained yard.

There was an old tree back here, and a familiar little depression in the earth just in front of it. It looked so empty and lonely now.

This had been my father's favourite place to lay on quiet summer evenings. It just wasn't the same without him here.

"Tommy," my mother's voice came from behind me. A moment later I could feel the ever so soft touch of her hand on my shoulder. "He was proud of you, Tommy. So proud. You were everything he ever wanted you to be and so much more. I'm just sorry he couldn't have met his grandchildren." There was the softest chuckle from her. "You have no idea how pleased he would have been to find he had a *human* as a granddaughter."

Chapter 6: Dirty Politics

The next morning came just *perfect*.

Not too early, not too rude.

For the first time in months we didn't have kids to feed, I had the day off from hunting, and Rebecca didn't have anywhere to go.

It was ten thirty in the morning and we were still snugly in bed. The covers were warm around us and the sun slanting in through the window was all there was to wake me.

I'd been awake for fifteen minutes now and hadn't had the faintest inclination of moving.

Rebecca was soft and still in my arms and the world was a good place.

And that's when a soft knock came at the door.

Bugger. It. All.

For a long moment I thought about just ignoring the thing. But it came again.

And this time I could hear the perfect, measured, sharp knock. It was a police dog.

Moving slowly, I carefully untangled myself from Rebecca and closed the bedroom door behind me as I walked into the main room.

Whoever was out in the hallway must have heard me coming, they didn't knock again.

Gathering a good scowl to my face, I opened the door.

And let out a long sigh. It was Pine who stood there, and he already looked suitably chastised, ears down and tail curled around his legs.

"What can I do for you?" I didn't even bother sounding annoyed. After Jon, Pine was the only police dog I truly trusted. He wouldn't be here if I wasn't needed.

"Sir," he lowered his eyes, "I received this summons for you from City Hall this morning."

I blinked. A 'summons'?

Taking the pre-opened envelope from the dog's hands I quickly unfolded the paper.

And started growling.

I only just remembered to leave Rebecca a note before storming out of the apartment. Pine was smart enough to keep out of my way. This wasn't his fault, but I could have just as easily unloaded on him as anyone else who crossed my path.

Last time I'd been here I'd taken a moment to admire the architecture when I entered City Hall. This time I simply stormed through. Not so many people stopped to smile at me now. I almost didn't even notice all the people gathered around the front steps. I only took note of them when they blocked my way into the building. I had to go in via a back entrance.

Up the steps to the third floor, I was at the door to mayor's office before reception even had time to tell him I was here.

I at least managed to get my anger under control as I walked the last few steps. Max's office was set well back from reception. Well, I should say *my* office was set well back. I'd made that design decision myself. I just hadn't stayed in the position long enough to reap the benefits of that extra breathing room.

The door to the mayor's office was a simple wooden affair. No name plate, no expensive carving or gilding. It could just have well been the entrance to a broom closet.

Okay, I had to stop and chuckle at that thought. Even if it did put a damper on the perfectly good rage I was in. City Hall had still been under construction while I'd been mayor. The comparison to a broom closet was an apt one. That's where I'd had to set up shop while I'd been running things. There'd been nowhere else while City Hall was still little more than a pile of rubble and twisted girders.

Taking a deep breath, I fought to work up some of the righteous indignation that had fuelled me just moments ago.

Baring my teeth and raising my hackles, I started forward again.

It was more of a show now than anything else, but I was still pissed off at Max for 'summoning' me.

Throwing open the office door, I made a point of only just avoiding having it bang.

It still gave me the intended effect though. Sitting within were Max and some bureaucrat I couldn't quite place. They both jumped in their seats when I entered, turning to face me.

"Mr. ... Mr. Taggert," said the bureaucrat. I recognized his voice. I think he was a minister of internal relations or something like that.

The back of my mind nagged. I *should* remember him. I'd been the one to found that department and hire him. His job was to keep the inter species tensions under control in the city.

Out of the seat in a heartbeat, the man, a nagga, bowed to me as he mumbled something. He was around me and out of the office before I could even blink.

I'd hired the guy because he could think fast. It seemed he could move just as quickly.

And he'd closed the door behind him.

"Max," I turned to the oni who sat behind the desk. He hadn't moved. "What in all the gods' names is this?" I tossed the letter I'd received, envelope and all, onto the large oak desk.

It fluttered across a sea of papers before coming to land before him, almost lost among all the other paperwork.

It was only then I notice the dark circles under Max's eyes.

"Bugger." I said. Taking a deep breath, I took a seat across from him, dropping heavily into the padded chair. "What's gotten all shot up now?"

Max was a good guy, and likely a better mayor than I'd ever been, but it was obvious these weren't normal times for the city. This wasn't the first time – by a long shot – that something had gone wrong.

Max leaned forward to pick up the letter, his eyes scanning it as he pulled it open. A moment later he shook his head and set it back on the desk. "Sorry, man," he said. "Things have been going in a hand basket for the last couple of days. I've been trying to get a hold of you, but your dogs kept brushing me off."

I cocked my head. "They were brushing off the *mayor*?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Told me that you had better things to worry about right now. Said that between your kids and the return of Ferguson I should leave you alone unless it was an emergency. Well, I asked one of my aids to draft something up that was an emergency letter." He shook his head. "I guess this was it. Sorry," he laughed again, "I guess I should have read it before I signed the bloody thing." He pointed down at the bottom of the page where his signature was visible.

I grinned, letting the anger fall from my body like a lead weight. "Don't worry about it. I know about signing things you haven't had time to read. Remember, I used to have your job. But what's gone so wrong it constitutes an emergency?"

He looked at me oddly. "You didn't see it on the way in?"

I snorted. "I was so rip roaring pissed off I could have walked past a riot and not noticed."

He smiled glumly at that.

"Tommy, follow me."

Out of the office, he led me along one of the hallways until we were in a little meeting room at the front of City Hall. It had a great view of the plaza.

And right now that plaza was filled to the brim with people. Angry people.

"They've been calling for the mayor for hours," Max said, a chill to his voice. "I went out to talk to them, but it seems I'm not the mayor they want."

I cocked my head. "Then who are they looking for?"

He looked me in the eye. "You."

"Oh bugger."

Back in Max's office, I had my head in a stack of papers taller than I was. Gods, I'd thought I'd been able to get away from this when I stepped down. "Okay," I said, "short version. What in all the gods' names went wrong?"

"As far as we can tell," Max said, sipping on a cup of black coffee, "Brian Ferguson."

"Huh?" That was enough to knock me for a spin. I sat up so suddenly I nearly sent papers flying.

Max shrugged. "Keep in mind that everything is speculation, but we think it's Brian's death that caused this."

I took a deep breath. "Brian's not dead."

Max looked around nervously. "Sorry. Brian's... uh, incapacitation seemed to be what caused this. Did you know the government finally got access to that wolf's apartment a couple of months ago?"

I just groaned.

I was about to let lose some choice words about how the police service had been running with Jon out of commission when Jameswell crashed through the door.

Jameswell was the assistant mayor. A cat, and a nice enough guy. I'd run against him when I'd first gotten the job, then he'd switched sides.

He wasn't exactly an unflappable fellow, but I'd seen him stare down more than a few crisis without flinching. He was a career bureaucrat. And after I'd turned him to the light side he'd ended up being an asset.

Right now he looked like he'd just had the wrong end of a red hot poker shoved up his tail... not that there's a *right* end.

Stumbling into the office, his fur was immaculate, but his eyes were wide and bloodshot. He didn't even notice me as he dove for a pile of papers on the side of Max's desk.

"Minutes of the HDL meeting from last week..." he mumbled.

Max leaned forward to pull a handwritten page from a stack in front of him.

"This?"

Jameswell paused for a moment, eyes blinking slowly before focusing on the paper.

"Ha!" His voice was just this side of exhausted hysteria. "This'll do it! I *knew* those morons had agreed to the terms last time. They were trying to change them on me..." His voice petered out to a growl as he turned on toe and began stalking out of the room.

"Oh." He paused mid stride and glanced over, as if seeing me for the first time. "Hi Tommy."

And with that he was gone.

"What," I asked with my mouth agape, "In all the gods' names was *that*?"

Max just sighed and shook his head.

"I've got Jameswell doing the talks with the Human Defense League. They've come back in force."

"But... how? I thought they were just about gone after Brian... oh."

Max shrugged.

"The records we have from Brian's apartment suggest he did quite a bit more than we thought. He was... active in the V-town government. Just not in ways that anyone could see. It seemed he had a lot of experience in keeping things balanced. He was able to keep the human population here in V-town safe right up until the previous administration began its purge. After that," he shrugged, "Brian didn't seem to be doing such a good job anymore, but he did still help to keep the city together."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Then I guess that brings up the question, just how much good did I really do while I was mayor? Was it *me*, or did Brian bring the city back together?"

A slight smile slipped onto Max's face. "Don't discount yourself too much, Tommy. From what we could tell you did most of it. It doesn't look like Brian was too active right then."

"Fine." I looked Max straight in the eye. "You've got protesters out front. What can I do to help?"

About twenty minutes later I was dressed in a suit – though not one as good as what Smith made – and half a dozen people were busily bustling me towards the front door. I was, it appeared, about to give a speech.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Max was by my shoulder as I stood just inside the door. He pressed a sheet of paper into my hand.

"Here, Tommy. This should do it." I looked down at the script. It was handwritten, quick and messy. "It's by my best writer. I told him you needed something to say. It should be good, he had a whole half hour to work on it."

I didn't even get a chance to skim the paper before the door opened.

Max at my shoulder, I was all but shoved out onto the front steps of City Hall.

Someone had been out here before me, getting ready. There was a small wooden podium set atop on the landing. Nothing fancy, all slapped together, but it had the logo of the city government tacked onto the front of it.

"Here we go," I muttered.

Stepping up to the podium, I set my papers on it and looked out over the faces before me.

By the gods, there were a *lot* of people here. It wasn't up to what I'd had to speak in front of when I'd been running for mayor, but I hadn't been up in front of this many people in ages.

And, much to my surprise, they weren't all human.

It must have been Jameswell talking about the HDL back in Max's office, but I'd had a mental image of most of the crowd being human. Not so, we had a pretty clean mix of just about everyone in V-town.

I forced a smile to my lips, though I didn't feel it.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced down at the speech before me and started out.

What in all the gods' names was this hogwash?

I'd had to read pre-written speeches while I was mayor, but whoever wrote this was a hack of the first order.

There were so many 'my fellow citizens' and 'we have to look towards the future' that it felt like I was reading a parody of a speech rather than the real thing. None the less I slogged through the lines, reading them off one at a time even though half of them threatened to gag me.

And, by the looks of it, the crowd standing before me wasn't so enthralled by it either.

Coming to a close, I stumbled over the words, but was able to get out an appeal to the people to hold on, stay the course, and keep calm.

I breathed a sigh of relief the moment I finished.

"Now stop reading a script and tell us what's really happening!" came a voice from the crowd.

Oh bugger.

"Yeah! We voted for you, not the oni! What are *you* doing?"

Throwing the papers back to the podium in front of me, I took a deep breath.

This had been a bad day. I had to keep my temper and not make it worse.

"What about the humans," came a gruff voice. "You seem to like giving them so much. What about the rest of us? You only give them so many considerations because you're sleeping with one!"

A general murmur came up from the crowd with that.

I could feel my fur stand up on end.

"And what in all the gods' names is wrong with trying to maintain the human population?" I said before I even knew what I was doing. "We were the ones trying to kill them off. And *what* considerations are you talking about anyway? Other than watching their numbers the government isn't treating them any different than any other citizens! That was the whole point of the reintegration. It doesn't matter if you're human or not, you're still a citizen."

I can't say I remember too much of the next five minutes, but that's how long it took Max to drag me away from the podium.

Who'd brought the vegetables to City Hall I'd never know, but now I knew how a bad comic felt. I'd always thought the old line about throwing things at people on stage was a joke.

Is it wrong that the first thought through my head as Max dragged me away was 'I'm glad this isn't *my* suit?'

Max shoved me through the door and back into the relative safety of City Hall before returning outside to talk to the crowd.

His voice was more soothing than mine had been.

"Come on, Tommy. Let's get you cleaned up before that stains."

I jumped when Jameswell set a hand on my shoulder.

That was the moment it all came crashing down on me.

"Oh bugger," I whispered, "I really blew that one."

The cat smiled as he led me downstairs to the nearest washroom.

"Don't worry about it," he sighed. "It's our fault. We never should have sent you out there on such short notice." He chuckled. "And don't feel so special. The mob has been out there for a couple

of days now, just not as large. Both Max and I tried to talk them down. I... can't say we got quite as visceral a reaction from them as you did, but then again neither did we ad-lib it either."

I snorted. "Yeah, I've got to remember just how bad I am at public speaking."

I was just getting out of my stained, and rather pungent, suit when I heard a sound from outside.

Stepping over to the narrow washroom windows, I had to stand on the tips of my claws to get a view of the world.

And what I saw chilled me to the bone.

There was a pack of police dogs out there. They were closing on City Hall with riot shields and batons.

"By the gods..." I didn't even have the words.

A moment later Jameswell was by my side. He was half a head taller so he didn't have to strain quite so much to get a view. "I guess Max gave up," he said. "We were hoping not to have to do this. We talked to Baker yesterday just in case. He had a riot squad overnighted in the station down the street in case things got out of hand."

It didn't take long for the dogs to close on the building. They didn't run, but walked sure and inexorable as the tide.

"Come on," I said, turning from the window.

A couple of moments later Jameswell and I were in a third floor meeting room with the view out front.

I'd left the soiled suit downstairs, but I still felt dirty.

The protesters hadn't fled when the cops arrived. Rather they'd pulled in around themselves and put up a strong face.

I couldn't make out the force's words through the thick glass, but one of the dogs carried a bull horn.

He addressed the crowd, but they didn't move.

Someone threw some spoiled meat at the officer. It splattered harmlessly against his riot shield.

I'll give the dog credit, he handled it better than I would have. It was like he didn't even notice the dark red stain on his clear plastic shield.

There was a long pause after the officer stopped speaking. Then a single bark came from somewhere.

The cops began advancing once more.

There wasn't much space between the two sides, only a dozen meters. In little more than seconds the calm, precise leading edge of the police riot squad came in contact with the rough, uneasy wall of protesters.

And then it all went to hell.

Not on the cop's side, of course. They had Jon back in charge of them, even if he wasn't anywhere to be seen. The police were perfect and by the book.

Too bad the protesters had never read the book.

"I see my men are performing their duty," came a voice from behind me.

I nearly leapt through the ceiling, Jameswell on my heels.

"Jon!" I had to fight to keep my heart from beating out of my chest as I reached out a hand to lean against him.

Jon, looking poster perfect, had been standing no more than a stride behind us. He was dressed in full riot gear, fold down mask and baton. The only thing he was missing was the shield.

He was even wearing body armour. And at his side, unlike the officers down on the street, was strapped a firearm.

"Commissioner Oaks," said Jameswell respectfully from beside me.

Jon nodded to him quickly as he stepped up to stand silhouetted by the window. He didn't say anything as we watched the force meet the protesters.

Oddly, they didn't seem to be pushing them back.

"Why aren't the cops winning?" Jameswell asked. "They're just standing there. They're not fighting."

Jon glanced over to him, clear blue eyes unreadable. His voice was little above a whisper.

"There is no *win*, Sir." Did I hear just the slightest venom as he said that? "We do not *win* by beating them back. Every act of violence the force displays is a loss for us. We can only hope to contain the damage, both to the city and to our own reputation. If a single member of the public were to be knocked down it would be worse in the end than if a dozen members of the force were wounded."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "I can control my force, *Sir*. I can only guide the public. You should know better than anyone that no one *controls* the public." He turned back towards the windows. "Should one of my men be wounded, it is in the line of duty. All the members of the riot squad are volunteers. They are here because they see the value in maintaining order. I can visit them at their bedsides should they be hurt. I can congratulate them, reinforce their belief that we are fighting for the right. But," he paused for a moment, letting the sudden silence draw out as we watched the chaos separated from us by not more than a few centimeters of glass, "Should one of the citizens be wounded... it will not be I who stands at their bedside. To wound an officer will only strengthen their resolve. To wound a protester will simply encourage them to fight again. We wound one and their story will embolden ten more to fight in his place. It is a difficult battle we fight, *Sir*, there is no way to win. All we can do is hope to tie. Or at least lose gracefully." He turned again to Jameswell. There was something in Jon's eyes now. They showed a steel I hadn't seen for a long time. "I can contain the damage, but it is your job – that of the government – to heal this wound."

The three of us stood there. There were chairs not ten feet away, but it would have felt disrespectful to sit while the battle played out below.

I hadn't noticed it before, but there was a radio on Jon's belt. He lifted it to his lips every so often to bark out orders, moving men from one engagement to another.

Mostly it seemed he pulled the force away from the hot spots, kept the protesters off balance not by attacking, but by retreating. He pulled them from where the mob thought the cops would be so that the officers were always nipping at their heels rather than facing them head on.

The only place he kept a thin blue line of men was in front of City Hall. But then again, the mob, for all it was worth, didn't really seem to want in here anyway.

We were looking down at the chaos below us when something caught my eye. There was a cop element of five dogs working its way slowly across the plaza. It wouldn't have been anything of interest, except I'd noticed that all the packs were in even numbers.

Looking back along their path, I saw a single officer stranded among the mob. It seemed his team hadn't yet noticed him missing.

I couldn't look away as the men and women closed on him.

The police were fearsome fighters. I knew this first hand. The dog down there should have been able to claw his way through to freedom, hardly breaking a sweat.

Instead he stood there, backing up against a wall and holding his riot shield out before him.

And he clipped his baton onto his belt as the mob advanced, leaving himself weaponless.

I wanted to cry out, but I couldn't find my voice.

It seemed I didn't have to. A moment later I felt Jon jerk beside me. He pulled the radio from his belt.

"Command to elements sixteen and twenty-three. Emergency response. Redeploy to the north-west edge of the plaza. An officer has been isolated and requires assistance." I couldn't make out the voices on the other end, but they sounded like barks. Jon swore under his breath. "They won't make it in time."

On the other side of me, Jameswell stepped forward, raising a hand to touch his fingertips against the cool glass. For just a moment the cat closed his eyes.

The protesters descended upon the lone police officer like a pack of wolves on a defenseless rabbit.

No. Wait... that comparison was all wrong...

I wanted to close my eyes too, but I just couldn't.

The first to strike a blow was a woman. A rat, possibly.

The hit itself was meaningless, her fist simply bouncing off the riot shield. But it was enough to embolden the rest of the mob. A second before they'd all been hanging back, not quite sure what to do. Now they surged forward, washing over the cop like a living wave.

Jon swore.

"Command to elements sixteen and twenty-three. Get a move on. Elements two and nine, redeploy to north-east corner of the plaza. Medical team alpha, we have an officer down."

His voice was so cool and mechanical as he spoke that I could have confused him for Ornthi.

No... change that. Ornthi *tried* to sound human. Jon... I think he had the ability to just turn that part of his mind off.

I began counting the seconds in my mind as the rescue teams pushed forward. I only got up to half a minute before they made it to where the officer had fallen. We watched them drag the protesters off him. Even from this distance I could see the blood staining his uniform.

And the baton was still clipped to his belt.

Jon let out a sigh.

"Element sixteen. Report."

I could only make out a few words over the static. "*Waiting for medical team.*"

I glanced over to Jameswell. The cat's eyes were still closed.

That was roundabout the point I realized I was done here. It didn't matter what I did, the game was in Jon's hands now. And he was a player on an entirely different level than I.

And I didn't want to join him.

Turning, I walked from the room without a word. Jon was still standing at the window, giving terse orders through the radio. "Five to plaza east. Thirteen to twelfth ave. and Yukon..." It reminded me of a chess game.

It wasn't until I closed the door behind me that I realized Jameswell had followed me out into the hallway.

"Sorry for getting you into this," I mumbled as I started off. Like the meeting room, the hallway was almost perfectly silent.

It was only now I realized why it unnerved me so. All the people that should be milling about City Hall on a normal day weren't here. It just as well could have been midnight.

Jameswell matched me step for step, our claws loud on the stone floor.

"Don't blame yourself," he said. "It was a long shot. We were hoping you might be able to calm them down. No one really expected it to work. If it hadn't been you that it would have been Max or I who set them off."

I picked a hallway at random. Jamewell stayed at my heels.

"You're following me." There was no reason for it, but I had to suppress a growl.

I guess I just wanted to be alone right now.

He fell back step.

"Yeah," he worked out a half hearted laugh. "You're the City Administrator. It just doesn't feel right to have you wandering about alone when there's a riot right outside. You're the highest ranking man in the city."

I snorted. Turning, I looked at him,

Okay, I'll admit it, I laughed.

Louder, perhaps, and longer than I really should have. I got a good belly laugh out of that.

I really needed it.

"You... you're going to protect *me*?" I said between gasps for air.

Jameswell might be taller than me, but he likely weighed even less than I did. And I'd been able to beat him up even years ago, before I turned to hunting. Jameswell was an accomplished bureaucrat, but a fighter he was not.

He glanced away nervously, staring intently at a featureless point in the wall behind me.

"Uh, well, I guess it's not really like that. I just don't want to be alone while... they're, you know..."

I smiled.

"Fine," I said, setting a hand on his shoulder, "Where were you heading?"

He shrugged. "Home, I guess. There's not really anything more for either of us here."

The cops really were doing a good job of keeping everyone out of City Hall. We didn't see a single soul all the way down to the main floor. Then again, with Jon commanding them, I had no doubt they were well on their way to quelling the riot.

We didn't dare go anywhere near the front entrance, but there was a side door to Yukon and Eleven A Ave that was placed just so to allow people like the mayor a discrete way in and out of the building when he wasn't looking for the press of crowds.

We were about a dozen paces from the exit when a door in front of us opened.

I'll admit I just about jumped when a shadow fell across the hallway.

"Mr. Taggart. Mr. Jameswell." It still struck me just how close Pine looked to Jon.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"Pine? How in all the gods' names did you find us?"

He cocked his head slightly. "I am your *attache*, Sir. It's my *job* to know where you are." He smiled. "That, and Commissioner Oaks contacted me. He suggested you and Mr. Jameswell might do well with an escort."

From the office behind him three more dogs stepped out. They were all dressed in their normal police uniforms, not the riot gear of the officers outside.

I nodded.

"Let's get out of here."

It was three blocks before I was brave enough to talk again.

Stepping out of City Hall, we'd found out firsthand just how good the sound proofing was. And

the air filtration.

The first thing to come to me were the sounds. Screams, growls. And behind them all the barked orders of police dogs.

Second, and far more powerful, were the scents.

I'd been expecting fear, even blood, but they were all secondary. First by a far margin was confusion. It smelt like these people were more confused than anything else.

"Dean," I turned to Jameswell as we stopped for a breather in an alley, "Be honest. Just how much of our success rebuilding the city was due to Ferguson? First he disappears, then we have an influx of immigrants, then the riots start up again."

He shrugged, pulling a hand down the side of his face to try and straighten his fur.

"Might I suggest, Sir, that you just answered your own question," Pine said, making me jump. "The riots have started *again*. There were riots far worse than these while Brian Ferguson was still alive. That suggests he was not as omnipotent as you are considering him."

"Heh, you might be right," I said.

Jameswell glanced from Pine to me and threw up his hands. "I don't care *who's* responsible, I just want to calm things down again." He paused for a breath. "Anyway, this is where I get off." He pointed a thumb down a side street. "My place is off that way. How do you want to split the guard?"

I glanced over to Pine. He nodded.

"You can take the officers, Dean. I'll head on with Pine. We'll be alright."

There was just a flicker of a smile before he turned away. "I pity anyone who tries to take you down, Tommy."

Things got a bit easier after Jameswell went his own way. It's hard to describe, but that cat was just so... *domestic*.

I don't mean to say it like a dirty word, but there's just no other way to describe him. He can run circles around me when it comes to paperwork or bureaucracy – and I'm no slouch – but he wouldn't know the right end of a deer to spring on if I let him feel it out with both hands.

Pine on the other hand... he might be just as domestic a breed as Jameswell, but the police were a species onto themselves.

I stalked forwards, moving from shadow to shadow without even really thinking about it. Pine followed me step for step. And that was something there. Pine, at least when he was following me, didn't move like other police dogs. If I didn't know better I'd have guess Jon had him trained by the hunters.

Yeah, fat chance of that.

But that did remind me...

We were far enough from City Hall now that the riot was a distant memory. Far enough that I felt comfortable stopping off at one of the fast food vendors that lined the streets here.

Cub-caf. I'd frequented this chain since I'd been working at KDP.

Pine stood a respectful distance away as I stepped up. That was after, of course, he slipped some bills into my hand.

Two orders of beef. It didn't cost much. I left a tip on the counter. I always felt bad for the poor folks who had to man these stalls, they reminded me of myself when I'd had to work a minimum-wage job.

That was one of the reasons I'd upped minimum wage while I'd been mayor.

Stepping over to where Pine stood next to a strand of trees, I found a bench in the shade and sat down.

"Come on, Pine." I flicked an ear to the space beside me. "You're making me nervous standing there."

He took one last look up and down the street before joining me. His motions were still stiffer than a normal person's, but not nearly so as your average police dog.

Smiling, I shoved one of the orders of beef into his hands.

"Sir?" He almost dropped it.

I bit a chunk out of my meal and swallowed it down. "Think of it as a thank-you for being in the right place at the right time to get me out of City Hall, eh?" I'd learned long ago that it was good planning to butter someone up when you wanted to get information out of them.

It's hard to make idle conversation with a police dog, but Pine wasn't too bad. And anyway, I'd had lots of experience with that art getting to know Jon.

And that brought us to what I really wanted to know.

"Hey, Pine," I said, keeping my voice just low enough not to carry, "I saw some odd dogs while I was down in HQ. They were guarding the sub-basement and were dressed all in black. Know anything about them?"

I'd tried to ask Jon about them while we'd been down there but the other dogs around us had always intervened before he could answer.

Pine went stiff. Not much, but just enough I could feel him move on the bench beside me.

"Sir," his voice had gone formal, "You know I'm under orders to work with you in any way I can..."

I sighed. "But you're not allowed to tell me," I finished.

I was surprised when he laughed. "Not quite, Tommy." He'd lost some of his formality. "I'd tell you if I could, but I *don't know*. The blue zone, the area you were in, is the highest security location the force has. Even more so than our archives. It's grounds for dismissal for an officer to even wander down there by accident."

"Heh." I closed my eyes for a moment as I rolled a morsel of beef around on my tongue. "So I'm guessing those guard dogs aren't exactly common knowledge."

Pine nodded, pulling a strip free from his meal. "Yep." His voice became even more casual, almost sounding *normal*. "I'd likely be in danger of losing my job by even knowing they exist if I wasn't assigned to you. Well..." he cocked his head slightly, "I would have. Commissioner Oaks appears to be running things a bit differently now that he's in charge, but old habits die hard. *He* wouldn't likely fire me for something like that, but the dozens of officers below him would without him ever knowing."

I snorted. "Yeah, I could believe that. I've had some experience trying to steer a bureaucracy. Even if everyone can see the jagged rocks ahead it still takes forever to turn, and don't even bother thinking about a complete one-eighty. Folks would die before they ever allowed that."

Pine snorted. The sound almost made me jump, coming from a police dog.

"Yeah, I could imagine that. Same as my old job," he said.

Alright... *that intrigued* me. Most police officers were born to families that had served for generations. Almost none of them went anywhere but the service.

"What was that?"

He paused for a moment, as if realizing he'd said too much.

"Oh, my dad was in the service, but my mom worked in the public sector. She could have been an officer, but was born lame." He winced slightly at the memory. "Anyway, you can't join the service until you're eighteen. My parents thought it might be good for me to get some 'real world' experience so they had me work at the same place as my mom for a few summers."

I grinned. "That company was a bit of a mess?"

He shrugged. "In a way. The worst bit was what they did *right*."

I cocked my head. "How's that?"

A sad grin tugged at his lips. "You may have noticed, Sir, that I'm a mere constable. There's a reason for that. The force does not take kindly to those on the bottom who think they know better than their... betters." He chuckled softly. "I knew Commissioner Oaks when he was still a cadet. He was in the class behind mine. It seems he didn't forget me."

"How so?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Attache to the City Administrator is quite a select posting. It's," he smiled, "The previous posting of the Commissioner. Some people think it might be the new gateway to the position."

I narrowed my eyes. "But I thought a lot of the higher ranks in the service were biased to family."

He nodded. "They were. Are, still to some degree. But there just aren't enough folks of the old families to fill them all. We may be police officers, Tommy, but we are still – in our own way – human."

I didn't head straight home. It was time to pick the kids up anyway, my wonderful *day off with Rebecca* was coming to a close.

I'd almost forgotten we were supposed to have had today to relax.

Well, I hope Rebecca found something to do.

I was a little put off when we rounded the corner to my parent's place. There were police dogs stationed here.

"Just as a precaution," Pine whispered.

Thankfully, Mom wasn't as sensitive to them as Dad had been.

Gathering the kids into my arms, I stopped to chat with Mom about their day. They were still young enough that they hadn't been *too* much of a handful.

Walking down the street, the kids nestled in the crook of each arm, I looked out at the setting sun.

Gods, was it the evening already?

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of world it was the two would inherit.

Chapter 7: I'll Rip Your Heart Out. By the Gods I Swear It

It was eleven in the evening when I stumbled through the front doors of the lobby. Pine glanced out from his office and grinned at me. He was used to this by now.

How the police were able to switch from protecting me like an over active den mother than leave me be well enough to go bounty hunting with English I'd never know. I could only assume Jon had worked out some kind of insane moon logic for them to follow.

But it wasn't hunting that had kept me out so late tonight.

Sure I'd been of tracking down bounties with the lion, but I'd tied off the last of those – a mouse armed robber – around two in the afternoon.

The remaining hours had been spent down at City Hall.

Every time I think I've gotten out *they just pull me back in again*.

I was getting the distinct feeling that no real work was getting down down there until I arrived. I wasn't sure Max was even coming in for the mornings anymore. There were no more riots these days, but things were still on the brink more often than not.

And the worst part? Overall living standards were *still improving*.

The city was in the best shape it's ever been. People were employed, immigration was up, buildings were either being constructed or refurbished, and there was food enough for everyone.

The problem was the people seemed to think that *better* wasn't the same as *bloody perfect*. Everyone had put so much work in during the rebuilding, so much faith in me, that they didn't like the idea that they world wasn't all champagne and cornflakes.

And I was run ragged off my feet just keeping things on the up and up.

I'd hardly gotten my head on the pillow when a familiar sound broke the night.

That of a crying child.

Beth by the sound of it. The pitch would be higher had it been Ging.

I closed my eyes for just a moment before shifting.

“No, Wolfy. I've got it.” Before I could even move I felt Rebecca's soft hand pressing me

down. "This one's mine."

My eyes adjusting to the gloom, I watched her silhouette glide across the room. A moment later she was past the ill-defined light patch of the door frame. A nightlight clicked on the the hall. I could see her shadow moving against the carpet.

A moment later they cry faded away to a soft, gurgling laugh.

You know, if I didn't know better I'd almost say the two of them were just doing this to keep Rebecca and I on our toes. They didn't *want* anything. Well, nothing more than hourly attention.

Something came a moment later that surprised me. And made me smile.

Rebecca singing softly.

I couldn't make out the words, I could hardly even make out the tune, but she was singing to the kids. I'd *never* heard her sing before.

Before I knew it I was asleep. I didn't even notice her getting back into bed beside me.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when I woke.

It would have been later, but the knock at the door *would not go away*.

Feeling a growl deep enough to shake my chest, I all but rolled out of bed. Rebecca was by my side, but I gently pushed her back under the warm covers.

We both knew who it was for.

Standing in the doorway was a messenger from City Hall. And towering behind him, just short of growling himself, stood Pine.

"Sorry, Sir," the dog rumbled, "He said it was important."

"Administrator." The messenger bowed his head slightly. I didn't normally effect that kind of faility, but the presence of a growling cop can have that effect on people.

Pine wasn't that big, but he managed to look huge towering over the rabbit.

"Your presence is urgently requested at City Hall," he began. I was about to slam the door when he added, "It's about the Human Defense League."

Sparing a glance behind me, back into the apartment, I did close the door, but softly. And with me on the other side of it.

I'll have to find a way to get Pine a raise one of these days. I had no doubt Jon had trained him, but he added a *human* element to the service when he was around.

Walking down the hallway towards the elevator after already having sent the messenger off, Pine pulled a flask and a small cardboard box from the pouches on his belt.

I eyed he wearily as he held them out.

He winked. "Nothing to worry about, Sir. I know your distaste for alcohol. Just a drop of sweetened ice tea and a pouch of chocolate."

Okay, I'll admit it. The moment he said the word chocolate my hand shot out like lighting. He could have lost a finger if he hadn't been careful.

Popping the cap from the flask, I upended it as we stepped into the elevator.

Gods, he hadn't been kidding when he'd said this stuff was sweetened. There was tea in there somewhere... I think, but he'd added a good pound of sugar by the taste of it.

Well, it did it's job. By the time the doors opened again it felt like my eyelids were glued to my forehead.

And as for the chocolate...

Unwrapping the small pouch, I was rather surprised to find the rectangle to be a milky white. I glanced over to Pine.

"Thought it might agree with your system better, Sir," he said with a grin.

"Thanks." I took a tentative bite. It didn't look like chocolate, but it tasted like it. That was all I needed. "Do I even want to ask why you have these?"

He shrugged as he escorted me to the front door. "No particular reason, Sir. I just noticed things were getting hectic for you these last few weeks and though I might as well make use of my discretionary budget."

I stopped for a moment and shook his hand before stepping outside. He stayed in the building with Rebecca and the kids.

It may feel early to me, but it was already late morning for the rest of the city.

Walking down the street I took the fastest rout to City Hall, but I refused to run.

They'd barged in and woken me up? Well, they could wait ten minutes as I walked.

Conveniently, the path I took led me right down one of the more upscale shopping districts.

This was nothing like where Smith kept his shop, but the merchants here were pleasantly understated.

And expensive enough that I never would have thought to browse here just a few years ago.

I didn't stop, but I did slow down just enough to peek through the windows to the brightly lit displays within. I'd been having to rely on other people a whole lot these last few months. Rebecca especially. I'd almost bowed completely out of caring for the kids lately.

We were married, and we slept in the same bed, but that was practically all I saw of her these days.

I got up in the morning, bolted a breakfast, kissed her goodbye. Fought like a tiger bounty hunting with English, then headed down to City Hall and worked like a dog with Max.

Coming back late at night, more often than not Rebecca and the kids were already asleep by the time I stepped through the door. She always remembered to leave me something to eat.

The thought of Rebecca being a cook for four made me laugh.

But it was true though, I saw more of her cooking these days than I saw of *her*.

I had to do *something* to say thanks.

The next store I passed by was decked from floor to ceiling with jewelery. I didn't even bother *looking* in there. The only jewelery Rebecca ever wore was our wedding ring.

The next store was woman's fashions. Well, that was *closer*. She had to wear *something*.

Though, to be honest, I had to say I knew next to nothing about what a proper woman might wear – going fur out most of the time myself – and even less what would best fit a human.

Though I had no doubt she'd get a good laugh out of me picking out a dress for her.

The final store before the intersection was for travel supplies.

Huh, I'd never really thought of that before. V-town was a port city. We had a lot of immigration these days – almost all of it by sea.

I may not be all that much of one for sailing, but perhaps I could find a camping supply store one of these days.

And that was the last chance I had to think about that.

Stepping up to City Hall, I made of point of coming in through the front door.

There were, thankfully, no riots out here, but there were still pockets of protesters cheering and jeering in the square.

And they were being carefully watched by police dogs. Though these officers were in their normal day to day uniforms. No riot shields out here. Not yet.

Stepping into the front hall, I forced a smile to my face and a steadfastness to my step.

Gods, I didn't *feel* like smiling, but I'd learned – all over again – in the last few days that the only way to motivate people is to make them happy.

And *no one* is happy to see their boss stalking down the halls with murder on his mind.

I waved to the people in the front hall as I angled for the nearest staircase. I had to find Max.

The oni was waiting for me in his office. He wasn't smiling.

I will say I was proud about one thing. The man's desk wasn't clear, but it was a heck of a lot better than it had been a few weeks ago. I'd managed to tame some of the paper tigers he and Jameswell had let slip their leashes.

"Alright, Max," I said, sitting down across from him. "What's on fire now?"

Despite the fact I *knew* he was getting a good eight hours of sleep a night – I'd been forcing him to, even I haven't been getting the same – he looked like he'd just been run over by a wagon.

"We have a representative of the HDL waiting in a meeting room downstairs," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "The messenger mentioned. What do they want this time?"

He shrugged. "That's just it. They showed up a couple of hours ago, just walked right in, took over a meeting room and set out an ultimatum that they wouldn't leave until they had a private conference with you."

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

"And where was security during all this?"

The security guards at City Hall weren't police dogs. They had been when I'd first taken over as mayor, but I'd changed that. Back when I'd first become mayor the old commissioner, Sayer, and I didn't always see eye to eye. I'd quietly replaced the cops in the halls of this building with a security force that was operated directly under the building manager.

Never mind the fact I *knew* for a fact that at least three quarters of the men and women in security had been employed by the police before coming here, it at least made me feel better.

Max sighed.

"The HDL had a legitimate appointment to be here for when they first arrived. Security didn't think anything of them. Then they took over a meeting room and no one had a clue what to do. They aren't being violent, and with the riots not so long ago..." he petered off. "Well, we just kind of put a guard outside the door and waited. The HDL might not represent too many people, but you know as well as I, dollars to donuts, that they can kick the wasp's nest better than anyone."

I closed my eyes for a moment and rubbed my forehead.

"Fine. Do we know *anything*? Or do I just get to walk into that bear cave deaf and blind?"

Max got up from his desk, walking around to join me as I stood up.

"Sorry, we tried to get something out of them but they just won't talk." He laughed. "We even tried sending in pots of coffee and seeing if we could wait them out as they had to leave the room. Nothing."

I smiled. Now that was the Max I knew. A conniving little bugger.

Down on the second floor, Max led me to one of the more posh parts of City Hall. Figures the HDL would set up here. They always had a taste for doing things big.

Turning down the hallway, I noticed the security guard standing beside the meeting room door had been joined by two blue uniformed police officers.

"Did you call them?" I asked Max.

He shook his head.

Well, that was Jon. Always on top of everything.

We stepped up to the guard.

"Mayor. Administrator." He bowed his head to us slightly.

"Anything happen?" Max asked.

A slight smile slipped to the dog's lips. "One members of the representatives was forced to... leave the room. We quietly diverted him when he tried to return."

Max smiled back. "Well, one down," he said.

I took a deep breath and stood in front of the door. Now that I thought about it I should have taken a moment and put on a suit to look more official. But then again, this was a bunch of ruffians camped out in a meeting room and refusing to leave. They didn't deserve official.

I knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" came a rough, male, human voice.

"Administrator Taggert," I said.

For a moment there was no reply. Then the door opened.

No one said anything.

I stepped in and closed the door behind me before the cops could follow.

The meeting room wasn't all that large, perhaps only five meters to a side. Not that much room left once you put a table and chairs in here.

And three humans.

"You took long enough," one of them muttered.

I kept myself from smirking as I took a seat without asking.

"Well, what did you expect? You woke me up."

He scowled. "You're part of the government. What were you doing asleep at this hour, wolf?"

I showed him just a flash of my fangs. "You'd be asleep too if you'd been here until eleven thirty last night."

He didn't say much in response to that.

"Shall we cut to the hunt?" I asked. "You call me – and only me – all the way down here. What in the world do you want?"

"You had kids," another one of them said. A woman.

I felt suddenly defensive. "Yeah."

"Two of them," she continued, "Twins."

I narrowed my eyes. "Yeah."

"And one of them was human."

"Yeah."

She smiled and sat back like she just managed to win something.

"How'd you do that?" another one asked.

I drew in a deep breath. For just a moment I was ready to break out into a whole spiel about Edmonton and project Phoenix and the Cataclysm and everything else.

And then I stopped.

Jon had asked me to keep project Phoenix quiet. I wasn't quite sure why, but he seemed to think it wasn't something that would do good to get out.

I let out the breath. "Just lucky, I guess."

If looks could kill.

"*Just lucky?*" One of them said incredulously. "The human race is dieing out and you've had the first human child to a non-human parent in a century and you're *just lucky?*"

"Listen, is this conversation going to go anywhere or are you just going to repeat what I say?" My patience had started thin and was getting worse. The sugar rush Pine had given me was long gone.

"You've fallen a long way, Mr. Taggert, since you were mayor. What happened the the *oh so noble* wolf that everyone voted into office? You remember, the one who courted the human vote, the one who worked with the community not so long ago to try and stabilize the population--"

"The one who saved you all from being killed off by the last administration," I cut in. "What more do you want from me? I saved your necks how many times now? Not one of you would be alive if it wasn't for the work I've done. Now I really am rebuilding the human population *and you can't just leave it at that?*"

The female human leaned forward. Now she tried to moderate her tone, as if seeking a middle ground.

"Mr. Taggert, how would you like it if a wolf was born from two human parents. That's not something you could let slide. You'd have to find out why. And *your* species isn't on the short list for extinction."

I took a deep breath and ran a hand over my head, trying to smooth the fur down.

"Listen," I evened my voice, "I'm not *trying* to hide anything from you. We don't know for sure what caused it." Well, that was the truth. No one had been *expecting* us to have a human child after the transformations in Edmonton. "We're working on it, okay? I've got some of the smartest guys in the city bashing their brains out trying to understand why this happened."

The first man narrowed his eyes. "That's not enough. We can't wait. It might only be decades before we die out. There's fewer of us now than there were even a year ago for god's sake."

"Then what?" I asked, exasperated. "I already told you we don't know. I can't give you what I don't have."

"You don't deserve her," one of them muttered.

The words hung heavy in the room for a long moment.

"Pardon?" I asked. My voice was mild, but my gut was rolling.

The human wasn't even smart enough to know when he was in trouble. He looked me straight in the eye for a long heartbeat and repeated what he said.

"You don't deserve her. A miracle that thousands of us would give our right arm for you instead it falls to you. What have you done to earn something like this? *We* should have had it. *We'd* put it to good use."

I couldn't help my ears from pulling back.

"Right," I said, my voice still mild. None of them seemed to be able to read my body language. They all seemed as relaxed as when I'd first entered the room. "The three of you have done so much more than I have. Than Rebecca has. We've risked our lives, worked more hours that we could ever count in your cause, and *we've* done nothing to deserve this so called gift from the gods that we never even once asked for."

The woman finally seemed to clue in, if only slightly.

"Listen, Taggert," she said, "No one is doubting what you and Rebecca have done to the cause, but you're not..."

"Human?" I suggested. "This has nothing to do what what I have or haven't done, does it? You're just mad because I had the wrong parents." Suddenly a thought occurred to me. "You already confronted Rebecca about this, didn't you? She told you to piss off so now you're here."

The first human went red.

"That's none of your business."

I narrowed my eyes, my vision threading to go scarlet. "You accost my wife and tell me it's none of my business?" I leaned forward across the table. Suddenly the cramped room felt all the smaller. "Don't you *ever* threaten my wife or children."

It seemed now that even the humans were able to pick up on the signs that I was about ready to snap. They all leaned back in their chairs to get away from me and shared a glance.

"We weren't... uh, saying that," the man said, holding his hands out in front of him. "We didn't threaten her. We just wanted to find out how this happened, that's all."

I took a deep breath and tried to get my racing heart back under control.

"Well now you know everything I can tell you. No one has a clue how it happened, but we're working on it. Are we finished here?" Ye gods, I was just making a right fool of myself these last few days. Every time I have to go out and speak to someone as mayor I just made things worse.

"We want to see the child." This was perhaps the first time the third human spoke. This voice was soft, but his words were strong.

"No." I didn't even bother pausing for thought.

"Why?" He narrowed his eyes.

I leveled him with a glare. "I don't need a reason. I'm her father. I'm not going to show her off in public like she's some kind of science project freak. She's my child. You can see her – maybe – in a few months when she'd older."

"A few months and the human population will have shrunk further. We need to see her now and get the investigation underway."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest.

"Or we'll have to take more drastic action," he added.

That was it.

In no more than a heartbeat I was out of my seat. Leaping across the meeting table, I landed atop the human who had threatened my child.

He didn't even have time to scream before I was upon him.

The other two, however...

I think I had about three seconds of time with the man to choke the life out of him before the door behind me burst open. Another three seconds and I felt the hands of police dogs on my shoulders.

I'll admit I've a bit of a gap after that. The next thing I remember was...

Well, at least there was no blood in my mouth.

The meeting room was empty now. The security and police dogs had cleared it out faster than I'd have thought humanly possible.

Well, I guess that was the key word there. Human. They'd hustled the three humans out, nearly dragging them away. I guess they must have been listening through the door or something, there didn't seem to be any confusion on exactly what had been going on.

And that left me, back in my seat, sitting in the middle of an empty room, in front of the table and couple of chairs I'd overturned.

The lights were still bright above me. Odd, it didn't feel right to be so bright in here.

A moment later there was a soft knock on the door.

"Eh?" I craned my neck around to try and get a look.

Jameswell poked his head around. "Can I come in?" His voice was hesitant.

I shrugged. "It's your building. Yours and Max's."

He cleared his throat nervously. "Yeah, sure. Just wanted to make sure you were cooled down was all."

I snorted. "I wasn't going to *hurt* them." I paused, looking down at my hands. "Well, not *much*."

He laughed and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Uprighting a chair, he took a seat. "Don't worry about it too much, Tommy," he said. "I asked around while you were in here. Apparently they're just one of the HDL groups around and they've been antagonizing just about everyone they could find to get information about your kids."

My blood went cold.

"Don't worry," he said, raising his hands, "They haven't gone anywhere near your apartment." A smile pulled at his lips. "But they did send a couple of people over to Police HQ." The smile grew wider. "By the sound of it they tried to play the same trick on Commissioner Oaks. It didn't go over well."

I laughed, nearly falling out of my chair.

"Do they even have the slightest idea how close Jon is to me?"

Jameswell managed to straighten his face. "I think so. That's likely why they thought he might know something. I think they got more than they expected. From the sound of it the entire force just about imploded on them. The cops won't even tell me where they've got them locked up."

"Tommy," he continued, lowering his brows and looking at me. "What *did* happen? I know we don't have all that long of a history..." he cleared his throat, "And it's not that good, but do you even know?"

I sighed and set my head back, looking up at the ceiling.

"I never lied to them. Everything I said was true. We don't *know* what caused it." I glanced over to him. He was watching me intently. "You know, Dean, that this stays with us, right?" He nodded. I let out a sigh. "We've got some pretty good ideas, but we don't know for sure, and for all the gods we don't know *how*. Anyway, Jon asked me to keep it as quiet as I can and I trust his judgment."

Jameswell shook his head. "I don't know Oaks all that well, heck almost no one seems to know anything about him other than his position, but I *know* that not even I want to tangle with the cops when they're trying to keep something secret." He shuddered for just a moment. "I've seen the cops when they're mad. I may *technically* control them, but I wouldn't ever want to cross them."

I signed. "Amen to that, brother."

I wasn't able to get out of City Hall unscratched, of course. The mere fact I'd walked through the front doors opened me up to whatever Max and Jameswell could pile on me, but I was able to get most of their fires put out by an hour or so later.

Walking from City Hall afterwards, at least the smile on my face was half real. I didn't *feel* happy, but I'd sent a messenger – as well as a police dog or two – to check on Rebecca and the kids. They were all safe and well.

Out on the street again, I didn't head straight home.

I'd thought about buying Rebecca something on the way here, and now I had the time to do it. Unfortunately, none of the camping supply stores were around City Hall. Camping wasn't *in*. I had to head out to the more down market shops for that.

And I *knew* there was a supply store around here somewhere... it had been here last I'd gone shopping while Rebecca was still pregnant. That was back when we'd taken our vacation in the Rockies.

Okay, I was lost. I'd taken what I thought was a shortcut down an alleyway, then tried to correct by slipping between two more building. Now I had no clue where I was.

The sound of loose gravel scraping across the asphalt behind me made me shiver.

Glancing back, a shadow moved amidst the garbage.

Bugger. My mind flashed back to the assassination attempts from when I'd been running for

mayor.

I didn't have any police dogs with me now. I'd sent them all back to look after the apartment.

I didn't even take the moment to think. I began running.

No clue where I was, no clue where I was going, I took off like a deer through the underbrush, leaping garbage bins and hurdling crumbling concrete blocks.

If I'd had any idea where I'd been before it was long gone now. I knew most parts of V-town, but this street was alien to me.

No longer in the residential, or even commercial parts of the city, I was now surrounded on all side by the towering hulks of long disused factories and warehouses.

There was the sound of someone yelling from behind me, but I couldn't make anything out over the rasp of my own breath.

Diving through the door of a long abandoned factory, I was plunged into shadow the moment I left the street. My canine eyes adjusted quickly, but not quickly enough to keep from slowing to make sure I didn't run face first into anything.

I was in the office now, decomposing hallways and cubicals branching out around me.

Picking a direction that seemed to lead away from the tail, I started off.

I didn't get far before the sound of someone storming through the door behind me came loud. Whoever it was – and there seemed to be only one of them – they hadn't the slightest interest in keeping themselves quiet.

Heck, even from this distance I could hear their heavy breathing.

Breaking from the office and out into the old shop floor, it quickly became apparent why no one had ever tried to reclaim this building.

They must have handled chemicals of some sort here before the Cataclysm. There were huge open topped tanks on the floor, each the size of a small building. And most of them had burst long ago, spilling their loads across the floor.

Any liquid was long gone, but I could still see the off-colour rainbow of the chemical stains on the concrete. I couldn't tell you what they were, but my nose was already starting to ache from their acid stench. There was no way in the world I was going to touch the floor. At best I'd be stinking for a week, at worst my feet might try to dissolve.

Taking a quick glance behind me, I still couldn't see my assailant, but the sound of his heavy footfalls was coming closer.

Taking as deep a breath as I dared, I stepped out into a collapsed ceiling beam that jutted out in front of me. The shop space was two stories tall. At least that gave me a little room to maneuver.

The beam I was running along was little more than a foot wide, I had to fall to all fours just to make sure I kept my footing.

The fact parts of the beam seemed like they were dissolving only confirmed my suspicions that the floor would be a very bad place to end up.

About half way across the shop there was a dividing wall of sorts. It wouldn't be of much interest to me except it was the end of the line for the ceiling beam I was on.

Glancing around, the only place I could see to leap to from here a raised concrete pad on the floor below. At least it looked clear of chemicals.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I had to ask myself how in all the gods' names I got myself into these messes.

Sparing one for glance behind me, I could see a monstrous form breaking from the shadows.

I jumped.

Ow, ow, ow!

I think I twisted my ankle.

Letting out a grunt of pain, I reached down with my hands and – hopping on one foot – grabbed hold of my offending joint. A quick twist left me nearly blacking out.

Bugger!

A pop and I felt the joint slide back into place.

Limping now, I made my way down the relatively clean concrete pad as fast as I could.

I heard cursing behind me.

More by good luck than by good planing I found a exit back to the street soon after.

Alright, I still didn't really know where I was, but now at least I had a clue.

Gastown.

This was the old industrial district of Vancouver. It was technically part of V-town, but not many people ever came here. That would explain why I hadn't seen a soul since this all started.

Heading north now, I aimed for the sea. I didn't really feel like a swim, but once I got to the coast I'd be able to get my location straight and hopefully make a break for safety.

Safety was foremost on my mind. The sound of whoever it was behind me was getting louder. It took everything I had to keep a wall between us.

A grim smile crossed my face. Well, at least I knew that as long the person was following me they weren't going after Rebecca and the kids.

And – I let my fangs show – I was hardly defenseless.

The sparkling waters of Vancouver harbor came into sight soon after as I picked my way across the rusted and ruined railroad tracks the separated Gastown from the water.

“Okay...” I whispered to myself, “The bridge is to the west. A left turn and I should be able to get to Stanley Park.” That was about as far as I got before it felt like the weight of the world came down between my shoulder blades.

“Oof.”

My vision went dark as I was engulfed by a huge mass. I couldn't pick out even a single scent, the smell of chemicals being too strong.

Twisting and turning like a demon let loose, I raked my claws against anything and everything I could find. And, much to my surprise, was blocked blow for blow.

Seemingly like whoever it was could read my mind, every punch, cut, or snap of my teeth was dodged, met, or countered.

And yet no blows came in return.

The heavy breathing seemed to slow now. Like the act of fighting was less of a strain for my attacker than the run had been.

“Cut... it... out!” The voice was flat and nearly unintelligible.

I finally managed to land a punch, through what I connected with I couldn't tell you.

A high pitched 'eep' came up, then I suddenly found myself flying through the air.

Well, I'd wanted to make it to the sea. Now I had. I landed in the tidewaters, a good five meters out, with a splash.

“Bugger! What did you do what for, Mate?”

Raising from the tepid water, I pulled the back of one hand across my eyes to clear my vision.

English was sitting on the sandy beach, cupping a hand over his crotch and rocking back and forth.

The words that escaped his tightly clenched lips were not things I'd be likely to be repeating

anytime soon.

"Oh gods, sorry buddy." Sloshing through the surf, I waded back to him as quickly as I could. He eyed me as I neared but didn't say anything until I knelt next to him.

"You've got good aim, Mate. Though I would prefer you applied it to someone else's happy bits." His voice had gone down a few octaves now, returning to something closer to normal.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, throwing one of his arms over my shoulders and helping him to his feet. "I didn't mean to. What were you doing chasing me anyway?"

He shot me a withering glare.

"My best mate is running about in the middle of Gastown – someplace he *never* goes – and looks like he just got run over by a parade, then he takes off for no reason, and you'd expect me *not* to want to know what's going on?"

I let out a sigh. "It's just been a long day, eh? I had to deal with the HDL this morning."

The lion winced. "Ah, so that's it. You were just sharing the pain, eh? You got it figuratively and I got the literal hit to the crotch." With that he straightened up, taking a few steps with a groan. "Well, looks like we'll both live."

I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, something like that," I said. "They wanted to know how Beth could have been born." It was then I realized how glad I was to have English with me. He'd been with Rebecca and I in Edmonton. He knew about the computers.

He shook his head, making his mane rustle. "It's bad mojo, Mate. All of it." He cut off, suddenly realizing what he was saying. "Not the kids that is," he added hastily. "They're a blessing whatever type they may be. It's just the battle over the technology. I *know* why the mutts want to keep it secret, the gods know what people would try to do with it, but folks have a right to know. You can't find the cause of the modern world and not let people know. Soon enough people are going to start demanding answers, and not just the humans."

I closed my eyes for a moment. Suddenly it was no longer his arm draped over my shoulders, me sporting him, but English holding me close.

"Yeah, I know," I whispered, "But it's just never that easy."

There was a laugh in the lion's voice when he spoke again. "Well, Mate, perhaps I can at least make it a bit easier, eh? I can't get everyone together, but at least I can give you a hand."

The journey back into V-town proper was on the slow side, English was still walking funny. This was the time I was normally hunting with him, but he didn't seem to mind taking the day off.

We did at long last find the camping supply store I'd been looking for. I'd been only a block off when this all started and had more or less sprinting a straight line away from it.

There's something about a good camping store, something about the scents of canvas and denim. Even after the morning they at least *almost* put a smile on my face.

I still didn't really have any clue what to buy as I walked up and down the aisles, English at my side.

Well, at least the lion was doing well. If I didn't know better I'd have almost thought *he'd* been the one wanting to come here.

In the end I picked up a new backpack for Rebecca, along with one for myself – with a couple of oversized pouches for the kids.

Though I had to laugh at that. They were growing so fast I wasn't sure I'd be able to carry them on my back for much longer.

English on the other hand, he had a more interesting armload.

Weighed down with ropes and hooks it looked like he was planing an expedition to the arctic, though I knew for a fact his plans for these supplies were for use at Storm Front. It would be a surprise if even a single thing ever left the city.

The clerk, a rugged looking bobcat, eyed our purchases.

"You want an account?" he asked. "That's a pretty big load."

The lion shrugged. "Sure, why not? I always like being able to walk out of a store without paying."

Back on the street again, progress was far slower now. English might be walking alright, but we were loaded down with our own body weight in boxes.

Thankfully we didn't have all that far to go.

I was just following the lion. I'd been expecting him to head back to the SF building, but instead we took a turn into the posher districts.

Cafe Bristol.

I didn't even realize where we were until we ran into a wrought iron fence.

"Careful," the lion called, "I don't want you dropping any of my new toys."

Heh, only he'd call a rope, hook, and a half dozen sheath knives *toys*.

"Allow me, Sir," a clipped voice came from my shoulder.

I nearly jumped as the weight was lifted from my hands by a pair of police dogs. What in the world were they doing here?

Then I noticed someone sitting at our normal table. Well, that explained everything.

"Hey, Jon," I said, pulling up a chair.

The shepherd twitched an ear in acknowledgement and he finished off a paper in front of him and handed it off to a waiting officer.

"Good afternoon, Tommy." He sounded as tired as I felt.

For a little while it felt like old times. English, Jon, and I, sitting out in the sun at Cafe Bristol. The only person missing was Rebecca.

Every so often we were interrupted. Sometimes by a SF hunter looking for English, sometimes by a officer looking for Jon, and even once by a government runner needing me to sign something.

By this time it almost became the lack of interruptions was less common than someone being pulled out into something.

I glanced over to Jon. "So, how's the... uh, *project* going?"

He scowled. "It's coming along, but no one's foolish enough to pretend there's a time line. Even with the help of Ornithi we're still slow at making progress," he ground out a growl, "But at least we're moving forward again. It's better than going backwards."

"Oh," I said, picking through the half decimated platter of food that sat before us, "I heard you had a run in with the HDL today too."

The growl he'd been suppressing came back full force now. "Yes. You could say that. They walked into HQ bold as anything this morning. Tried to storm right up to my office."

I snorted. It was hard to hold back a laugh with the thought of a small human gang storming the Police HQ.

The slightest grin touched Jon's lips. "They got as far as you might expect. Even held in lock up they were demanding a meeting with me."

"Did you oblige them?"

He raised an eye ridge as he took a piece of meat from the tray.

“Eventually. About four hours later. Just to quiet them down.”

“About Beth?”

He nodded. “I told them the matter was under investigation and they would be brought up to speed as soon as the information was made publicly available.”

“And when will that be?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don't *want* to keep it locked away, Tommy, but we need to know what we're dealing with before we start handing it out. The moment it becomes public that the Cataclysm came from Edmonton the place will be ransacked for any and all technology. And if they could produce something that powerful who knows what else could happen.”

I sighed and nodded. “Yeah. But we do know that at least one other group knows. Ottawa. They had a vehicle there when we arrived. Only none of their expedition survived when they tripped the computers.”

Leaning back on the warm metal chair, I closed my eyes and turned my face skyward. It was a beautiful day out. I tried to let the stress fall from me.

Too bad it just wouldn't go.

Chapter 8: From a Single Drop of Blood

It was two in the morning and I'd only gotten home from yet another day of hunting and paperwork perhaps an hour ago. It had taken me that long to finally get into bed. Well, at least it was warm.

The night was dark and quiet, but I just couldn't sleep.

There was no reason for it. Really, none at all. The day had been no better and no worse than any other, the children were quiet, and Rebecca was warm and soft next to me. But yet I still couldn't sleep.

Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the ceiling as the flickering lights of the city played out in shadows across the ceiling.

Twitching my ears, I could now feel what it was that kept me on edge.

The fact there was *nothing*.

Well, more than that, it was the fact I couldn't hear *anything*. Other than Rebecca's breathing, the only sound around us was that of the building fans.

"Hey, Babe," I gave Rebecca a nudge, "Wake up."

A moment later she opened her eyes without a word. Old habits die hard, and we'd been in so many life or death situations that we'd almost gotten used to having to wake up at a moment's notice.

"Something doesn't feel right," I whispered.

She didn't question me. Thirty seconds later I was tiptoeing down the hall to check on the kids and she was getting dressed. I noticed she made a point of pulling her knives from the dresser drawer.

Thankfully, everything was quiet in the apartment.

Poking my head out into the building hallway, I expected to see a police dog over by the elevator.

The hallway was empty.

I pulled my ears back. "Babe," I said, closing the door again, "I'm going to head down and find a police dog. Can you stay here and watch the kids?"

She furrowed her brow. I knew as well as she did that staying here was the last thing she wanted. We'd discovered long ago I had a talent for getting into new and interesting types of trouble when we were apart.

At long last she nodded, but not before pulling on her familiar red leather jacket. With that I knew she felt it too. Something was wrong and she wanted to be loaded for bear.

“Come right back, Wolfy.” She reached up and kissed me on the lips.

I worked up a grin.

“Babe, where else would I ever want to be?”

Alright, this was downright creepy.

They always dimmed the lights in the hallway at night to save on power, but the effect now was more like something out of a horror story. It wasn't dark enough to put anything in shadow, but rather *everything* was in that odd half shadow that washed away the colour, even from my night vision.

For half a minute I considered taking the elevator, but the sound of it in the night somehow instinctively turned me off.

Down at the far end of the hallway were the stairs. I slipped through the door silently, my claws not even clicking on the polished concrete.

Down to the main floor, I didn't see a soul. But then again, neither did I smell anything of note.

That was until I open the stairwell door.

There wasn't much blood, but I was hyper sensitive to it as things were.

Stepping out into the lobby, even without the scent I knew something was wrong. There should be a cop stationed by the front door twenty-four seven.

Creeping forward another step, I couldn't help my claws as they clicked softly on the tile floor. There was something poking out from around the corner up ahead.

Something brown.

I wanted to break into a sprint, my heart racing so fast I could hear the blood pounding in my ears, but I wouldn't risk it.

Inch my inch I moved forward, one foot carefully placed in front of the other.

There wasn't the slightest sound from anywhere. Even the faintest click of my claws echoed around the lobby like gunshots.

Closer now, I could make out what it was that poked around the corner.

It was the brown furred toe of a police dog.

Oh bugger.

It felt like it took me forever to cross the ten meters that separated us. I looked over my shoulder so many times I was starting to develop a tick.

Crouching down, I reached forward a hand to the motionless foot.

And let out a soft sigh.

Good, it was still attached to a body, and felt warm.

Poking my nose around the corner, I used an old trick of first lowering my head to the floor. It would be less likely anyone watching on the other side would notice me way down here.

The hallway was empty save for the police dog who laid sprawled on the floor. The hallway led to Pine's security office. And the cop laying before me wasn't Pine.

My twitch was growing worse.

Pausing by the officer in the hallway just long enough to check if he was alive – he was – I continued on. Faster now, I no longer cared if anyone heard me.

Anyone who could take down a trained police dog was obviously a match for me. I'd have better luck calling reinforcements.

I passed another two police dogs on the way to the office. Both of them were out cold.

That wasn't what made my blood run to ice.

It was the fact that all three dogs had obviously been in a fight, but they'd all lost swiftly and conclusively. And there wasn't a mark on them.

I could only think of a half dozen people in the entire city who could take on three police dogs *at all*, and I *thought* they were all on my side.

The door to the security office was slightly ajar. I could see the light on inside. And I could smell the scent of blood.

Pushing the door slowly open with the tip of a finger, I peeked around the corner.

Jon had used this office once, and Pine hadn't changed it since he'd moved in. There was a desk in the centre of the room and maps and charts pinned to all the walls.

Now there was a form thrown over the desk. His legs were laying atop it and his upper body was hanging down the far side.

It was Pine.

I didn't even bother swearing as I stepped into the room and closed the door silently behind me. There were three independent dead bolts on the door. I locked them all.

"Pine? Talk to me, man." I took a quick look around the office as I stepped up to him. We were the only ones in the small, windowless room.

He didn't respond.

Above us, the steady building light cast everything in harsh, sharp edged shadows.

Taking gentle hold of the dog's shoulders I lifted him from his awkward position and laid him out on the floor. His breathing was rough and shallow, but here was still alive.

Unlike the dogs out in the hallway, he was covered with blood. All of it his own by the smell of it. Unlike out in the hallway the air in this room was thick with the scent of battle. It very nearly blotted everything else out.

The other police dogs had been taken by surprise, unable to mount much of a defense. Pine had seen it coming. Whatever *it* was. And he'd fought for all he was worth.

But from what I could tell all he'd managed to accomplish was to hurt himself.

I didn't know what to do. *Something* was in the building, and it was one of the most deadly things I've ever seen... except it hadn't killed anyone.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to steady my nerves. And my eyes fell across the radio sitting on the table behind Pine's desk.

It wasn't a little handheld unit, but one of those massive boxes that takes up a whole table.

Sitting down in front of the monster, I suddenly realized I had no idea how to use the bloody thing. Well, only one way to find out.

Pulling the headset uneasily over my ears, the sound of static blotted out the silence of the night.

It didn't make me feel any better.

There was a button next to the microphone that sat before me. I pressed it with a mechanical click.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" My own voice came back over the headset a moment later. It sounded small and frightened.

For a long moment there was nothing but white noise.

Then, just at the edge of my hearing, I made out a familiar sounding voice.

"This is a restricted frequency. Sign off immediately." I'd never been so happy to hear the clipped voice of one of V-town's finest.

"This is Tommy Taggart. I need help. Now." I tried to keep the edge of panic from my voice. I failed miserably.

"Taggart?" The voice sounded suspicious. "Contact your local officer. Pine is on duty."

I ground my teeth. "Pine is out cold, a bloody mess. So are the other dogs here."

The voice came in clearer now. They must be adjusting the set on their end.

"Repeat. Officer Pine is down? So are Winterberry and Larch? Understood. Contacting reinforcements now."

There was nothing but static for a long moment. I knew there was a police station just down the road. HQ must be calling there.

When the voice came back even I could hear how shaken he was.

"The nearest station is... not responding," he said. "We are redirecting officers from HQ."

A chill ran down my spine. An entire station taken out? Just like that? It was one thing to take down three officers. The idea that someone, *anyone*, could take down a whole station of dogs was...

I took a deep breath.

"Are you still there, Sir?" came the voice over the radio.

"Yeah."

There was a couple seconds pause. "Very good, Sir. I've been advised to ask you to remain where you are. I assume you are in the security office? That room has been fortified. You should be able to isolate yourself and wait for support."

The image of Rebecca and the kids flashed through my mind.

"No. I'm not leaving my family."

Again there was a pause. "They should not be in danger, Sir. As long as they are in your apartment they should be safe. That area has also been fortified."

Huh? I hadn't known that.

I let out a long sigh. "Fine. Just let me drag in the dog from the hallway. I don't want to leave them in the open."

The man on the other end of the radio said something, but I didn't bother listening to it.

Carefully unbolting all the locks, I stepped back out into the hallway. It was a breath of fresh air out here after the growing scent of blood in that confined little room.

The fact Pine hadn't moved the entire time hardly made me feel any better.

Dragging the bodies into the security office, I was just about ready to button down and wait for backup when I noticed something.

There was a pegboard in the back of the room, it held the keys to all the different parts of the building. There was one missing.

The master.

And the splatters of blood about the room suggested this was where Pine had made his final stand, defending the keys.

I didn't even bother to swear. Anyone with that key would be able to walk right through any defenses put in their way. Including into the apartment.

Shutting the door to the security office, I didn't bother locking it this time. It wasn't like it would do any good.

Switching into hunting mode, I no longer moved like a scared pup. I still hadn't the slightest who or what was in here with me, but I had my family to protect. There was no room to be scared when I had to think about them.

Casing the main floor, I kept my nose to the ground to try and pick up any scents I could. It was no good, too many people walked these halls everyday for me to lift anything.

It wasn't until I opened the door to the back stairs that it hit me flat in the face like a mallet. I knew that scent.

Brian.

Jon had been hunting him down since we'd found his place way back when, but no one had seen hide nor hair of him. Now it seemed he was coming for me.

My blood went cold as I began to run.

I made it to the third floor in a matter of seconds. I could have howled in joy when his trail went right past it.

Even then I poked my nose into the hallway to make sure the apartment door was untouched.

Drawing what should have been a deep and calming breath, I couldn't keep Brian's scent from running about inside my head. He *knew* where the apartment was. He'd broken in at least once before. There was no way he'd miss it so easily.

Turning back to the stairs, I began following the trail again as it wove up and up.

It didn't take me long to reach the top of the stairs, this building wasn't all that tall.

At the very top there was a door to the roof. The master key from the security office hung from the lock here. I pulled it free.

Opening the door to the outside, a cold gust of night air hit me hard in the face. It felt like it should be raining, but the sky was crystal clear. A strong wind came from the west, the direction of the sea.

Stepping out, I realized I'd never been up here before. The footing was rough and uneven, tared gravel and roofing shingles biting into the pads of my feet.

There was a strobing red light off behind my left shoulder, alternatively bathing me in blood red and pitch darkness.

I honestly hadn't the slightest why we still used those. They were originally for airplanes, but no one had used those in decades.

Stumbling forward, the wind shifted slightly, bringing a scent to my nose. I began growling.

But... there was something wrong. It was Brian, I *knew* it. But yet it wasn't.

The light behind me strobed again, giving me a short burst of red tinged vision.

A dozen or so meters away, sitting on the edge of the building with his legs dangling over, sat a wolf.

I stepped forward, ever so slowly edging towards it. My feet made enough noise in the gravel to wake the gods but he never turned, never seemed to notice.

Every time the light behind me faded away I was left in darkness, near complete blindness. My eyes were better than this, but I just couldn't adjust it things didn't stay the same.

At long last I came close enough I could make him out clearly.

An average wolf, with red fur not so unlike my own brown, he was a touch on the thin side, muscles showing though his coat in a way that wasn't completely healthy.

He had changed, but yet I knew it was him. It was Brian Ferguson. The man who had tried to kill me and threatened Rebecca. The man I'd thrown from the top floor of a thirty story apartment building to watch hit the pavement far, far below.

I couldn't hold back the instinct. Raising my hands, I got ready to push him one more time. The fall wasn't as far, but perhaps I might be successful on the second try.

I was inches from giving him a sharp, swift shove when his voice came to me over the gusting wind. It was high and pained, sounding more like a pup's than a man's.

“Who am I?”

I stopped dead.

He didn't turn towards me. Still sitting on the edge of the void, he looked out over the lights of the city spread out below. They looked so close that one could almost reach out and touch them.

That had not been the voice of Brian Ferguson I'd heard.

I knew Brian's voice. It was mild and condescending, the inflections were different. Brian had grown up in the same place but in a different time. His voice was unique.

This voice... it was more like anyone else in the city.

“I've seen things,” he continued, worlds still little more than a whine, “I've seen... people. But they weren't. Bears, monkeys, birds... things I can't even describe. They've all been here, walking the streets like a dream I keep returning to every time I wake up. What kind of world is this where I wake into a dream and my dreams return me to the real world as it *should* be?”

He reached out a hand, as if trying to grasp the air. The long, slow strobe of the light behind us came and went three times before he spoke again.

“I know the streets of Vancouver. I've walked them. They're down there somewhere. I can feel it. I... I used to walk those streets. I used to have a... beat. But I just can't remember.” He reached out and picked at the sky again, as if trying to pull memories from thin air. “Why can't I remember? I... I remember being able to *remember*. But it's all gone now.”

I was still standing no more than a stride behind him. My arms were still outstretched to mercilessly shove him over the edge to – once again – his doom. But I couldn't.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to keep his scent from filling my mind. I'd spent so much time and effort memorizing that scent, linking it to all my fear and hatred that having him so close to me was like standing next to my own darker self.

Stepping haltingly to one side, I got a better look at him. He was still the same red furred wolf I remembered, hardly any different than when I last saw him plummet away from me, but there were hairline scars along his fur, spiderwebs of grey.

“Why are you here, Brian?” I asked, my voice weak.

He cocked his head slightly. “Brian? Yeah, that sounds about right. Brian.” He rolled the name around on his tongue a couple of times, as if trying it out. Then he smiled. “Yeah, that feels right. None of the letters ever said what my name was.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Letters? What's going on? Why are you here?”

At long last he glanced over to me. I couldn't make out his eyes in the darkness. There were just deep shadows where they should be. Occasionally I could see the faintest of glimmers.

“Brian,” he said again, a pained smile spreading across his lips. “It feels good.” For a moment he shook his head and groaned, as if experiencing a migraine. “Uhh.. yeah.” Then it was gone again.

“The letters? Don't you know those?” he continued, seeming to only pick up on the occasional thing I said. “Doesn't everyone have those? How else would you know who you are? I remembered the first one day, a few months ago... it was... it was under a paving stone. It was from me, from before.” He raised a hand to smack himself on the side of the head before continuing. “It told me who I was. Reminded me I was... me.”

I furrowed my brow and forced myself to sit down on the roof next to him. Unlike Brian, I sat back a few feet from the edge. I didn't trust him not to do to me what I'd been planing for him.

“You're Brian Ferguson, aren't you?” I asked. He looked like him, smelt like him, but in no way acted like the man I'd so briefly known and hated.

“Ferguson,” he repeated. Once again he played with the name before smiling. “Yeah, that's me, I guess. I mean, who else would it be, right?” For the first time he turned his head and looked at me.

“And you... you're Tommy Taggart.”

I nodded.

He furrowed his brow. “I know you. I remember you. I think. I know your face, your scent, your name. But I don't remember *you*.”

I snorted. “We didn't meet that many times.”

His eyes widened. “But... but, you're... *you*.. You have to be. You're the only one I remember.”

“I'm what?” I asked, pulling back a step.

He let out a long breath. “Aren't you... *family*?”

I nearly fell right over. I was only glad I wasn't sitting on the edge.

“Me?” I felt a growl growing in my throat. “*Me*?”

He shrunk back as if I'd slapped him. A moment later a whine escaped his lips.

“I'm sorry. I... I just don't remember. You're the only person I can remember at all. You, you and the woman. I thought you might be... might be my... father.”

I snorted.

This man, who'd tried to kill me on no too few occasions, now thought that I was his *father*. The wolf over a hundred years old and he thought *I* was his dad? I was just about to start laughing when I stopped dead.

Brian was crying.

“I remember falling, Tommy,” his voice was rough, “I remember it. I fell for longer than I ever imagined I could. I could see the ground rushing up to meet me. The... the only thing going through my mind was your name.” His closed his eyes for a moment and shivered. “I guess that's why I remember it. I remember your face.”

Wrapping his arms around himself, I could help but think he looked like a scared and lost pup.

Taking a deep breath, I moved closer to him, sitting out on the edge of the building and letting my legs dangle out over the void. I couldn't even see the road beneath us in the darkness.

I hadn't realized just how small his little ledge was. Even a slight shift in weight and it felt like I could go sliding right off into the empty sky.

“But you're not, are you?” Brian said.

I jerked back to the here and now. Brian was still seated beside me. He was looking at me now, watching my face.

“Not what?” I replied, fighting to keep my tone neutral.

“Him.” He let out a long breath. It steamed up in the night. “You're not my father. I should have realized it long ago. It's just... you look a little like me. And I remembered you. I don't remember anyone else... except that woman you're with. I thought that if I remembered anyone it would be my parents. Or my wife. I had one. I think. God, Tommy, why can't I remember?”

There was no more than inches between us, but yet I'd be careful not to touch the wolf.

I reached out towards him, now. Slowly and hesitantly. He didn't flinch away.

Gently, and more than a little tentatively, I set my arm over his shoulders.

He felt cold, even under the fur coat.

And more than that, I could *feel* his body moving, and not in any normal way. I would have pulled back in horror if not for my own regeneration.

Brian Ferguson was – from the point of regeneration – the single most gifted person I'd ever met. Likely the greatest to ever live.

His body was slowly shifting and twisting under my fingers, his flesh molding and reforming like clay.

“It's been like that since I woke up,” he answered my unasked question. “I don't remember

waking up well. I was out on the road. I couldn't think, all I did was drag myself away. I was... scared. I don't know why. I knew *they* were out to get me."

I swallowed down a lump in my throat and asked the obvious question.

"Who?"

He shrugged. That made the feeling of his regeneration all the more unreal.

"Don't know. Everyone. Those... those *dogs*." The way he said that word was like spitting venom. "They call themselves cops but..." He cut off suddenly, hands flying up to him temples as a whimper escaped his lips. "Why can't I remember? I know... things, but it's like wandering through a foggy maze. Sometimes I can see clearly, but then the wind shifts and the walls move. And then... and then when I think I'm getting... it hurts."

Sliding closer, I tried to warm his cool body. Now I knew why he was so thin. His regeneration was likely using up every calorie it could find, repairing him.

"Brian, sush," I lowered my voice, taking on the tone I'd learned over the last few months when speaking to Ging and Beth.

Gods.

The flash of their faces through my mind nearly made me shove Brian right off the edge. Then he whimpered, just like a pup. And I couldn't do it.

"Sush, Brian, you're alright now. You're safe."

He looked at me, eyes wide. "No... I... there's more. But I just can't *remember*."

"It doesn't matter, Brian." I pulled him back from the edge a bit. More for myself than him.

"You've been through a lot. You can't just pick up from that and move on. It takes time. It'll all come back."

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was what I was afraid of. The thought of Brian Ferguson alive again, with his memory back.

As harmless as this pup in a wolf's body may look, I could only imagine the horrors he'd put me through when he remember it was I who'd murdered him.

"What do you remember, Brian?" I asked.

He took a deep breath. There was something in that action. He didn't breath through his nose the way a wolf should. He breathed like a human.

"I remember Vancouver." His voice was little more than a whisper. "I remember tree lined streets, endless cars on the roads, and more people... *real* people, than you could ever imagine. I remember life the way it should be. But it's all like shadows. I can make them out, sometime in finer detail than should ever be possible, but yet when I try to bring them forward they disappear like smoke. And every time my head hurts."

I looked down to the street below us. I could see something moving in the darkness.

It was hard to make out, but it was like water running through a stream. Still far away, but a flood of blue uniformed dogs were sprinting this way.

I didn't say a word.

Off on the horizon a crescent moon was rising. It was too overcast to truly see it well, and the wind pushed the clouds around making it appear and disappear as it pleased.

This was the first in a long time – perhaps since my dad died – that I've felt like howling.

Raising my head to the stars, I started low, soft and quiet so as not to startle Brian. Even then he jumped, almost sliding forward. The cry wasn't perfect, and hardly poetic, but it came out clear enough. I was rusty, but not that out of practice.

Coming back up for air, I glanced over to Brian. He was looking at me dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" his voice was breathless.

I smiled. "You're as canine as I am. It's nothing." In truth there had been more to it, though I'd never admit it to him. The cops knew my voice. They'd recognize it as they raced down the streets. Them knowing where I was would save them the time it would take for them to search the building.

"I'm not... I'm..." He was about to say 'human', I knew it. But instead he looked down at his hands. "This."

I tightened my grip around his shoulders. "It's nothing, really. It's built into us. Just," my mouth dropped open in a grin, "Relax and do what feels natural."

Well, that had been how my dad explained it to me.

Lifting my head back to the stars again, more slowly this time so as to allow him to watch, I opened my mouth to howl.

There's more to hollowing than I've explained. You don't use your vocal cords the same way as when you speak. There's a bit of a trick to it that you can't really explain. It's a canine thing. Also, there's a language to the howl. Nothing like english, but enough to get a basic message across.

Right now I was holding a single, strong tone. No waver to it, no snarl or growl of dominance.

I knew for a fact that the cops would be able to pick up on the message – they were canine after all – as well as Rebecca. I'd helped her learn how to read howls a couple of years ago.

A how can carry a lot further than a yell.

It wasn't long until another cry came up to rise with mine. It took Brian more than a few tries, and his was coughing up a fit between them, but at long last he was able to match my note.

And that, in and alone, was how anyone could tell he wasn't a true wolf. No wolf holds the same key as the leader of the howl.

It's in part a dominance thing. You don't challenge your alpha, but on a deeper level it has to do with the pack. A pack wants to look big, strong. That's why wolves always howl off key. It's to allow each and every one of them to hold their own note. You never match each other because that would make the pack sound smaller, sound weaker.

Brian, after a few tries matched my howl near perfectly. He was about my weight, about my apparent age. It sounded like I was listening to myself on a recording.

I had to fight with my instincts to keep from hopping to another key and solving the problem.

Beside me, Brian cinched closer, leaning into my side. His body still felt near deathly cool to the touch.

Then, a few seconds later, another howl joined us.

It wasn't the same as ours. A wolf's howl is different than other canines, more ragged and less cultured. The howl that came up to meet us now was more like a text book example of how a proper howl *should* be rather than how a real person did it.

Jon.

I'd never heard the dog howl before, but it could be no one else. It was a police dog for sure, and none of the cops would be so bold as to try and join the howl of the City Administrator.

He didn't match the cry Brian and I raised. His howl was softer, and slightly higher in pitch. There was a wavering of uncertainty to it.

He was asking a question.

Now I did shift my own howl slightly, making it higher and less aggressive. Brian matched a moment later, following me like a lost puppy.

I held the note as long as I could, to the point that when I finally broke off I was gasping for breath.

Brian cut off right after me. His eyes were dilated and his hands were shaking.

"I've... I've never done that before. I know it."

Still sucking in air, I grinned at him. "I thought you couldn't remember."

Any return grin died on his lips. "No. I *know* I've never done anything like that before."

My ears twitched. I could hear someone coming up the stairs behind us. No, strike that. I could hear a *lot* of someones.

And by the gods did they sound *pissed*.

I was getting the feeling that half of the entire V-town force was here tonight. Brian hadn't noticed, but I'd been watching as the blue uniformed wave washed along the street below us. There was hardly enough space between them to see the pavement.

At long last Brian seemed to hear the footsteps as well. He pivoted around to look curiously at the open door.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied, standing up. "You might want to stand away from the edge. It's the cops. And I don't think they're going to be gentle when they show up."

He looked over to me, eyes wide.

"The police? Why? What have I done?"

I was *this* close to face palming.

"Well, for one thing, I'm guessing it was you who took out the three of them downstairs. Not to mention the entire station that isn't responding."

"Oh." He looked down at his surprisingly bloodless hands. "I'd forgotten about that. They were between you and me. I just wanted to see you. And.." he laughed softly, "And then when I got all the way here I lost my nerve and came up to the roof. *You* came to see me."

The stomping feet were just about at the top of the stairs now.

Turning to Brian, I had just the time to one last thing.

"Stay calm," I said, patting him on the shoulder before stepping away. "They're as scared as you are. Keep calm and everything will be--"

I didn't get a chance to finish.

Like a bullet from the muzzle of a high power rifle, a police dog lunged through the door and across the roof. I don't think his feet ever touched the ground.

Brian barely had time to turn and see his attacker before he was flat on his back. He would have smacked the back of his head against the roof, but he was hanging half way out over the void.

He would have gone tumbling over if I hadn't had the foresight to have him step away.

The cop growled something, but I couldn't make out the words. This was *not* the response I expected from the normally calm and hyper efficient police force.

Then, poking out from under the blue uniform, I noticed a black bodysuit.

I backed away without saying a word and waited for the rest of the force to arrive.

They weren't long in coming. About thirty seconds later the main body of the force all but exploded out onto the roof. They must have figured out Brian was here. No small number of them were armed with shotguns and rifles.

Firearms weren't normal issue for any cops.

As if he was being drowned, Brian disappeared behind a sea of blue.

"Hey, wait," I said as I tried to step forward. I didn't even make it two feet before the wall of bodies firmed up. "Take it easy on him. He's not..." I didn't even know what to say. "Be gentle with him. He's hurt," I finished lamely.

A moment later I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Behind me stood a dog, the same as all the others. From the tip of his toes to the top of his ears

he was as close to identical to all the others cops as you could ever hope to imagine.

I recognized him at once.

"Hi, Jon," I said.

He didn't say anything for a long moment as he stared past me, out into the milling bodies that centred around a single unresisting form.

"Is it really him?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "I think so. He regenerated."

Jon coughed. "No one could regenerate from a fall like that. Not even you."

I sighed. "*He* did." I turned to the dog, catching his clear blue eyes. "Jon, there's more to it than that. It's Brian, I'm sure of it, but his mind isn't there." Jon cocked his head. "I don't know how to explain it. His body's regenerated but his mind is a blank slate." I let out a long breath. "Don't hurt him. Everything he's done in the past... it's not *his* fault."

Jon looked at me for a long moment, studying my face.

Then he let his hand fall from my from shoulder without a word and waded off into the sea of blue.

A moment later I heard him barking orders.

Descending the steps back down to the third floor, I noticed there were police dogs stationed at every intersection now.

And there was one particular dog standing guard at the door to my apartment. He had a bandage over the back of his head and looked a bit unsteady on his feet.

"Sir," he said with the perfect clip of the service as I stepped closer.

"Pine," I responded, leaning against the wall next to him. He wasn't talking like a man anymore. He was talking like a police dog.

"I... I'm sorry, Sir," he began. There was something in his words that reminded me so much of Jon. The way his duty and his personality mixed. "I've failed you." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I can understand if you'll be requesting a replacement officer. I let both you and your family come to danger. That was unacceptable."

I rolled my eyes and snorted. Yep, just like Jon.

"Give it up, Pine," I said, reaching out to give him a gentle shove. "There were two other dogs down there and you were the only one to put up a decent fight against Brian." His pupils contracted when I said that name, like he was reliving a bad dream. "That guy took out a whole *station* and you think I'm going to be mad at you for not wiping the floor with him?"

"I'm not quite so proud to think I could do *that*, Tommy," A hint of the real man slipped back into his voice, "But I was brought here to protect you. I failed."

I threw my arm over the man's shoulders. "Pine, you're my attaché, not my bodyguard. There's a difference. I'm sure Jon tasked you with both roles, but I need a helper – and a friend – not someone to beat people up." I grinned. "I've already got a lion to to *that* for me."

Back in the apartment now, I found Rebecca sitting in the front room, keeping an eye on the kids through an open doorway.

"Everything settled, Wolfy?" she asked.

I signed and sat down heavily beside her. "Yeah, Babe." I gave her a quick review of the night's escapades.

She'd met Brian before, too. She shivered.

We spent the night sleeping in the front room, watching the doorway.

Chapter 9: An Invasion from the East

The next morning there was a note waiting for me with Pine. It from from Jon.

The handwriting was clean and precise. It wasn't unnatural, but there was about as much personalty in it as you'd see in your average typewriter.

He wanted to see me whenever I was free to meet, in the cafeteria at Police HQ.

Wait... Police HQ *had* a cafeteria? I'd been through most of the building and I'd never seen one.

I had an hour or so before I'd promised English I'd meet up with him, so we were good to go.

The walk to HQ was a calm one. A warm wind in my face from off the ocean carried the scent of salt and brine. It's more relaxing than it sounds. The city was alive and awake around me. For just a moment it felt like everything was going well again. Things weren't *perfect*, but they were good.

And I could only guess that's why folks were still protesting.

At least the protests had died down recently. People, it seemed, didn't like *good*. They always wanted better. And the fact that things were getting *better* slowly wasn't enough for them.

Stepping up to the red brick Police HQ I took one last breath of fresh air before stepping in.

It wasn't that the air in here was stuffy, quite the opposite. All the air, like everything else in the building, was up to spec. It was filtered and checked. And free of the scents that made life worth living.

I stood in line to talk to the dog on duty behind the counter. I was here for a meeting with the Commissioner, but I didn't need to jump queue.

And there was quite a wait today, everything from dogs to humans to oni. They were all standing in line, silent with grim faces. There wasn't enough to be alarming, but definitely more than I'd like to see.

At long last I made it up to the front. The dog was expecting me. He called an escort to show me to the cafeteria.

Well, at least I knew why I'd never noticed the place before.

Down in the basement, the cafeteria was little more than a double oversized meeting room with the big conference table stripped out and replaced with a dozen or so smaller tables.

I'd been expecting a halfway decent kitchen in here or something with how obsessive the force is with its health. No such luck.

My guide showed me into the room and closed the door behind me. There were only a half dozen or so other canines in here. Jon sat in a corner of the room, behind a small square wooden table. There was a stack of papers in front of him along with a bowl of dry kibble and a glass of water.

Oddly, the papers sat untouched. Jon was staring out into the middle distance, completely oblivious to me.

Walking to the other side of the room, I glanced down at the conveyor belt that held the meals for the day. They were all identical bowls of dry kibble. Next to the belt stood a pyramid of glasses and a plain water tap.

It only took a single sniff of the kibble for me to leave it be. I'd tried the police dog's fair one. Some kibble can be halfway palatable – though its rare. The stuff the cops ate was far from it.

Lifting a glass from its precarious pile, I filled it with water and turned to walk off towards Jon.

Sparing a quick glance around at the other dogs in here, I'll admit I was a little surprised. One had a newspaper spread out on the table in front of him. Another was fiddling around with a little bone. There was even one reading a pocketbook.

All of them had the collars of their uniforms loosed and they weren't sitting as straight as I'd come to expect of them. All in all, they looked *normal*.

Jon was the exception. Other than his far away expression, he still looked the part of a police dog, sitting ramrod straight without a hair out of place.

I sat down across the small table from him. He didn't even acknowledge me save the slight flick of one ear.

Seemingly with great effort, his eyes finally focused and he was back to the here and now.

"Good morning, Tommy," he said.

I nodded at him and took a lap of my water.

"Nice place you got here," I said, glancing around. "Does it cost too much to get a couple of motivational posters on the walls or something? This place looks like you guys just threw it together."

A smile touched his lips.

"You could say that. The force didn't have a cafeteria until about four months ago. This used to be an attendance hall." He shook his head. "We rarely used it. The force has been too big to fit in once place for a long time. Anyway," the smile grew, "I was thinking that we needed a bit of a place to unwind and the gym was overused. So I had the cafeteria made. It's the only no-salute zone in the world."

I cocked my head. "No what?"

The smile finally made it to his eyes. "No-salute. It means that anyone in the force can come in here and do as they wish no matter their rank. I'm not Commissioner in here, just a dog. A corporal could come in and join me at my table."

I grinned back. "I see you're making improvements."

He shrugged. "It's taking time, but we're getting there."

I cocked an eyebrow. "You know, there were those black suited..."

Jon raised a finger to his lips, glancing around to the other men and women. "Another time, perhaps."

Heh. Now that was interesting. Something that Jon didn't feel comfortable talking about with his own men in hearing range.

I changed topics. "So, you called me down here?"

He nodded. "I thought you might want to know what we've found out about Brian Ferguson."

I sat back and took another sip of water. "That was fast."

Jon's ears pulled back slightly. "He's been more than willing to talk. I was concerned we'd have to use... interrogation techniques, but he's been quite forthcoming with anything we can think to ask him." Jon paused for a moment. "Not that he seems to recall much."

"So he really has forgotten everything?"

He narrowed his eyes. "So it would appear. But not *everything*. There are odd scraps of information he does seem to recall, almost at random. And..." He trailed off, his eyes unfocusing again.

"And," I prompted.

"Ah, yes," he said, snapping back to the here and now. "There is the matter of his memory. It seems this may not be the first time this has happened."

"That he lost his memory?"

Jon shook his head. "That he was killed."

My gut went sideways.

"I believe Brian mentioned he'd found letters written by his former self?" I nodded. "The evidence is still unconfirmed, but his... debriefers believe that this was a survival plan put in place before you... inconvenienced him. So far Brian has located three letters addressed to him from his former self. They don't appear to be in order." Jon shook his head. "While Mr. Ferguson came up with an inventive plan, it appears he did not necessarily think it out overly well. The letters – he provided them to us – are rambling, unpleasant affairs. While they were certainly written by Mr. Ferguson their purpose seems to be unknown."

I cocked my head. "Aren't they to help him regain his memory?"

Jon shrugged. "One would expect, but it appears the letters cover everything but what would be most important. As I believe Brian mentioned, they failed to even mention *his name*. Until he met you he was going under the pudendum of James Wolfram."

"Wonderful." I rolled my eyes. "Is he regaining his memory?"

"In a manner of speaking. His cognitive facilities are most definitely improving. The changes even over the last couple of hours are noticeable. It would appear his conversations have done great things to jump start the healing of his brain."

"That's his body, Jon," I said, "His physical brain. What we need to know is his *mind*. Is he returning to who he was before?"

Jon shrugged. "There's no way to know. No one knew Brian Ferguson before. You had the most exposure to him, and that was only scant few minutes." Jon narrowed his eyes and leveled me with a glare. "But that does leave us with a question. What do to with him?"

I let out a long sigh.

"He was dead, right?"

Jon nodded. "He was recorded as deceased by the government. An accidental fall. While the body was never truly recovered, enough blood and flesh was found for the coroner to make the assessment that he had died."

"Fine," I said, "So Brian Ferguson is dead. Who is the man I talked to last night?"

Jon didn't say a word.

I closed my eyes. "Brian Ferguson is dead. The man you have in custody shares the same name and the same form, but he's a new man as far as we can tell. A different person."

Jon sat silent for a moment before nodding. "His mind seems to have come back blank."

"Fine." I lowered my forehead to touch the rim of my cool glass. "As far as I can see Brian is free to go." I opened one eye to glance at Jon. "You've got a list of offenses longer than my tail to hold

him to if you want, but as far as what he did *before* he's clear."

A faint smile touched the dog's lips. "I thought you might say that. I've had my officers working with him. Anyone capable of disabling an entire police station is not someone I would like to have pitted against me." He twitched an ear. "Not that I want him running about the city unsupervised either. We've found a business – tangentially connected with the force – that is in need of a laborer. And an apartment close by. There happen to be a number of officers who also have apartments in the building. I think he might be a good fit there."

I smiled and shook my head. "You had this all figured out before hand, didn't you?"

For just a moment Jon looked taken aback before glancing about the room and grinning. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean. The force would never take action outside its jurisdiction. Why, reintegrating a man into society is hardly part of our mandate. The only way we could ever embark on a project like that would be at the request of the City Administrator."

Was it wrong that I felt like reaching across the table and slapping him?

There wasn't much to be left for our meal, but Jon made sure to finish off every chunk of kibble and every drop of water in his glass.

"Have to set a good example," he said.

Putting our dishes away on a tray to be cleared off by the gods knew who, I followed Jon out the door.

I'd been expecting to find another dog standing here waiting to take me back outside, but instead Jon urged me forward.

"I thought you might want to take a tour of some of the newer parts of the station," he said.

I cocked my head and followed him.

I'd been through Police HQ a good many times, but never on a real tour. Every time I've been here I'd had someplace to go, something to do. Now Jon led me calmly down one of the endless, identical whitewashed hallways.

Gods, this place was worse than Storm Front.

Still in the basement, we took a half dozen turns, seemingly at random, before Jon threw open a door.

"Our gym," he said.

Heh. Well, this was impressive.

I hadn't known what to expect when Jon had mentioned they had a workout gym. I'd been expecting something akin to the little workout room at SF with a couple of sparing dummies and some weights. This was a little more impressive.

Two stories high, it pressed down into the sub-basement. Even then it was still lit by a set of windows from above.

I pointed to them.

"Reflected from skylights in the roof," Jon said.

There were dummies and weights here to be sure, but quite a bit more. Everything from a jungle-gym to a oval racetrack. And all of it seemed to be in use.

The dogs down there were still wearing their blue duty uniforms, but they were all stained with sweat.

"Don't they ever take those off?" I asked.

Jon gave me a knowing glance. "One thing at a time, I suppose. You'd be surprised how hard it is to change. It's been what, over a year? I've been fighting tooth and nail to get even the smallest of changes written into the force's protocols. New projects that the force agrees with on the other hand..."

He shrugged.

"Yeah," I said. "We should talk about that." I followed Jon as he headed off again, I assumed to his office.

We never made it.

Up on the main floor, we were just getting ready to ascend the next staircase when an officer stepped around the corner.

That is and of itself was a bit of an oddity. Despite how many cops filled this building you never saw them when you walked the hallways. It was as if they took paths to avoid each other. At least when there was a guest present.

The dog didn't say anything but Jon went motionless.

I couldn't make out a word when they begun speaking, but Jon *did not* seem happy for the interruption.

"Tommy," he said, turning to me, "It would appear our meeting will have to wait. You have a visitor waiting for you in receiving."

"A *visitor*? No one even knows I'm here."

Jon shrugged, but his eyes were hard. It seemed he didn't care for other people intruding on the control of his domain.

All in all, it was a bit anticlimactic. Standing nervously in the front waiting room of Police HQ was a brown furred hare. He wore the familiar uniform of a government messenger.

Guys like that tend to have a nervous energy about them, spending all their time running messages from place to place, but this fella in particular really looked like he wanted to be somewhere else.

The fact he had a half dozen police dogs standing around him was a good hint as to why.

A big, relieved smile spread across his face the moment I stepped in the room. "Sir!" he called, waving a hand in the air as if I might miss him.

Stepping up, the crowd of dogs parted between us to let me pass. It was only then I realized they had closed in front of him but left a clear passage back outside.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, my voice mild. I was more confused now than alarmed. Max only sent messengers when it was something important, and he'd never sent one while I was in Police HQ before.

I expected the hare to hand me a delivery packet, but instead he just shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"They mayor has instructed me to bring you to him. It's urgent."

"I should hope so," said Jon acidly from behind me. I'd never heard him speak like that.

The hare shied back as if he'd been slapped. "I'm sorry, Commissioner, I really am. It's just that the mayor made me promise up and down that I'd bring Mr. Taggart to him immediately. He was very particular that we not delay." He choked on his words, as if just realizing what he said.

"Very well," replied Jon. With a subtle twitch of his hand he called off the pack of the dogs who clustered about the messenger. The man let out a relieved breath. "But," Jon added, "You will let the mayor know that I wish to speak to him. We must come to an understanding that this site is not to be intruded upon lightly by the government."

I had to keep my mouth from falling open. Being the top cop had changed Jon.

The messenger didn't have to be told twice to get out. He was through the door in seconds, all I

got to see was the after image of his upturned tail disappearing around the door.

I took off in hot pursuit. Even then it took me the better part of half a block to catch up.

"Where..." I gasped between pants, "Are we going?"

For all the world the messenger didn't even seem to be breathing hard as he rocketed down the street at a pace that to me seemed to be twice that of breakneck.

"West," he said. "The docks. Tsawwassen. That's where the mayor said to meet him."

"Why?" I took every last particle of air I had to get the word out.

He shrugged, somehow working the motion into his run. "Who knows. No one ever tells us anything."

We made it in record time – for me anyway – though I think I would have had a heat attack if not for my regeneration.

And we weren't the first ones there.

There was a crowd of people standing on the crumbling concrete and steel embankments that had, once long ago, been a ferry terminal.

I knew the men and women well enough to tell at a glance they were all from the government. All high ranking members too. Most of them in the diplomatic circles.

Max stood out in front of them all, perched ungracefully atop a small pile of rusted out steel girders. He was looking out towards the sea.

"What now?" I asked.

My guide had stopped at the edge of the crowd. He must have decided his job here was done. He sat down and motioned for me to continue on without him.

No one seemed to notice I was here. That was by itself odd. I was well enough known in these circles than none of them should have mistaken me for a dirty brown furred wolf who'd just happened to wander by. They were all too busy straining their eyes and trying to see over the western horizon.

Working my way forward, it was a challenge to get past without having to elbow anyone out of the way. It got easier, thankfully, once I got to the rusty pile of steel Max was atop of. The red of the rust contrasted nicely with the blue of the sea. It matched Max's unusually red skin.

"What's up?" I asked as I puled myself up the last few feet to perch next to him at the apex.

His normally ruddy complexion was paler than I remembered. He handed me a set of high powered binoculars.

Lifting them to my face, I had to adjust them quite a bit to fit my inhuman features. And even more to focus for my eyes.

For a long moment all I could see was the bright blue of the sky, then for even longer the dark blue of the sea.

"To your left," Max muttered from beside me. "Just below that triangular cloud."

Following his directions, I was able at last to find a dim and indistinct blob on the horizon. Or, more to the point, a whole lot of blobs.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

Max let out a sigh. "From the reports? A fleet of envoys and trading ships from Japan."

"What?" I handed him back the binoculars. "Japan? Asia hardly ever sends over ships in any numbers, especially Japan. Except for the occasional group of immigrants it's like they hardly exist."

I had to check my words. Max was himself from Japan, having come across the Pacific decades ago.

"You're telling me," he said. "You've no idea how much trouble it is to find a ship when I want to go for a vacation home. The wife was stuck over there once for four months when she missed her

departure.”

I squinted, now unaided, at the horizon. I couldn't see a thing.

“How many ships?” I asked.

“Twenty-five. None of them shorter than a hundred meters.”

I just about fell backwards.

I can't say I remember much of the next three hours. At first we simply stood there and watched dumbly as the ships approached. Then someone got the bright idea of filling me in on the particulars.

This wasn't a case of someone just happening to look up one day and noticing the ships out there, but rather a courier had arrived a few hours ago.

The courier had been supposed to show up weeks ago to announce the arrival of this grand fleet, but it had been waylaid by a storm. Now it arrived hardly a day ahead of the grand flotilla it was intended to announce.

It seemed that Japan wanted to reopen trade.

It wasn't that trade had ever been *closed* but neither of us just ever seemed to do all that much of it. Japan was one of V-town's biggest trading partners, but that wasn't saying much.

And next someone, possibly the same person, realized that it wouldn't do to have half the government of V-town standing out on the docks with their mouths agape like farm boys when the circus rolled in.

I was grabbed, none too gently, by the tail and hauled off to what I can only describe as *the powder room*.

I knew it well from my days as mayor. Sat down in a chair, the half dozen or so attendants folded me into a spotless suit and brushed and powdered me until I looked regal.

I'd hated it then and I hated it now.

“Why isn't Max doing this?” I asked. “He's Japanese, he can speak the language. I can't do anything.”

I got my answer quickly enough when Max walked in to check on me. He – the lucky bugger – was a lot easier to get presentable. A more human body and a distinct lack of fur or hair meant he could go from shabby to picture perfect in little more than minutes.

“Because it's twenty-five ships out there, Tommy,” he said. “I may be mayor, but you're still the City Administrator. I need all the help I can get with this. We've never had to deal with anything like this before, it could be an invasion for all we know.”

“What?” I almost fell out of my chair.

He smiled, showing perfect white teeth. “Sorry, figure of speech. The courier said it's strictly a trade envoy. But I still need your help.”

I closed my eyes and set my head back as someone grabbed one of my hands and began polishing my claws.

“But I can't even speak the language!”

Max frowned. “Oh. I'd forgotten about that. Well, I'm sure they've sent some people who speak english.”

I opened my eyes, a smile on my lips. “Speaking of English...”

About twenty minutes later the messenger I'd sent off – perhaps the same one who'd fetched me – was back with an out of breath lion trailing behind him.

Was it wrong that I was enjoying seeing the golden lug suffer like I had?

“What... what in the gods' names is it, Mate? You dragged me away from a shella. I wouldn't

have done it for anyone else in the-- oh.” He stopped dead when he saw me in the powder chair.

He knew how much I hated being in here.

It didn't take long to get him up to date. Though I did notice his whiskers droop as I spoke.

“Uh, Mate, you do remember that I'm dead as far as the Japanese are concerned, right?”

I gritted my teeth. “I thought the official line was that you 'sent to the new world'. It was your father-in-law that decided to change it to the 'next world'. Should line up nice for you, eh? You can be the official interpreter for the City Administrator.”

The lion's eyes lit up and he smiled. He said something that sounded like gibberish to me but Max jumped.

“When did you learn that?” Max asked.

English said something more and Max turned even redder than normal.

We made it just in time.

Not to say that we have much of anything grand worked out, but we sent out a little cutter to meet the fleet and guide them into our nicest port that we could get cleared for the occasion.

Standing on shore with the delegation, My jaw just about dropped.

The ships just kept coming and coming. And they kept getting larger.

These were no little sail boats, and no small yachts either. I'd never seen anything like these. Huge diesel powered monsters that had to be hundreds of meters end to end. They were like floating cities of their very own.

English, who'd managed to avoid a suit, leaned in from beside me.

“Pick your jaw up, Mate. Don't want to look like a yokel in front of the neighbors.” He wasn't exactly frowning, but his face was grim. “This is business as usual for them. It's not their best boats – those are warship – but they've sent out a good and reasonable trading fleet.”

This was *reasonable*?

These boats were larger than anything I'd ever seen. There had to be hundreds of people aboard. That or tons of trade good. V-town was no stranger to trade, but this was easily ten times anything that had berthed here in decades.

The initial landing process was slow and cumbersome. It seemed that *they* knew what they wanted to do, but we didn't have the facilities to accommodate even half of what they expected.

Thankfully though we did at least have enough for what they *needed*.

It was more than four hours later before I finally got to shake someone's hand.

By then, and I swear to the gods that I never thought this day would come, I actually *wanted* to shake hands. Just to get it over with.

The government had set up a small reception inside one of the warehouses just off the dock. About a dozen or so government and corporate representatives met with about two dozen men and women who stepped off the ships.

A little to my surprise, about half of them were wearing business suits that were almost identical to my own.

Max stepped forward to greet the man at the head of the procession.

An elderly gentleman, dressed in what I could only guess were traditional Japanese robes, he seemed surprised to see Max.

The two of them exchanged a couple of soft words as they bowed to each other and shook hands.

I watched as English's ears perked.

"He recognizes Max," the lion whispered. "He's surprised to see him here. He remembers the days that Max was just a minor government representative back in Japan." English chuckled. "He's congratulating Max on being sent as they city's representative."

Even I could hear Max clear his throat.

"I am the mayor of V-town," the oni said in a voice that was more than strong enough to carry through the room.

"Ah." Even I could hear the Japanese representative say that.

Things didn't exactly go downhill, but they didn't get much better from there on out.

Meetings resumed the next morning. The two sides sitting across from each other on either side of a long table that had been setup overnight.

Max did most of the talking for our side. He was one of only a handful of senior government types who could speak both languages.

English and I sat off in the background. The lion's keen ears kept tabs on everything. He translated what choice bits came to his attention.

"They're asking what changed," he said. "They want to know what's changed in the city to open trade."

I cocked my head. "Nothing's changed," I said.

English gave me a disappointed look.

"Alright," I admitted, "Brian's gone. But was he keeping out *this*?"

English shrugged.

It seemed these people really were here to trade, and were making no bones about it. They wanted a trade agreement with the city. It seemed, much to all of our surprise that they were under the understanding that V-town had all but closed it boarders years ago.

Max was the first to tell them that wasn't so. He and I exchanged a glance.

Two more days passed and I was starting to get *really* board.

Even with English translating I was still out in the cold for most of the conversations. Max all but pleaded me to come, but it wasn't as if I was doing anything.

It wasn't until we broke for lunch on the third day that anything of note happened.

Max and the head representative on the other side had come to an impasse on some minor detail hours ago and neither of them were willing to give an inch.

The sad part was that I didn't even understand what they were arguing over.

English was off to the catbox and I was leaning against a wall, munching a chocolate bar when a man came walking up to me.

He was short – well, most of them were, and a dragon, dressed in a business suit almost indistinguishable from mine. No small feat as mine had been tailored by Smith.

He bowed as he stepped up to me. Not saying anything for a long moment as he looked me over.

"You are Taggart?" He voice had the huff sound many of the delegates did. I noticed he didn't put the stereotypical '-san' at the end of my name.

I nodded.

"I am Mr. Mayumi."

I cocked my head and nodded again. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Mayumi. What can I do for you?"

He stopped and looked me over again.

"I would like to discuss our government's treaty."

I backed away a step, raising my hands in front of me.

"Sorry there, mister. I'm not the one you want to talk to. The mayor makes those kinds of decisions around here. He's the boss."

He hardly even skipped a beat before saying, "And you're his boss."

I let out a long sigh. "Fine. Just wait for my... translator to get back."

I'm guessing Mr. Mayumi had never noticed English, or at least never seen him up close. He was... well, to say he was taken aback by the lion would be an understatement.

A series of words escaped the dragon's lips, but I couldn't make out a single one of them.

English didn't say anything, but I could see him go still. And when he spoke his words were stiff.

The two men carried on a conversation, both of them suddenly ignoring me.

"I'm sorry," I cut in after a few moments, "Do you know each other?" Their conversation had been completely in Japanese, going over my head.

English gave himself a shake, then turned to me.

"You could say that, Mate," he said. His voice was a touch rough having switched languages. "Mr. Mayumi here," he said the name with an odd inflection, "was... is related to me through my father-in-law."

"Ah." I took a step back. "Well, perhaps I should give the two of you some time to catch up then."

The lion moved faster than I could track.

"No." His voice was mild, but there was steel under it. And a hint of fear. "I'm your translator, Administrator. I'll stay with you and do my job."

Almost before my eyes I could see the lion seem to fold in upon himself. He looked hardly so regal now, more subdued and browbeaten.

"Yes," Mr. Mayumi said, returning to me. "You, Mr. Taggert, are who we should be speaking to. I am in command of this expedition. We should be the ones speaking, not our subordinates."

And that was how I got roped, once again, back into the joys of diplomacy.

Max, much to my annoyance seemed overjoyed to be able to defer to me. He handed any problems he didn't want my way.

"Just. Go. Away."

I was ready to throw something at the mob of reporters who clustered around the entrance to the apartment building. They'd been there for days, hounding me ever since news broke that I'd taken over talks with the trade group from Japan.

It had gotten bad enough that Jon had once again had to double the number of police dogs stationed here. And that hardly helped my mood.

I liked Jon, liked Pine, and didn't mind the other dogs in moderation, but having them all but standing at my elbows twenty-four seven was enough to drive anyone mad.

"You look like you need a vacation, Wolfy," Rebecca said, sitting down on the stool next to me in the kitchen.

It was evening now, and the kids had been put to bed. It was hardly dark out yet though, and I could still see the cluster of people down on the street.

"You can say that again, Babe," I gowned as I leaned back into her. I could feel her strong fingers digging into my pelt, wrestling with knotted muscles of my back. "I never wanted to get back

into politics. We were doing so good for a while. Bounty hunting during the day, a touch of government work in the evening, and the two of us looking after the kids at night. Now *all* I do in government, and I've even pulled English in on it too." I craned my neck around to look at her. "How'd you managed to keep out of it? Everyone else I know seems to have been mired in the muck of politics."

She grinned and kissed my nose. "Just smarter than you. I know what really matters. My sanity." She paused for a moment and smiled. "Well, that and the kids."

I let out a long breath. "Yeah, the three of you are what's important. But yet you're getting the least of my time."

She shrugged. "We're used to it."

A growl escaped my lips. "But it's not right. I haven't had a full day to spend with you and the kids in over a month."

I winced as her fingers hit a sore spot, it melted away a moment later as she teased it apart.

"Well, you're the City Administrator, aren't you? Tell them you're taking a day off. It's not a crime."

I grinned. "Yeah, but what good would it do us? It's no better here with all the reporters on the street."

"Mate, I'm not hearing any more of it. You're coming to my place."

I hardly even gotten the words out of my mouth. The moment I'd mentioned *vacation* English had his mind set.

"Your little terrors haven't even seen my place yet. Gods, Mate, I doubt they've ever even seen the countryside. My place. This weekend. End of story."

Do I have to say what a joy it was to get away from the city?

Not that it was easy. It took Rebecca and I hours to pack everything. Suddenly I was longing for the days that the two of us could just pick up and leave at a moment's notice with nothing more than her jacket.

Not so much now. I was only glad that English dropped by to help us carry everything.

Pine was a bit put out when I told him, in no mean words, that he wasn't joining us. He was still a bit put of from allowing Brian through that I loosened up and told him that he had the next couple of days off too.

Getting out the apartment without the media hounding us was a production, but not so much as you might imagine. Anything can be easy when you've got enough police dogs to keep people at bay.

And the fact the force put on a show of pushing the crowd away from the front door as English, Rebecca, I, and the kids slipped out the back? It was almost too easy.

It was only a few dozen blocks before the highrises began to drop away on either side of us and began to be replaced by single story homes. They they were replaced by closely placed lots, then sparsely spaced estates.

Then, about a half an hour's walk later, we found the turn off to English's home.

Chapter 10: Washed Up on Shore

English's home was set well back from the road, with several strands of trees between it and anyone who might try to pierce the veil of privacy.

The house at the centre of the near grossly oversized lot wasn't all that big, but it was familiar. A pure white two story Victorian, it looked like it had just been transported here from across the Atlantic.

"Come on," English pulled us forward with an arm over our shoulders, "Let's get you and the terrors settled in."

Stepping up the unblemished whitewashed steps, we hardly even slowed as he unlocked the front door.

"Take 'em upstairs, Mate. I've got just the place," he said.

For just a moment I looked at the stairs in horror as if climbing them was the equivalent of Mt. Logan. We'd come all the way out here with me carrying the kids, Rebecca their supplies, and English *our* supplies.

My arms felt like they were about to fall off.

Gritting my teeth, I was about to glare at the lion, but turned only just in time to see his poof tail disappearing around a door frame.

Rebecca was no help. She'd dropped all her bags the moment we'd stepped through the door and had spread herself out across the nearest sofa.

"Have fun, Wolfy," she said, a chuckle to her voice.

The stairs were just as bad as I'd feared they'd be, but I made it none the less. And managed not to drop either of the kids who curled asleep in my arms.

Coming to the top, I felt almost as worn out as the first time I'd stood here. And back then I'd had to scramble my way in through an upstairs window.

Pausing for just a moment, I turned right, into the spare bedroom. I had a feeling English wouldn't much care for the idea of me settling the kids out over his massive king sized bed. Like most things in this house his bed was pure white. It wouldn't stay that way long with the kids on it.

Then again, to think of it, not much in this place would be white for long with the kids here.

I was just starting to chuckle when I stepped into the spare bedroom. The sound stopped dead on my lips. It's hard to laugh when your jaw is sitting on the floor.

Had I just stepped into a parallel universe?

I'd been in this room before. It had been, like the rest of the house, white walled, only this once had held a spare white linen bed and a couple of stained wooden night stands. I'd never been sure why English had it as I'd been fairly certain Rebecca and I had been the only ones ever to use it. And sparingly at that.

That room was, to be quite blunt, gone.

In its place was quite possibly the most jarring, most over thought, most... *extravagant* kid's room I'd ever seen.

The walls on one half of the room had been repainted a sky blue, the other half a unicorn pink. There were two cribs, one on either side, and a toy box in the middle that was positively overflowing with every imaginable children's toy.

"English!"

I could hear laughter from behind me.

"Like it, Mate?"

"Well, what else was I going to put all my money into? With the upswing in business I had to invest it in *something*," the lion said, sitting back on a chair in the kitchen, sipping a cup of steaming lemon tea. Rebecca and I were seated across from him.

I shook my head and Rebecca just laughed.

"But a room for *our* kids?" She asked.

English shrugged. "It's not like I'm ever going to have any. And anyway, what better? They'll enjoy it while they're young, coming out to their ol' uncle's house. Then when they grow old enough to not care for it anymore I can just put it back again, eh? You're only young once." For just a moment his voice went soft.

We didn't get much else done that day, seeing how the walk out had taken *forever*, but we made up for it come the next morning.

Rebecca had been right, I don't think we'd ever taken the kids out of the city before. My dad would have cuffed me soundly about the ears for that if he'd still been alive.

Watching the two of them crawl about on the lawn and through the garden at the back of the house was an amazing experience. You'd never think it would be such a big deal, but the wonder in their eyes said far more than any words possibly could.

Ging was, unsurprisingly, the more active one. They were only about eight months old and wolves develop faster at this age. He was already ambling about on all fours, chasing butterflies and trying to chew on *everything*.

That wasn't to say the Beth was far behind. She was smaller and her crawling was far slower than Ging's unsteady loup, but she trailed determinedly behind her brother and always kept him in sight. More than once she managed to catch up with him by finding a shorter path to whatever it was that had caught their attention.

"What have you there, little-one's?" I asked, scooting through the dirt towards them as they clustered around one of the garden rows.

A moment later Beth's hand came up, followed by Ging's sniffing nose. She was clutching a bluebell.

I laughed. At this rate the two of them were going to uproot every one of English's expensive

imported plants.

“Feel like a run, Mate?”

It was nine in the morning and English and I were the only ones awake. Rebecca was still sprawled out on the couch and the kids were sound asleep upstairs.

That was a nasty side effect of making over the spare room. Rebecca and I had been demoted to sleeping down here.

English had offered us his room, but it just didn't feel right to sleep in another man's bed.

I stretched, yawned and cracked my spine. “Sure, why not. It's been a long time since I've had to sleep on someone's sofa, and longer since I've had to share one with someone else.”

He chuckled, leading me out the back door and across the wooden patio.

For just a moment I felt a twinge of guilt at leaving the kids, but then I saw the flash of a blue uniform out of the corner of my eye. There were cops on the path between us and the road. We were as safe here as back in the apartment, if not safer.

Breaking into a run, we were weaving around the trees in little more than seconds. There were no cops out here, they hardly ever braved the forest.

English, when I'd first met him, had been as home the the woods as a deep sea angler fish would be in the company of hawks. His motions out here were still a touch stilted, a hair to stiff and hesitating to be completely natural, but he no longer seemed to try and tip over every dead branch between here and Manitoba.

The dark green foliage of the trees closed in around us like a mist, obscuring our vision but bringing such a plethora of scents to our noses that it more than made up for it. The city smelt of concrete and asphalt and far too many people pressed into far too tight a space. The road smelled of travel and dust. Even English's home was unnatural, selling far too strongly of lion and whitewash.

Only the forest smelled as it should, clear, rain swept and *right*.

We didn't have any real destination in mind as we set out. Sometimes I led, sometimes English did. Every so often we would stumble upon the trail of prey, a deer or a rabbit. We followed their trails now and then but never gave then any serious attention.

I didn't need to hunt. I needed to *run*, to be free. Spilling blood and bringing back a fresh carcase wasn't high on my priorities when I knew there was a well stocked larder in the kitchen.

Somehow without even trying to we slowly climbed up the foothills of the Rockies. It wasn't long before we rose above the crowns of the trees below, opening up a vista to the west. The city and the sea spread out before us, glimmering like jewels just waiting to be plucked.

“Wait for a breather, Mate,” English called from behind me, his voice rough.

I found a soft rock to park myself down on and gazed out over the view.

It wasn't until I sat down that I realized just how winded I was.

“Oi, Mate,” English puffed, collapsing down next to me, “You haven't made me run like that in years.” He shot me a grin. “I'm an old man, eh? You do that to me too many times and my heart will give out.”

I smiled and punched him in the shoulder. His muscles were rock hard.

“Wow, Mate,” he said, looking out over the ocean. “I haven't seen a view like this in a very long time.” Pointing a finger, he singled out the ships that anchored out in the harbour. They were plain to see even at this distance. “Gods, I remember coming in on a ship like that, only smaller.”

“It was a different lion that stepped off that boat, Mate. Michele James may have boarded the

boat from Japan, but he was at the bottom of the sea with the jetsam.”

“I walked down the gangplank from the boat with nothing, literally nothing, save what was on my back. Everything I'd had, money, status, I'd packed with me from Japan was the gods knew where. All I had was a single backpack I'd salvaged from the explosion, and it had precious little in it.”

“I'd set off east, to the new world, and by the gods I'd made it. Now I hadn't the slightest where I was going next. It may sound like a bit of a cop out, Mate, considering I'd walked all the way from the golden plains of Africa, but I took one look at the soaring Rockys in the such close distance and quickly decided that I had no intimidate desire to cross them.”

“Then again,” he said, smiling, “That may be in no small part due to the fact I arrived in the middle of winter. As you may have noticed, winter just isn't my season. I'd never been someplace where there was snow before. Even when I'd been crossing through China I'd always stayed to the lowlands. I took one look at the snow that had crept down from peaks and decided it just wasn't for me.”

“I'm not going to say I'm proud of what I did next, Mate, but I did what I had to do in order to survive. I stole.” The lion tried to flash a smile but failed. “Keep in mind, Mate, I could speak a good half dozen languages by this point, but 'english' wasn't among the ones I'd used in a long time.”

He shook his head. “You wonder why I was never much of one to respect the cops in this town – our good friend expected – I started out on the other side from them.”

“I spent a month here, Mate, never venturing far from the docks, burgling whatever establishments I could find as the weather just got colder and colder. One night I'd raid a pastry shop, the next a wine store. I took what I needed to survive, and perhaps just a little bit more. I had a few run in with the dogs back then but they never caught me, never even caught sight of me.”

“It was the coldest day of the year, sometime in January. Gods, I thought my whiskers were about to snap off I was so cold. I'd been sleeping on the streets and in disused attics.” He laughed. “You'd have hardly thought that mere months ago I'd had a posh little house in Japan. I looked little better than a street urchin and I *was* little better than a cut-purse.”

“Anyway, it was sometime around two in the morning when I decided to venture a little further afield than I'd normally been doing. My escapades had been on the shorefront and that had attracted the attention of the dogs. Enough so that I'd decided I wanted to move elsewhere. And where better than up? High street wasn't all that far away.”

“I wasn't able to case my target as well as I would have liked. I looked – and smelled – like a tramp. Walking up and down the street to get a good idea of who and what was there would have attracted far more attention than I would have liked.”

“The shop I picked was based purely on need. There were jewelry stores and watch shops on either side, but I picked a tailor to rob.”

“I was cold and I wanted something warm to wear. And more than that, I wanted something I could look good in. This was supposed to be my first step up in society. I'd been on top once, more than once, and I wanted to get back up there again.”

The lion closed his eyes for a moment. “And I picked the wrong store to burgle.” He chuckled slightly. “Or perhaps I picked the perfect one.”

“The moon was in hiding when I stalked up the back alley. I thought myself in luck when I found the back door unlocked.” He chuckled. “I didn't even pause to think what it might mean.”

“Prowling into the back room, I made a racket that could have raised the gods. Honestly, I wasn't even *trying* to be all that quiet. I was sure everyone had gone home for the night. I thought I was alone and could do anything I pleased.”

“I got about ten steps before a door opened at the top of the nearby stairs. A golden light flowed

out. It almost blinded me.”

“You remember how I told you I couldn't speak the language? Well, by this time I'd managed to remember a few dozen words. What I heard from up the stairs didn't sound like anything I'd heard in the town previous.”

“For just a moment I was paralysed with fear. It may sound silly, but despite my weeks of burgling I still didn't really think of myself as a thief. The idea of being caught, of being *tried* was terrifying to me.”

“Only just in time did I gather the presence of mind to hide. I thought myself cunning, ducking behind a sack load of bolts. It wasn't until much later I learned he knew every square inch of that blasted store.”

“Flipping on lights as he walked, the man at the top of the stairs came towards me, straight as an arrow. I was still dazzled from the light and couldn't make out the form.”

“It wasn't until he was nearly atop me that I could finally see him clearly. A red fox, already well on his way to going grey. He hardly even reached up to my chest. And he was looking straight at me.”

“He said something, but for the life of me I couldn't make it out. Then he said something more. Still couldn't understand a word of it but his voice made it more than obvious he didn't care for me hiding behind his cloth as I was.”

English let out a long sigh.

“I, if you'll pardon the pun, bolted for it. Tossing the cloth aside, and in the general direction of his head, I ran. I could have stood and fought, but like I said I didn't really see myself as a law breaker.”

“That got me all of about three steps.”

English paused for a long moment, a smile and scowl fighting for his lips in equal measure.

“The blighter hit me in the back of the head with one of his bolts. A heavy one. Velvet, I think. I was out like a light before I even got to the door.”

“I don't think I was out long. I was still on the ground when I came to. I would have tried again for the door right then and there but he'd bound my hands and feet.”

I couldn't help but snort. English gave me a hard glare before his face softened.

“You've got it, Mate. I was soundly beaten by *Smith*. It was his store I'd had the misfortune to enter.”

“I've never been able to figure out why he didn't just all the cops right then and there, but I think I can speak for us both by saying I'm glad he didn't. Instead he dragged me across that polished floor of his and deposited me in front of a little wooden chair. He made me get the rest of the way from there.”

“I'm many things, but I know when I've been beat. I didn't bother trying to fight. When Smith started talking I listened. Not that I understood much, but I listened.”

“I only knew a dozen or so words, so it took me a good hour, but at long last I was able to get across that I was a wayfarer. A man in need of a home and a good meal. I'm not sure why, but it was when I told him how cold I was that he softened to me.”

“Not that he trusted me much. It was another eight hours, and I'd learned another couple dozen words, before he cut me loose.”

“That, Mate, as they say, was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Not that it looked that way at the time. I made a run for it before the ropes had even touched the floor, never looking back.”

“Not that I got far. The weather kept getting colder and I couldn't seem to get any richer. The first rule of being a criminal is never to return to the scene of the crime. Well, I'm a piss poor thief. It

was two days later I went back to Smith's shop, in the daylight this time, and through the front door.”

“The blighter honestly didn't even seem surprised to see me. He simply helped up his customers while I waited and then turned his attention to me when the store was empty.”

“I can't say that 'sorry' was one of the words I'd learned yet, nor was it likely to be something from my – now somewhat more humble – lips.”

“It took a little while, but I was at least able to get across that this time I was looking for work rather than his cash box. I'm not sure what it was he saw in me, but I'm sure anyone else would have thrown me out on my ear.”

“Smith? He invited me for a sit down and a cup of tea.”

“You might remember that I'd packed my mother's tea set with me when I left home so many years ago. It was a testament to it's design, not to mention its carrying case, that it was still unbroken. I hadn't used it in years, but it felt right to offer it now, perhaps in repayment for my attempt to rob him.”

“At first Smith wouldn't touch it, he thought it stolen. It took me a long time to get it through his thick skull that it was *mine*.”

“In any event, we have a long, leisurely tea and I picked up a dozen or so more words. By this time I'd managed to work up a pidgen english. Most things still went over my head, but I could get myself understood if I had enough time.”

“By the end of the day I had a job as Smith's helper. Not an assistant, I didn't know the first thing about tailoring, but I could carry bolts of cloth and make pickups as well as the next man. And I could sleep in the store rent free and guard it from any other would be thieves.”

“It took me a month or so living with Smith before I was confident enough to walk the streets again. I could speak the language now, thanks to Smith's help. And it was that old fox who gave me my new name, English. Until then I'd still been Michael Jones. I didn't mind the change, it helped me feel more at home here, like a new man. Like I'd never been my father's son, like I was related to Smith.”

“Anyway, the wage old Smith was paying was, to put it bluntly, rubbish. The man fed me and let me sleep rent free, but I had hardly enough pocket money to buy myself a snack likely start thinking about becoming self sufficient.”

“Well, Mate, you know about my history in India and China. I went back to the one thing I knew I could do well. Bounty hunting. I don't think I can ever thank Jasmine's parents enough for that gift.”

“Things were different back then, Mate. The cops had a different top dog and they tended to prefer to do all the work themselves. Contracts were still common, but only for the criminals the cops either couldn't find, or *didn't want to* find. It was hard cases all around.”

“I think it's safe to say I made a bit of a splash.”

“With Smith's blessing I took a day of work and picked up a contract. It was for a murderer who'd killed at least half a dozen people. No one knew where he was, all I had was a rough sketch of his face.”

“To make a long story short, I found the man, knocked his block off, and dragged him to the nearest police station with a copy of his warrant before the day was out. The cops had been looking for him for over a year. At first they didn't even believe me this was the man they'd been searching for.”

“Next week I convinced Smith to give me another day off. I went out, got another contract, and brought another man in. In two days I'd made more pocket money than I'd made working for Smith for two months.”

“The third week I did the same over again. I was starting to get a bit of a reputation.”

"Things were a bit different back then, you understand. Bounty hunting wasn't big business. There were no companies, and only a few dozen contracts up at any given time. Bounty hunting was more of a pastime for most people, a side business."

"Anyway, it was during the fifth week, and my fifth contract, that something changed. The dogs at my local police station had been competent and capable enough, but now when I walked in there was a new one. He handled my contracts personally."

"He was a Great Dane. I remember him well. His coat was pure white, contrasting with the brown and black of the shepherds, and he was as thin as a ghost."

"His name was," English coughed, "Sayer."

"I won't say he quite took me under his wing, but the old dog – he was even old in those days – did come to work closely with me. He was at the station every time I came in with a new catch, and always handled my paperwork. And he was good at it too. I hardly needed to do anything but give an account of my hunt that he'd write down."

"That was about the time I began switching gears. It may not seem like much, but I began hunting twice a week. Now instead of Smith paying me to work I payed the fox to sleep in the shop."

"And that's how it went from there. I did more and more hunting, and made not a bad little bit of scratch. I still remember the day I moved out of Smith's shop, I'd only been living there for six months. But..." he went silent for a moment, a hand reached up to brush his eyes. "It felt, Mate, like I was leaving home. I remember that day better than the day I buried my mother." With an obvious effort he pushed the thought away.

"Anyway, by that time I was hunting seven days a week. And, oddly, Sayer was at the station *each and every day*. Every time I came in I tarried a little longer, talked to him a little more. He... wasn't a normal dog. I'm not sure how, but I knew it the first time I saw him. He was more."

"I didn't realize just how much more until one Friday night. We were just finishing up the last of a paperwork on my latest catch when he turned to me and asked if I'd like to join him for a drink at the bar."

"I knew the cops, but not as well as I do now. I was taken aback that a officer would ask such a thing, but I wasn't as surprised as I should have been. I shrugged and agreed."

"Sayer was different in those days, looser. I met him at the neighborhood bar an hour later. He was out of uniform. Now I had a second friend in the city."

"It was a couple of weeks later, after we'd gotten to know each other, that Sayer came to me with a proposition. He wanted to start a company. A bounty hunting firm."

"I'll be honest, I just about laughed him out of the bar. *Me?* How could he ever think *I'd* want to form a company?"

"I suppose I should have seen the signs right then and there, but I was too young and stupid. Sayer wasn't the only cop taking a leave of absence from the force. There were four others right at the same time, likely even the same day. They all found other prominent hunters in the city and went off to form their own companies. Sayer was the only one who'd been rejected."

"After that point, Mate, pickings got a lot slimmer. I was a good hunter, the best in the city by a wide margin, but it's hard to compete with you're up against whole groups of people. A month later I walked back into the station on a rainy and blustery Saturday night, empty handed when my mark had been snatched out from under my nose by a team, and asked Sayer if he was still interested."

"It was the next day, with the rain still pouring down from the heavens, that we formed Storm Front, just the two of us."

"I remember *that* day, Mate. A tree out in the park across the street got hit by a bolt of lightning."

"As you can guess, forming a company on paper is one thing. Making it work is a whole 'nother problem. But even right off the bat we had an edge. I was the best bounty hunter in the city and Sayer was no slouch himself. Our profits tripped overnight once we started working together."

"But that wasn't enough. We improved, but so did all the other companies. We needed more hunters. And we were at a disadvantage. All the other groups had a head start on us. They'd all been formed a month ago and snapped up all the best and most willing talent. That left SF with the dregs, those who were either too incompetent to be hired or too proud to work for anyone but themselves."

English smiled. "We didn't want the former, so that left us with the daunting task of getting ahold of that latter. The most prominent bounty hunter who'd yet to join a company was a bear. Brown."

"I won't go too much into detail on just what I had to offer the bugger to get him to sign up, but suffice it to say that in the early years he was taking a bigger share than either Sayer or I."

"You don't know Brown well, Mate. He's a good man. A really good man. There are few people in this city I'd trust my life to, and he's one of them. I never had an older brother, but he'd be the closest I've ever had to one."

"But three hunters does not a full sized company make. With all the other obvious candidates gone now I had to spread out to... less obvious possibilities."

"You have no idea how long it took me to get a meeting with the next guy, Mate. I'm talking *months* here. He was just about impossible to get a hold of. And for good reason too. The man was in the process of starting up his own group."

"I think you might know him," English flashed me a smile, "His name was Griss."

"At long last I managed to get a sit down with him in a coffee shop on the edge of town. He kept me waiting a good forty-five minutes. I was just about ready to throw my plate across the room and storm out of there when the scent of blood hit my nose like a sledgehammer."

"He never seemed to *enter* the room, and I'd been watching for him. It was just a matter of I blinked and he was sitting across the table from me, his entire chest soaked in gore."

"Griss Taggart was not a well known name in the city back in those days. He was on the top of his game as a hunter, but there was yet any real group known as the *hunters*. He was still in the process of forming them."

"We sat down over a pleasant enough meal. I'll admit though that I was a little off put by the blood that matted his fur. He hardly even seemed to notice."

"We started with smalltalk, crime in the city, the price of food, things like that. Then there was a pause. I decided it was now or never."

"I asked him point blank what it was going to take for get him to join Storm Front."

"You may not see it, Mate, but there were some ways that you and your father were so alike. The way your eyes widen when you've been surprised, how you looked like you're about to fall off the back of the chair."

"And the way you laugh."

"And by the gods that man could laugh. I almost never heard it, but he could laugh if you gave him reason to."

"I was starting to go red before he could get himself back under control. He'd thought I'd come here *looking* for a job, not *offering* one. Griss was hiring people for the hunters in exactly the same way I was recruiting for Storm Front."

"Well, I shouldn't say *exactly* the same way. He'd be a perfect bounty hunter for SF, but I would have made a piss poor member in his ranks."

"Anyway," English let out a long breath, "Once he got over the humour of the situation he told

me, in a voice calm and commanding, that he was sorry, but he have to decline. The hunters were his life, and he wasn't about to throw his lot in with anyone or anything else. And, he added, he had a child on the way."

English grinned at me.

"Well, that was it. We did manage to get one good thing out of it though. I learned right then and there *not to mess with the hunters*. He never said it in so many words, but he make it understood that it would not be in my best interests to try and poach men from the hunter's ranks. One, I wouldn't get any. And two, I wouldn't like the consequences. Almost as an after thought he added that he wouldn't try to hire away any of my employees either."

"Things were a bit rough for the next year or so, but we survived. That was when I realized what SF really was. The best. We didn't have many hunters, only a dozen or so by that point, but they were the best money could buy. I gave people deals that they just couldn't find anywhere else. And Sayer still handled our paperwork. He did less hunting every month, but it was more than made up for by him handling just about everything else."

"You've seen Sayer as a Commissioner, he was uncanny. Now imagine that skill and force of will backing Storm Front. Even with a small force we were unparalleled."

"And that's the way we carried on. Once we got through the first year things began to settle down. The next four were the best we ever had. I knew something was wrong towards the end of the fifth year. Up until then Sayer had handled just about everything on the back end himself. But all of a sudden he started hiring office staff. One day I walked in and he had an assistant. The next week he had another. By the end of the month he had half a dozen people working with him to keep the papers straight."

"I didn't think much of it. We were a growing company and I just figured he needed help. I hardly took notice of any of the office drones."

"And that, Mate, was my biggest mistake. And I'm old enough now to admit it."

"One of the men hired, I'm not sure if it was by Sayer or one of his subordinates, was a reptile named VanderHoom."

"I hardly even noticed him. He was little more than a clerk."

"But it was only a couple of months after that things changed. Sayer quit."

"Up and quit. Just came to me one day in my office and told me he was done. There was no anger in his voice, no annoyance. It was like he'd just woken up one day and decided that the last five years work was finished."

"I think I did a good job of keeping my face in place, but it felt like he'd stabbed me through the heart with a blade of ice."

"I didn't realize it until much later, but the day he quit was *exactly* five years after he'd left the force. I did find out, however, that he quit SF on a Tuesday, and was back and working with the cops on the following Wednesday."

"You might be able to make a good guess how things went from there. The man who replaced Sayer was a ape, named Hlost I think. He was a good man. Too bad. It made his death four months later all the more painful. The cops wrote it up as an accident, and I had no reason to think different."

"Not until the next man we promoted to the head of the office died. And the one after him. It wasn't until I promoted VanderHoom to the position that the problem went away. I'll tell you that back then I didn't think twice, I was just glad to have a office manager who could stay breathing."

"You know, Mate, that I don't tend to worry myself too much about the back end of things at SF. Sayer had done an amazing job and outright spoiled me. His replacements had been pretty good too. I gave VanderHoom the same long leash."

“I didn't even poke my nose in when he started changing our hiring policy. SF had always been a small firm, but with VanderHoom at its head we began to hire lots of inexperienced hunters to compliment the old fellas like Brown and I. The fact that so many of them died off on their first few hunts didn't even make it through my thick skull. I didn't see that, I just saw how much money they were adding to my pocket.”

“I was the last to notice anything suspicious with people dieing. I'd gone through more partners then I could count. Brown was still alive because *nothing* can kill him, and Sayer was alive because he'd quit. Everyone else it seemed was long dead, replaced by new, fresh young face after new fresh young face.”

“Then one day I way hunting down a mark alone. He slipped into an alleyway and threatened to escape. That's when a waif of a kid stepped right out in front of the monster and tripped him up. That little waif was a tiger named Huston. I think, Mate you know the rest from there.”

Chapter 11: A Monster Greater than I

We spent the next couple of days at English's home, only the rare police dog dropping by with packets to remind us of the real world not a kilometer away.

I ignored all the messages except for those from Max. It seemed that my stepping out had been the best thing possible for negotiations with Japan. Now the envoys *had* to deal with Max, he was top of the heap again and he – unlike I – knew what he was doing.

Things were wrapping up pleasantly now and, generally speaking, the smartest thing I could do would be to keep my cold, wet, black nose out.

That suited me fine.

Sitting with Rebecca on the patio, we watched Ging and Beth play in the garden. English was down there in the dirt with him. I can't say I've ever seen the lion willingly get dirty, but there's a first time for everything. He was on his hands and knees next to them, sharing in their wonders.

"You know, Babe," I whispered as one of the kids shrieked in joy over finding an earthworm, "I think the old golden lug is really taking a liking to them."

Rebecca smiled. "What was your first clue, Wolfy? I didn't think English had it in him to be paternal. You'd think they were his own by the way he puts up with their antics. He even holds back better than you do when they yank on his tail."

I smiled and rubbed my rear end, the ghost of a sharp pain coming back to haunt me. "Yeah, I'll give him that one. And his is so much easier to grab, too."

None of us really wanted it, but at some the vacation things had to come to an end as we returned to the city. The walk back took far longer than the one out had, now that the kids were awake. They wanted to stop every five feet to look at a flower or a signpost, or just an unusual rock on the road.

At long last we made it all the way back, through that was in no small part due to the fact the two of them quickly tiered out and we carried them as they slept.

Rebecca in the apartment and English off at Storm Front, I had something I needed to check into.

"Pine, you got a moment?" I asked as I poked my nose around the corner of his office door.

He looked up at me from his desk.

"Of course, Sir."

Sitting down across from the dog, I took a deep breath. There wasn't a trace of blood left in the air, but I could still smell the bleach they'd used to douse the walls.

And Pine's uniform was still a bit puffy across the chest where a bandage was wrapped around him.

"I'd like to know where Brian Ferguson is," I said.

I hadn't been quite sure what to expect from him. First the dog had taken him – and a lot of other cops – out, then I'd ordered the wolf released. I wouldn't have blamed Pine if he held a grudge.

"I can do that for you, Sir." There wasn't a trace of anger in his voice. "I should be able to find him for you shortly."

He hadn't been kidding. Turning to the radio behind him, he called up HQ. Something like two minutes later they not only gave me Brian's new address, but also his current location down to the block.

"Do I want to ask just how you know this?" I said.

Pine's lip twitched up. "You might as well, Sir."

I smiled. "How do you know that?" I asked, playing along.

He shrugged. "After the previous event, the force decided it to be best that we keep a *very* close watch on him. He knows it, we don't try to hide the fact. He's too... *notable* for us to afford to lose track of him again."

I headed off to see Brian, but I knew for a fact Pine had informed the force of my plans. I could hear him speaking into the radio as I left. Loudly.

By the time I made it across town to Brian's new home I could see members of the force, both in uniform and undercover, every ten steps. It seemed they didn't trust Brian any further than they could throw him.

It was a Monday, but late in the day. Most people were already home from work.

They'd given me Brian's new address, it was a small little apartment in one of the highrises. Up on the sixth floor.

Standing out in the hallway, I knocked on the door. My nose was twitching from the scents of all the other apartments. I couldn't imagine how I'd managed to live in a place like this years ago.

Perhaps it had been because *my* apartment hadn't been surrounded by police dogs.

It didn't take long for Brian to answer. I'll admit I was rather surprised. I'd been expecting *something*, but Brian looked as normal as any other man in the city.

"Hello, Tommy." His voice was bland, bordering on soft.

I nodded my head. "Hi, Brian. I just figured I should drop by and see how you're doing."

He shrugged his shoulders and stepped back from the door. "Come in. Please. I suppose I owe what I have to you." There was *something* in his voice. A hint of... venom? But yet at the same time he sounded genuinely grateful.

The apartment wasn't much, little more than four walls and an attached bathroom. He ushered me over one corner where a small table stood, there were only two chairs. I took one.

The apartment really wasn't much. From where I sat I could see *everything*. A bed in one corner, the door open to the bathroom on the far wall.

There was no place to hide in this apartment.

"I sorry, I don't really have much to offer you, Tommy," Brian said. "I just got my first pay

cheque yesterday and I had to spend it on the essentials.” A smile pulled at his lips. “You have no idea how much toilet paper costs when you start off with nothing.”

I laughed. “You’d be surprised. I was in a situation not so far from this a few years ago. If you need anything, Brian, anything at all, just let me know. I had to suffer through these kinds of problems and I’d hate to see you have to do the same. And I had my parents to fall back on.”

He closed his eyes when I mentioned my parents. I stopped talking.

“Anyway,” I continued, clearing my throat nervously, “I guess you’re doing well enough. I should probably be off then.”

The wolf’s eyes contracted. “No, please, Tommy. I... I’d rather have some company. The hours can get long here when I’m all alone by myself.”

I shrugged. “Okay, I’m game. Feel like going for a walk? We can pick up dinner. My treat.”

He immediately brightened.

Leaving the apartment, I noticed he didn’t bother to lock it behind us.

I raised an eyebrow.

He simply said, “I’ve cops on either side, and more watching me. No one is going to steal anything and it saves them from having to pick the lock.”

Down the stairs and out onto the street, I noticed the officers in the shadows in all directions. They were doing their best to not stare at us but were failing miserably.

I didn’t have any real idea where to go, and Brian – despite living here – and no idea where anything was. I picked a direction at random and headed off.

Well, not quite at random. I headed in the general direction of the main food district but that was clear across town. What I forgot was how close that path took us to skirting Brian’s old apartment.

The derelict highrises here in V-town aren’t as common as they were before the quake, but they’re still numerous enough that most of us just don’t notice them.

That’s why I couldn’t figure it out when Brian began shivering.

“I don’t want to go this way,” he said in a whimper.

“What?” I asked, stopping dead in the middle of the street.

He pointed a finger up into the sky, at his old home that loomed over us. “I don’t want to go there.”

It took me a moment to register. “Oh.”

Thankfully, we were just a few steps from a takeaway shop. The food here was little better than garbage, deep fried chicken bits, but it filled our bellies.

And it let me grab the food and find a seat without having to move more than a dozen feet.

Getting Brian and I seated on a bench on the side of the road, I pressed the bucket of miscellaneous chicken parts into his hands.

His nose twitched. “What is it?” he asked.

I smiled. “That’s a question best left unanswered for those who are squeamish. They promise that everything in there is edible, possibly even tasty, but that’s the furthest they’ll go.”

Just as I’d been expecting, his first bite was hesitant, but soon after the chicken was disappearing with frightening speed.

It was a good thing I was used to dining with English, this wolf could out eat a lion. I had the feeling he hadn’t had much to eat in the last few days. Or if he had, his regeneration had burnt it all away.

With chicken grease on our lips and fingers we sat back on the bench as I tossed the now empty bucket into a nearby bin.

Brian belched beside me. He seemed to be down a few stress points. Well, that was one thing I knew for sure, at least among canines. A good meal can make anyone feel calmer, and the greaser the better.

Brian wasn't exactly *happy* now, but he was at least stable. He looked up at the tower the continued to loom over us, lit now by the setting sun.

"It was a bad thing that lived up there, Tommy," he said. His voice was bland, but there was an undertone to it that made me shiver. He knew better than anyone living or dead what had happened in that tower over the last hundred years.

We got up and started walking again, but this time it was Brian leading.

He didn't head towards the tower, I thought we were off somewhere else, but rather he circled around it.

Eying the building wearily as we wound around it again and again, in ever tightening circles, he seemed to slowly be working up his courage.

And more than that, he seemed to be *drawn* to it, unable to look away, now that it had been brought back to his attention.

At long last he stood on the scrubby green patch in front of the main door. The face of the building was lit a bright orange by the light of the setting sun.

"You don't have to do this, Brian," I said. The words were more for my own comfort than anything else. I noticed there were whole packs of police dogs following us, but none of them were close enough to be within range if anything truly went wrong.

Brian took a deep breath and looked up at the tower. He had to kink his neck to see all the way to the top.

"I have to," he said.

Stepping into the lobby on the first floor, I noticed that it was empty of any transients making it their home. I guess the police had gotten a bit more serious about keeping this place clear since Brian had returned.

I let the other wolf lead. I knew where to go to get to the empty elevator shafts we'd need to get to the top floor, but I wanted to see if he still remembered.

I wasn't sure if I was happy about the fact that he led me unerringly, following a better path than I knew existed. In seconds we were in front of the shaft and Brian reached out to grab the first rung on the ladder to climb up.

"I remember this," he whispered. "I remember this climb. I've taken it a hundred... no, a thousand..." His voice petered off.

A twenty story vertical climb takes a long time. And when done in a claustrophobic, pitch black elevator shaft on a rusty ladder it takes even longer.

Every so often Brian would stop in front of me, my head bumping his feet.

He wouldn't say anything, but I could just make him out reaching for something in the darkness, hands tentatively stroking one thing or another.

At long last we made it up to the top floor and climbed out into the lobby of the twentieth floor.

Well, now I *knew* the cops had been back here.

The room was empty, but the police tape had been put back up, and it looked likely that there had been a guard stationed here until just hours ago. I had the feeling they'd pulled him out once Brian and I had started heading this way.

Somewhat more ominous though where Brian's own signs. They still stood where I'd first seen

them, promising that death would be the kindest thing visited upon anyone who dared trespass upon this domain.

Yet he hardly even seemed to notice either the police tape or the deathly warning. The wolf simply began walking forward, brushing anything and everything out of his way as he made a straight line for the apartment.

I noticed, as I trailed behind him, that his feet exactly followed a trail that been worn into the floor, likely over many, many years.

Opening the door to the apartment, Brian took a deep breath and shuddered.

"A monster lived here," he said.

"What?" I asked, stepping up behind him.

He turned to me. His pupils were so large in the darkness that it seemed his whole eyes were black. "A monster lived here," he repeated, "One far greater than I."

That was all he said before turning and slowly walking through the door. I stood at the threshold for a long moment, not sure if I dared follow him.

With a deep breath, the scents of the old and new Brian Ferguson pulling at my nerves, I stepped in.

Brian hadn't gone far, I found him just around a corner or two. He was standing in the kitchen.

When I'd first been here the room had been spotless, now it was edged in the dust and grime of disuse, but still serviceable.

He stood next to the sink, one of his hands resting lightly on the counter.

"I remember when I first found this place," he said. There was something about his voice that sent chills down my spine. "The kitchen was a mess, rotting food in the refrigerator and rats infesting the cupboards. It took me months to make the place fit for habitation again. Took me god knows how many hours of tearing everything apart and scrounging through every half razed husk in the city to find the supplies I needed to make it livable again, fit for human habitation."

Casting about for just a moment, he turned to a cupboard, reaching in to pull out a box of biscuit. They looked like they'd gone long stale, but he lifted the top of the cardboard box with a claw and took a sniff.

He never even thought twice as he reached a hand in and took out a biscuit. The little bread-like lump of dough snapped quietly as he crunched it between his fangs.

He left the open box on the counter as he walked out of the room. I followed him.

Casting about for a moment, he led me to the living room. This was where English and I had met him last time. When we'd thrown him through the window.

He walked across the shards of glass without even seeming to notice them. Running a hand tenderly along the pillows of the sofa here, he stepped up to the large ceiling to floor windows, almost unconsciously avoiding the ones that were plywooded over.

"This was where I spent most of my time," he said. His words were fogging up the glass, his lips so close. "I'd sit here and look down over the city. My city. I'd see just how ugly it was, how far it had fallen. How fast *I'd* let it fall. Every year it seemed that no matter how hard I tried that things just kept getting worse. The humans were dieing out and the civilization was ebbing away."

He raised a hand to touch the thick glass, falling quiet.

I stepped up beside him to gaze down.

He was right.

This was possibly the tallest building left in V-town. Looking down from here the entire city

looked... dirty.

"I looked down on this every day," Brian continued, his voice an even monotone. "Summer sun or winter snow, I looked down on my city and saw nothing but ugliness. I still fought to keep it stable and right."

He closed his eyes and turned from the window. Never bothering to open them, he strided confidently through the nearby door and down the hallway.

Room by room, we made our way through the apartment. This was a large place, it was a good thing we had time.

Brian narrated each room and the treasures within. It wasn't *him* talking, per say, but something closer to the old man. That alone made the hair on the back of my spine stand up.

He said a few words about the room with all the books, but not nearly as much as I would have liked. Gods but this room made me all but drool. I could spend a year in here and hardly even scrape the surface.

We even came back to the main hallway, out where, on a pedestal, stood a framed photo of a man, woman, and two children.

Brain walked up and lifted the photo into the wan light to get a better look at it.

"Who are they?" I asked.

He didn't respond for a long moment, his forehead creasing as he thought.

"I don't know." His voice was rough. "I *should* know. I know that I once knew. It was something important to me. But I don't know. Everyone there is a stranger to me."

Taking the photo gently from his unresisting fingers, I gently set it back on the pedestal.

I couldn't tell you for certain who they were, but I could make a good guess. If I had been in Brian's position there were only a few people I'd worship on such a way, and the fact all of them in the photo were human – dressed in clothing I'd never seen before – only added weight to my theory.

The photo was that of Brian and his family. And he couldn't even remember *them*.

At long last we came to the final room. Brian's bedroom.

He stood out in the hallway, toes at the threshold, seemingly unable to take the final step.

I stood behind him, setting a hand on his shoulder. It was the first time we'd made contact since coming up here. He jumped.

And then, like someone had flipped a switch, he was *Brian* again, the wolf I'd been talking to on the street.

"I... I don't like this place, Tommy," he whispered. "I can remember things, but not *how* I remember them."

With the he took a step forward.

The bedroom was a nice place, on par with the best rooms that Hotel Vancouver had, or better.

Brian stood in the center and looked around. His mouth was held firm, but his eyes were wide.

With halting steps he walked towards the far wall. There was a painting there. I hadn't the slightest who'd drawn it, but it was pretty enough. I had a feeling it was worth more than all the money I'd made in my life.

He reached up and unhooked it from the wall, setting it aside without another thought.

Behind it was a plain plaster wall.

I cocked my head. "Were you expecting a wall safe or something?"

He didn't respond. Hands out before him, he began feeling the wall, the pads of his fingers brushing the smooth painted surface.

His motions were slow and methodical. He covered the entire space behind the picture before stopping just long enough to pull down another, and another.

The room was starting to look a bit on the cluttered side now.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

He didn't respond for a long moment. When he did he never slowed in his search or turned to look at me. "Don't know."

The sun was starting to set now, the light in the room fading out, casting us in the blood red of the sunset. I would have turned on the light switch, but I doubted there was any power to make a difference.

At long last he stopped dead, one hand poised in front of a featureless section of wall about three feet off the ground.

He growled.

Before I could take a step forward a snarl escaped his lips.

Plunging his hand forward with a dry crack of plaster and the wet crunch of bone, he made a neat hole in the wall.

I winced. That had to have *hurt*.

But this was Brian Ferguson. By the time he'd drawn his fist back it was already half healed, the small little bones of his knuckle sliding back into place.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Blinking, he seemed to surface from his trance. "I... there's something there."

Reaching into the dark hole, he fished out plaster until he could get to a small compartment that had been sealed away behind it. There wasn't much there, only a single envelope.

Brian passed the envelope to me so quickly you would have thought it was on fire.

I took a look down at the simple white paper envelope. It was sealed and yellowing with age. There was no address written on the front.

"What is it?" I asked.

Brian looked at me wide eyed. "I've found them before. Every now and then since... I woke up. It's," he paused and took a deep breath, "From me."

I walked over and sat down on the bed. The scent of Brian Ferguson was strong in this room, both old and new. It was a little easier to withstand now.

Lifting the envelope to my nose, I could pick the scent out plain as day. It could be from no one else.

"Do you want me to open it?" I asked, looking up to meet his eyes.

It took him a long moment, but he nodded.

We walked back out to the living room with the big floor to ceiling windows. It was the only place in the apartment with enough light for me to read by.

Finding seats, we sat across the now ruined table from each other.

Slipping a cracked black claw under the seal of the envelope, I pulled.

The paper tore away freely, but only after a fight. It had been well sealed, secure from the ravages of time. Much like Brian himself.

The envelope open, I reached in and pulled out a single page of paper. It was a thick and rich sheet, almost more of a parchment.

The handwriting on it was clear and concise, but still full of expression. The man who's had had written this letter had worked decades on his penmanship and it showed.

Reading it out, word for word, I tried to keep my voice neutral, but it was difficult. The words

were chosen in such a way as to force my lips into the passive snarl of the Brian Ferguson I'd once known.

The words, nothing more than ink on paper, scared me.

I won't get into the exacts, but they were from Brian, to Brian. He'd written the letter years ago, perhaps decades, there was no date.

It seemed he'd known that this would happen one day – that he'd lose his memory. By the sounds of it my fight with him hadn't been the first time he'd lost. He'd been beaten to a pulp – and come back – at least a couple of times before. And he'd lost his memory those times too.

Brian had written this letter, and the others that had been cropping up, in order to provide a bit of a 'jump start' to get his mind running again.

In short, even my throwing him out of a window and splattering him across the asphalt twenty stories below had been planned for.

I was little more than a speed bump for the man who was Brian Ferguson.

I finished reading the last words of the letter out loud. There was a signature below, written in the same perfect script. It put anything I could ever do to shame.

Looking up over the top edge of the paper, I could see Brian sitting in the chair across from me. It was the same chair he'd sat in when I'd met him up here a year ago. And he was the same wolf, on the outside at least.

"Brian?" I whispered.

I couldn't make him out well in the growing darkness, but I could see his face. He was crying.

"What have I done, Tommy?" His voice was little stronger than mine had been.

"What do you mean? The police told you what happened, right?"

He closed his eyes. "They told me we fought. That you killed me. Or close enough to. But... that's not it. What did I do? I know those words, I remember writing them. *What did I do to become like that?* I can remember how angry I was when I wrote that letter. How many long months I took to choose just the right words. I know what I did to *you*, but what did I do to the people before to make them kill me? And how could I have ever wanted to kill you or anyone else?"

"Brian, it's not like that," I said, reaching out towards him. "Things were different, you were a different person. That's why we're here. We don't want it to happen again."

He pulled away from me when I reached for him, shrinking back in the chair.

"I can't go back to being that, Tommy. The police told me about who I was. What I did. I don't want to be *him* again."

I took a deep breath. I could only imagine what the cops had told him. The police had *not* been happy when Brian had tried to kill me. They weren't much of a group for physiological warfare, but I'd put money on the fact they hadn't put the old Brian Ferguson in a good light.

Not that I'd cared much for him either.

"Come on, Brian. Let's get out of here. There's nothing more to see."

He sat there for a long moment, not moving.

"Tommy, give me the letter."

I shrugged and handed it over.

He stood up and, letter in hand, walked to the kitchen.

Reaching out a confident hand, he found a pack of matches in the back of a cupboard without having to search for them.

Striking a match, he held it to the letter.

"Brian, wait! The cops will want to read that!"

Seemingly deaf to me, he waved the little flame back and forth under the paper. I stopped fighting to pull it from his fingers when I realized it wasn't bursting into flames.

Whatever the letter had been written upon it wasn't normal paper.

Holding the match until the flame was licking his claws, Brian kept the heat to the letter.

I could see words forming at the bottom of the page, underneath the signature. They hadn't been there before.

A second later the flame was snuffed out, the embers of the match singing the skin of Brian's palm.

He handed the letter back to me. "Read it." His words were not a request.

The writing on the hidden lines was not like that above it. These were directions, straight and to the point. "The book is located at Cathedral Mountain. North face. In the cave two hundred meters from the top. You remember it. It's where you buried the bodies."

I looked up at him after I read the words. He was as still as a corpse.

"I remember it," he repeated, voice soft.

"Brian, are you alright?" I asked, backing away slowly. I didn't like the look in his eyes.

For just a moment he looked like something was ready to snap deep in his mind, but then he shook his head like he was throwing water.

"Yeah," he said, a pained look on his face. "I want to get out of here. Now."

Moving towards the elevator, he didn't exactly run, but there was an urgency in the man's step as he headed towards the outside.

He never said a single word as we made our way down to ground level.

Stepping from the building into the green space out front, I noticed a police dog out of the corner of my eye. He nodded politely to me and slipped away into a shadow. Brian never even saw him.

Brian wasn't in much of a position to notice anything. Down on his haunches, he was kneeling in the scrubby grass, gasping in deep breaths as though I'd been holding his head underwater for the last hour.

"I won't go back there," he said, voice rough. "There are too many memories up there. To many years fighting to get back inside my head. It's dirty."

I set a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Come on," I said, "Let get out of here. I think you could use a walk in the fresh air."

Brian seemed to perk up the moment we got out of the shadow of the apartment building.

The sun was low in the sky, but there were still lots of people out enjoying the warm summer evening. We passed a school in our wanderings. Brian slowed to a stop on the sidewalk. Not a stone's throw away a dozen kids were running about in a playground.

It wasn't the greatest or grandest thing in the world, but a little community school yard, a set of monkey bars, a slide, and a sandbox, but the kids seemed to enjoy it just the same.

There were cats in there, and canines, onis, trolls, and everything else you might come to expect to see on your average day in V-town. There were even some human children.

Brian watched them. His lips were trembling.

"This is what I never saw, Tommy," he said. "I spent so many years up in that skybox, looking down over the city. I only ever came down when I absolutely needed to, when I needed food or supplies. I spent decades up there, looking down from a distance, planning... scheming for the future of the city."

"I was doing right," he continued, "Trying to keep the spark of humanity alive. But... I never

saw things like this. I never saw children playing, never talked to people on the street. I never saw that *people* are still here, even if they're not human."

I laughed softly. "It took you a century to realize that? How could you not notice? Like you said, you had to come down for supplies every once in a while."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. I *saw* things, but I didn't *see* them. All those years up there, I'd already decided what was right and wrong, what was real. It didn't matter what was around me when I came down to the real world, I saw what I believed to be here, not the real world around me. I didn't see children playing, I saw inhuman abominations taking up space for *real* children, learning how to hunt and kill."

I didn't have a good response to that.

"You can remember now?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I can remember snatches, passages from a book. Images and sounds, thoughts. I can remember having been him, but I can't remember *being* him."

Putting an arm over the other wolf's shoulders, I gently guided him away, walking down the street again.

It may be nothing, but I just didn't feel safe having him close to so many children. This may be the *new* Brian Ferguson, but the thought of him being close to kids, any kids, made me uneasy.

It didn't take us long to wander out to the edges of the forest. V-town may be a decent sized city, but it ends quickly enough if you know what direction to walk.

Brian stopped dead when he saw the street end ahead of us.

Well, I shouldn't say the street *ended* per say. It just kind of got gobbled up by the trees. One moment you're on the asphalt, the next moment your standing on the mossy grass, the earth having reclaimed its rightful place. There was hardly more than a few feet where the change occurred, where the city and the earth transitioned.

"I don't want to go that way," he said.

"Huh? What's wrong."

"I've never... never been out of the city before."

I tightened my grip on his shoulders. "Then you're talking to the right wolf. I grew up in the forests, with my Dad. But then I spent years hardly setting foot out there again. I know, it can be a bit intimating at first. Don't worry, you're a wolf. It's what your body was designed for."

He began shivering.

"I'm not a wolf, Tommy," his voice was a whine. "I'm not like you. I wasn't born this. I'm... I'm human."

"You were, Brian," I whispered reassuringly in his ear as I help him fast. I didn't push forward but neither did I let him back away. "You were, but that was long ago. You've spent ten times as much of you life as a wolf than a man. Don't you think that could be part of the problem? You're holding on too tight. Nature made you what you are now, but you refuse to accept it. Accepting what you've become doesn't mean you have to let go of what you were. You become more than you were without losing what you had before."

I paused for a moment, lowering my voice further.

"And I'll tell you a secret, Brian. I was human once too. Only for a few days, but I've experienced the same change you have. I know of frightening it is."

I'd been planing on taking him on a hunt, but now I realized we were a long way from anything like that.

It took everything Brian had to take that final step off the asphalt. When his toes touched the soft moss of the earth he leapt as if burned.

It had been difficult for me, who'd spent less than a decade trapped inside the city, to return to the forest. I could only imagine how hard it had to be for Brian, who'd spent easily ten times that in the city, and hadn't likely been much of a nature lover before anyway.

He leaned heavily on my shoulder as we journeyed deeper amongst the trees. The footing wasn't so treacherous here that he really had any reason to clutch me so tight. I think it was more of the fact I was the only thing he had with him that remained of the city.

We could have wandered in the forest, but I kept us straight and narrow, nicely in the middle of one of the well trod paths. This had been a highway once, long ago. For someone like me it felt just about the same as the city.

For Brian, however, I could see in his wide eyes that his was far and away from anything he'd ever experienced.

He looked at the trees around us like a month old pup. It was with a shock I realized the expression on his face was not so different than Ging's had been, or even Beth's, when I'd taken them out to English's home.

Tugging me gently to a stop, Brian reached out a tentative hand towards the nearest tree.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's a birch," I replied. "You could climb it if you wanted."

Hand reaching out again, his claws snagged a loose flap of the tree's white, paper like bark.

He cried out slightly and pulled back. His claw caught on the bark, pulling a decent size chunk back with him.

"Get it off! Get it off!" All but leaping up and down, he waved his hand in the air as if afraid the tree was some kind of blood sucker. I had to hold back a laugh.

"Come here, let me handle that."

Grabbing a hold of his flailing hand, I gently tugged the bark free.

"See, just some birch bark, nothing to be afraid of," I said, holding it out to him.

He leaned forward, sniffing it. It seemed some measure of his courage was back now that he didn't have nature attached to him any longer.

And that was the way the rest of the evening continued. It flat out amazed me just how little Brian knew.

Even for a man who'd lost his memory he seemed to know less than anyone but a new born babe would. Other than grass and the occasional ornamental pine, it seemed he hadn't seen anything green in far longer than I'd been alive.

Much to my surprise we came across a rabbit as we wandered. It wasn't much, a stingy and unappetizing fellow – likely why he'd yet to be caught – he stood on the path not a dozen strides before us.

I called a silent stop to our progress and pointed it out to him.

"My daughter used to have one like that..." he whispered, then suddenly cut off, going cross eyed.

"You remember her?" I asked.

He raised a hand to his forehead and winced. "No... yes... images. I can..." He stopped and looked up at me. "Tommy, I want to go home. I want to go back to my apartment surrounded by police dogs."

I nodded. "Okay."

When I looked up again the rabbit was long gone.

The towers of V-town had still to break through the canopy of leaves above us, and it wasn't yet dark enough to see its lights, yet I already knew something was wrong.

We were still a good five minutes walk away when I started getting nervous. I'm sure Brian could feel it. He kept up with me step for step and I moved faster. It wasn't long after that I was running flat out, Brian fighting simply to keep up.

And there, on the edge of town, with his toes right on the last pebbles of the fractured concrete, was a police dog.

Not just any dog. It was Pine.

Sprinting past, I didn't even need to say a word, he started off with me. I never even slowed.

"What is it?" I asked, panting.

His ears were down.

"Rebecca is safe," were the first words out of his lips.

I skidded to the halt and grabbed Pine by the shoulders, my claws digging through the fabric of his uniform.

"What is it?"

He paused for a moment, looking like a deer caught in the headlights of a north bound train.

"The children--" was all he got out.

I took off again, sprinting for home at a speed that would have giving anyone else a heart attack.

Chapter 12: The Scent of the Hunt

The journey from the edge of town to the apartment should have twenty minutes. A world record would be six. I made it in four.

There was a ring of blue uniformed police dogs around the building as I approached. I didn't give them enough time to identify me and make an opening. I lept right over them.

Coming to a skidding halt, there was yet another cop standing directly in front of the door, baring my path.

I snarled at him, a wordless order to get out of the way between me and my family.

He didn't need telling twice.

Slowing to a walk now, I entered the lobby. There was no need to run, I could see Rebecca sitting on a couch here, being attended to by police dogs and nurses.

The fact they'd had to call nurses in...

I stepped towards Rebecca, she looked up at me from where she was sitting on the couch. There was a deep gash across her forehead and a long tear down the leg of her pants oozing blood.

"Tommy," she said, her voice woozy.

Clearing the final few steps between us, I shoved everyone else out of the way. In a heartbeat I had my arms around her. She may be smeared in blood, but she was still warm to the touch. And, by the smell of it, not all of the blood was hers.

"What happened?" I whispered.

It took her eyes a moment to focus on my face. When she spoke her voice was low, sounding more like a growl that might come from my own throat.

"We were ambushed," she said. "I had the kids all bundled up and ready to go for a walk. We were here in the lobby, just waiting for you to come back. I thought we'd go out and get dinner." She paused for a moment, looked towards the glass front doors. Only now did I notice one of them was shattered.

"They came right through," she continued. "One moment we were sitting here, fine and safe, the next there was a boom and a flash of light. I was flat on my back before I even knew what was going on. Then I heard them coming."

"It couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds. A dozen of them stormed through the door and

into the lobby, as if they'd been waiting for us. The police were here, Tommy, it wasn't their fault. I could hardly see them, but the dogs were trying to protect us. Three were shot. I think one of them is dead."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Then they were gone. For a moment I didn't even realize what had happened. It wasn't until I could see again that I realized the children were missing. They were the only thing they took."

My vision was starting to go red. "They kidnapped Ging and Beth? Who?"

If she'd done a good impression of one of my snarls then I was doing a try at one of English's.

Any grogginess in her motions had cleared away. She looked me straight in the eye when she spoke.

"They were all humans. It was the HDL."

With a scream I leapt forward, ripping one of the cushions off the sofa. It was only a matter of seconds before I'd reduced it to nothing more than rags and down floating through the air.

I was just turning to leave, heading out on the street to track them by scent, when there was a commotion out beyond the front door.

That would be just perfect for me. If they dared return to the scene of the crime I would tear them apart just as I had the pillow.

Sadly, when the crowd of police dogs finally parted it was one of their members that stepped through, not a human.

The dog wasn't dressed in the usual blue service uniform, but a black riot suit with a full face mask pulled down in front. It wasn't until he raised the mask that I realized who it was.

"I'm so sorry, Tommy."

Jon.

Grabbing the dog by the shoulder, I hauled him off to the far corner of the lobby.

"What... the hell... happened?" It took everything I had just to form the words.

Jon looked me straight in the face. His blue eyes were wide and clear. "I failed," was all he said.

With a snarl I lashed out, scoring the wall behind him with my claws, leaving long ugly gashes.

"That's *not* what I asked," I snarled. "What happened? Why did they do this? Where are they? They have my children and I want their skulls!"

Jon, the man who I'd seen weather just about any situation with hardly so much as a glimmer of emotion pulled back now, afraid.

"Tommy, I swear to you we will get them back. You're... you're my best friend. I'll do whatever it takes to bring them back to you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Make it happen, Jon. Find them. Make them pay. I don't care if they're human. They're not human anymore, they're beasts. I *kill* beasts for food."

He didn't say a word as he turned from me and walked back to where the police dogs waited. His tail was held low and his teeth were bared.

I didn't hear much of the conversation that went on between Jon and his officers, I was too wound up over both the kids and looking after Rebecca's wounds, but I couldn't help but pick up snippets of conversation.

Especially with how loud they were talking. And police dogs never yell.

Able and Baker weren't here, but a number of the dogs directly under them were. They were trying to tell Jon he should be back at Police HQ.

"Sir, it's improper for you to be out here," one of them said. "As commissioner we can't afford to risk your life."

Jon whirled on him, voice in full snarl. "The Administrator's children have been kidnapped as a result of the incompetency of *this* force. The problem *will* be resolved. The officers who planned and implemented the security for this building will be dealt with. Until then *I* am in charge here."

"But, Sir..."

"This is *my* force. Or are you challenging my order?"

A moment later the dog backed down.

"And what in the gods' names are you still doing here?" Jon continued. "Who's following the trail? Who's finding them?"

"We called for a sniffer unit, Sir..."

That was about the point where Jon grabbed the subordinate by the ear and began dragging him off.

A moment later a shadow fell over me. It was in the shape of a dog.

"Hello, Pine," I said, never looking up.

"Sir." His voice was little more than a whimper.

The dog came to stand before Rebecca and I. His face was half obscured by a bandage, looking like his left ear was possibly missing, and his arm was in a makeshift cast.

Rebecca looked over to me. She didn't say a word but her message was clear enough.

"Come on." Rising, I led Pine away, letting the nurses get back to Rebecca. The dog followed me without a word, his tail between his legs.

"Was it as bad as they say?" I asked as we made it to a quiet corner.

He nodded. "It was an organized attack, Sir. Heavily armed and armoured. They were all carrying firearms and wearing body armour that made them all but impervious to our claws and teeth."

I looked over him. "But you took some down?"

He nodded curtly. "I did. I took one down. I was the only one to successfully attack. My target was... killed."

I let out a sigh. For just a moment I thought we might have had someone to interrogate.

"How did they do this, Pine? How did we not know, not even get a whiff?"

If anything he stiffened even further. "We had all the signs you might want, Sir," he said, keeping his voice soft. "Riots, demonstrations. The HDL demanding access to your daughter. They made it more than obvious what they wanted. We... we just didn't take them seriously."

I leaned forward and set my forehead against the wall. Right, I'd forgotten. So much had been going on, the trade delegation from Japan just being the latest, that's I'd almost forgotten just how aggressive the HDL had been.

Something changed inside me as I let the anger boil. My vision had been misted red when this had started, and it had only grown.

Now, when the anger had been threatening to crest, to wash me away, it was gone.

Not... gone. It was still here, but the red fog had gone crystal clear. I would get my children back.

But first I had to deal with this.

Turning to Pine again, I slowly sized him up. Behind the bandages he was still a model police dog, though he'd never see public duty again with the disfigurement to his face.

"Pine." The word came for my mouth a sharp growl. The dog flinched back.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Did you fight to protect my family?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you fight for them as you would have your own?"

There was a long pause. "No, Sir. I fought harder. If it were my own family I'd know I'd be the only one responsible. They belong to you. You've done more for this city, for me, than anyone else ever could."

I pulled my lips back in a snarl. "You lie! You would lay your life down for your own pups."

He seemed to shrink before me, but he never took a step back.

"No, Sir. I'd do, could do, no more than I did for your family. The other dogs fell when they were shot. I didn't. I've two bullets still in me that the doctors need to take out."

Pulling a deep breath, I looked once more at the dog.

"Thank you," I said, closing my eyes. "You've done more than I ever could have asked of you, and you've helped reduce their numbers." I reached out and set one hand on his unwounded shoulder. "Now get out of here. You need to get yourself looked after."

Walking back to the couch, I saw Rebecca had changed into new clothing. Her old pants and shirt were soaked through with blood.

"I'm going after them," I said. "You stay here and look after yourself."

I was about to turn towards the door when my face lit up with fire.

"Don't you dare!"

Hands flying up to clutch my nose, I had just a instant to see her fist pull away, covered in blood.

"Don't you think for even one moment you're going to go out there without me, Tommy," she hissed. "They're *our* kids. You're not going anywhere without me."

"But, Babe," I said, trying to sound calm, "You're hurt."

She narrowed her eyes. "Now you are too. And I'll be fine. *We're* going to find them. We haven't gotten through everything this far just to let a bunch of Luddites steal our children."

Reaching out, I pulled her into a tight hug, pressing her against my chest. She flinched slightly as I put pressure on her wounds.

"Babe... I'm so sorry. I wasn't here." I did everything I could not to cry, but the tears came anyway.

Looking down into her eyes, I could see no fear there. Only determination.

"Let's get them, Wolfy."

I grinned, but there was no joy in the action. I showed every single one of my teeth.

Walking hand in hand, Rebecca and I brushed the nurses aside as we made our way to the front of the lobby where dozens of police dogs still stood, though more and more of them now were dressed in black.

"Jon!" I shouted.

A moment later a form broke from the mass.

"Tommy."

I couldn't see his face behind the mask, but he sounded as ready as I was.

"What do we have?"

"Little," he replied. "The sniffer unit is still on its way. The retreating kidnapers set a number of fires during their escape. That's slowing everything down."

I lowered my ears.

"Then we do this ourselves."

Stepping past him and over the broken glass, I found myself back out on the street.

It was a war zone out here.

A battle had raged outside during the kidnapping. There were splatters of blood and potmarks in the concrete.

Lowering my nose to the asphalt, I drew in a long breath. A dozen humans had passed this way. I had them.

At first the path lead straight down the road, then ducked into an alleyway. That's where they set the first fire.

Thankfully, the people who owned the shop next door had put it out fairly quickly. The smoke and ash obscured the scents for a few feet, but I was able to pick them up again in the exit to the street.

Weaving and dodging up and down the next three blocks, they didn't make the trail easy. They must have managed to beat the cops back by this point. They weren't making a straight dash as I'd been hoping, but deliberately covering their scent.

And the fact they'd been carrying the kids meant I couldn't try to track them directly. Whoever they were, they were smart. They knew full well that I'd be able to pick up my children's scent no matter what was in the way so they took pains never to leave it.

Another half block and I heard the click of claws, a *lot* of claws, coming up the street behind us.

"Sir," a voice said.

There was a tap on my shoulder. Raising from my four legged stance I'd been using to track, I turned to see a whole battalion of dogs standing there. They were all wearing special uniforms.

"The tracker unit is at our disposal," Jon said.

I didn't even have to give the order. They pressed past me to carefully arrange themselves on the road. I noticed they all wore rubber boots and gloves so as not to contaminate the trail. Their uniforms were ever so slightly different than what the regular dogs wore, they were tailored to these officers spending most of their time with their noses down.

And, I had to admit, they were good at what they did. In seconds they were off and it was all Jon, Rebecca, and I could do to jog along behind.

It wasn't that long before one of the sniffer dogs split from the group. "He's following another trail," Jon said. "They must have split up." Then, a second later, another dog left on his own invisible trail.

I grated my teeth. They'd been ready for us.

In less than four blocks at least half a dozen dogs had turned into alleyways or apartment doors, tracking their prey. That quickly cut down on our numbers. The cops had been taken by surprise last time. They were making sure all their tracking parties had enough officers now to take down *anything*.

Two hours later and the moon was well up. The three of us had stuck with the most likely scent trail, following along behind the dogs, but we were all dead on our feet now.

The trail had led just about *everywhere*.

We'd been uptown, downtown, through the factories and even across Stanly Park.

I had a distinct feeling we were on the wrong trail. No one could have made a journey like this with two kidnapped children and not be spotted. Every cop in the entire city was out looking for them.

But yet I still refused to give up. I kept putting one foot in front of the other and followed the tail of the sniffer dog.

It was four in the morning before Jon spoke up.

"Perhaps, Tommy, it's time for a shift change."

Glancing over my shoulder, I could only just see his face through his mask. He looked like he was about ready to fall over from exhaustion, and I wasn't far behind him.

Looking over at Rebecca, I could see her lips set in a hard line. She wouldn't be the one to call a stop.

Reaching out a hand, I pulled her close to me.

"Come on, Babe. We're no good out here. Let's get some rest so we're ready when they find them."

She gave me a hard glare. "I'll be ready, Tommy. We'll make them pay. Both of us."

We could tell something was up at the apartment before we even got within a block of it.

Jon pulled one of the officers aside. After a few whispered words he turned to update us.

"A letter has been delivered, Sir," he said.

I hadn't thought I had anything left, but I still managed to sprint the rest of the way home. Rebecca was at my side step for step.

The cops were fast enough to get out of our way this time. And, to be rather honest, I wasn't surprised to see a familiar golden pelt standing in the lobby, looming over the dog in charge.

"Give me the blasted letter! You know he'd give me permission to open it!" English bellowed.

The dog standing before him held firm. "That may or not be the case under normal circumstances, but I can not allow you to open it at the present time."

The dog looked more than relieved when I stepped up and plucked the envelope from his hands.

It was a plain white envelope, the only writing on the outside was 'Taggart'.

That was about all I got to see before another pair of hands plucked it from mine. A golden pair.

"Back away, Tommy," English warned, his accent all but gone. "You remember the letter you got from Brian and the HDL last year. There's nothing saying this isn't laced with the same anti-regeneration poisons."

Jon's head shot up.

"You're right," he said. A moment later I felt his hands on my shoulders, guiding me away.

The only reason I let him move me even a step was that Rebecca stayed next to English, watching as the lion slit the envelope open with a claw. But moments later a number of the police clustered around them, obscuring any view I might have had.

With a sigh, I gave up and walked with Jon at my side to the nearest couch, all but falling onto it.

"What do you think will happen, Jon?" I asked more to just make conversation than anything else. I felt that if I closed my eyes for even a second I'd be out for hours.

He cleared his throat. "That's difficult to say, Tommy. If it is indeed the HDL that kidnapped them then I can see no reason they would be harmed. The Human Defense League's agenda has always been geared towards the preservation of their species. And they haven't been known active as a violent force since Brian Ferguson was removed."

I grunted. "Then it looks like our intelligence service needs some updating. Rebecca said that everyone in the attack was human, and she recognized them as HDL. She'd be the one to know, there aren't that many humans, and she knows just about all of them by name."

Jon was about to say something when there was a call from across the room.

"It's clear, Mate." The accent was back in English's voice, but I could hear how strained it was.

Standing up, I wavered on my feet. I likely would have fallen right back down if a strong pair of hands hadn't discretely steadied me at the shoulder.

I gave Jon a nod.

Walking slowly, step by exhausted step, across the lobby to where the crowd waited, I realized I could hardly see the walls for how many police dogs there were. And they, it seemed, were all armed to the teeth.

English handed me the letter. I took it in shaking hands.

Taggert,

We asked nicely. Now we're taking it.

You have the secret to keeping the human race alive. How else could you have had a human daughter?

You've done a lot for us. That's why you're still alive. And so are your kids.

We only want the girl, but we have the boy, too. Neither are hurt.

They'll stay that way only if you call off the cops.

We're not doing this to hurt you. We just want to stay alive.

Remember. We need the girl, but not the boy. Stay away.

There was no signature at the bottom, but there was a stamp. It was Leonardo's vitruvian man.

A hand fell gently on my shoulder. The weight was light, but it made me nearly collapse.

"I knew them, Tommy," Rebecca said, her voice soft. "I even recognized some of them through their armour. What could make a person do something like this?"

I let out a long sigh and turned towards the elevator.

"I could hazard a guess, Babe. It's the same thing that made the two of us fight so hard to keep the spark of humanity alive. We *killed* to protect ourselves. Gods, I can't even remember half the things we've done to keep the humans alive in V-town. And don't even get me started about Ferguson..."

Going straight as a rod, I whirled in place. Jon was by my side in an instant.

"Find Brian," I hissed. "He was with me all evening. It could have been a distraction."

I didn't even have the time to blink before Jon was across the room, barking orders to his men. Many of those dogs sprinted out onto the street seconds later.

I felt sick.

Could Brian have been nothing but a distraction?

The wolf had convinced me he'd lost his memory, but how much of it had been nothing more than a game? He had been playing games with V-town for generations. Could this have been nothing more than a ploy to learn about my children and open up a gap for him to send his men to steal them?

But then why go after Beth and Ging rather than the Phoenix technology directly? Easy answer. He didn't know about it. No one outside the police force and English, Rebecca, Lucy, and I knew of that.

Brian had to attack what he knew. And he knew Beth had been born to me.

"We're going up to the apartment," I said to the nearest police dog. "Tell me *immediately* if anything happens."

After all the crowd and carnage of the lobby it felt like another world stepping into the elevator.

"You okay, Babe?" I asked Rebecca as I leaned on the wall. She'd buried her face in the fur of my chest.

"I will be, Tommy," she whispered after a moment. "I never wanted to be a mother, but now that I am... It scares me right down to my heart to think Ging and Beth are in danger."

I looped my arm around her and held her close, trying not to shiver.

"Jon said they have no reason to hurt them. They wouldn't go to all this effort to kidnap them if they were going to hurt them."

"But they only need Beth."

I closed my eyes. I'd made the choice *not* to tell Jon to order his force off. Jon would do what he thought was best. He'd do everything he could to get them back.

And the thought of letting them get clean away was too much for me to bear.

The elevator door opened a moment later, letting us step out into the dark hallway.

I'd almost forgot it was the middle of the night. With all the lights and bodies in the lobby it'd seemed like day again.

There was only a single source of light up here, flooding through the open door to our apartment.

"I didn't leave it open," Rebecca whispered.

Weariness just short of dripped from my fur, but I fell into a hunter's crouch. If there was the least chance that one of the HDL was up here I wanted to deal with them *myself*.

Stalking forward, I stopped just short of the door. Rebecca stood behind me. From somewhere in the deep folds of her jacket she pulled a long, wicked looking knife.

Taking a deep breath, I bunched my legs and leapt through the open door, landing in a ready crouch.

Only to be confronted by the golden form of English laying sprawled out on the sofa. He opened one lazy eye to peer at us.

"Thought the two of you would never get here," he said in a sleepy slur. "The stairs are faster."

To say I didn't get much sleep that night would be an understatement.

Rebecca and I were still used to having to get up ten times every night to sooth crying infants, feed one and rock the other.

That night, save the sound of countless bodies marching in and out of the lobby beneath us, was disturbingly silent. Not even English's snores could fill up the void where a pair of soft breaths should be.

It wasn't long before morning came, only scant few hours. Sitting up in bed and looking out over the city, the buildings and streets looked dirty and ugly.

I was disappointed with Jon that he'd let us sleep the whole time. I'd been half expecting him to show up at my door, a tight, nearly imperceptible smile on his lips as he handed Ging and Beth back with one hand and held up the kidnappers by their toes with the other.

No such thing had happened.

Stepping out into the front room, leaving Rebecca asleep on the bed behind me, I expected to see English still sprawled out across the couch.

He was nowhere to be seen.

A quick case of the apartment brought back a pang of pain when I peeked into the children's room.

No lion, and no children.

I was just about to head out into the hallway when a hand touched my shoulder.

"You ready for this, Wolfy?" Rebecca asked. She was already dressed in fresh clothing. If not

for her trussed hair and the deep rings under her eyes I'd almost have thought this just another day for her.

I wondered what in all the gods' names *I* must look like.

"Yeah, Babe," I said, taking a deep breath. "Let's get this over with."

I wasn't surprised to see a police dog guard out in the hallway, but I was a little taken aback to note there were *a dozen* of them up and down, all the way to the elevator. And none of them had broken arms. They must have sent Pine away to recuperate.

Not bothering with the elevator, we took the stairs down. It felt good to stretch my muscles. I'd been so tensed up all night that every motion made me feel like a slab of hamburger getting pounded.

Out into the lobby, it looked like half of Police HQ had been transported here overnight.

There were dozens of dogs walking briskly to and fro, and clusters of temporary desks and offices that had been set up. How they'd done this all without waking either of us I had no idea.

Though getting down here did answer one of my questions. English was sitting at a desk on the far side of the room. The flow of people that came to report to him were most definitely *not* police dogs.

Rebecca and I were on our way over to him when he noticed us and handed over the desk to one of the employees.

"How are you two holding up?" he asked, meeting us in the middle of the room.

I glanced over to Rebecca.

"As well as can be expected," I said.

He nodded gravely.

"Come on, let's find Jon. I think he needs to talk to you two."

A moment later we were seated in one of the police's little cubicles. Jon's was a cut above the others, it had walls.

"We've continued our search overnight," he said, not a hint of emotion in his voice. I had the feeling he'd been up non-stop and was running on autopilot, nothing left. "Out of the dozen attackers, one was killed in the initial assault and we've managed to track down seven more. Six of those are in custody. The last drowned while trying to swim the inlet."

I closed my eyes for a moment. English and I had had to swim that once. That had been back when we'd been on our way to Horseshoe Bay.

"What about the rest?" Rebecca asked.

Jon shuffled the papers in from of him and cleared his throat.

"I just received an update on them moments ago. They seem to be the group with the children. They were the most difficult to track and the best prepared."

There was an edge in Rebecca voice when she spoke again. "Where are they?"

Jon glanced down at his papers.

"They've fled the city, heading north-east."

I glanced over to Rebecca.

"Towards Horseshoe Bay?" I asked.

Jon shook his head. "No. That would be north-west. They went straight into the mountains."

For just a moment time stopped for me.

"They left the city?" I asked. "They're in the forest?"

Jon raised his lip ever so slightly, exposing just the shadow of a fang.

"Yes." His voice was deadpan.

"Get me Gowan," I said. "Bring me my uncle, the hunter's alpha."

Jon sent off a half dozen of his blue uniformed men to fetch Gowan.

The dogs looked distinctly nervous. I could make a pretty safe bet that no one *fetched* the new hunter's alpha. I could tell you in no mean words what my father would have had done if someone had tried that on *him*, likely police dogs.

Gown must not have lost his sunny disposition. He stepped through the front doors of the lobby not a hour later, tailing a half dozen of the highest ranking hunters.

I knew they were here before I could even see them. The reactions of the police dogs told me everything.

"Hunter's alpha," I said, standing to meet Gown I bowed my head respectfully.

It was only after Jon had sent off his dogs that I realized just what I'd done. I could have pulled this trick with my father because... well, *he'd been my father*. I wasn't quite so sure with Gowan.

The other wolf must have matured in his new role of alpha a bit since I'd last seen him months ago. He wasn't quite up to the regal bearing my father had cultivated, but he no longer looked quite the happy-go-lucky beta he had been.

"You sent these *dogs* to retrieve me, Administrator?" He asked. Gowan's voice wasn't quite as I remembered it. It was deeper, with the edge of a growl. The way he looked at me, the way he moved, both with a confident and easy motion the belied the power he held.

He was acting like an alpha. And he was pissed.

I fought to pull my ears back, to lower my tail, but I was too on edge. My children were missing and I was going to cow down to no man in a moment like this.

A little fact in the back of my mind itched. It was one of those million of little bits of minutia that I'd helped Gowan work through when last I'd seen him. One of the old, obscure hunter's laws.

"Alpha," I said, working only just enough reverence into my voice to avoid affronting him, "I place my case before you. I am a hunter, ordained and bloodied. I was born to a hunter, and my wife and I were married under the eyes of the pack. My children are hunters until they grow old enough to make their own will known."

"Alpha," I continued, raising my voice as the words came smoothly to me, "You are the leader of the hunters, but you are also our protector. My children have been stolen from me. My good and trusted friends, the police, have informed me the kidnapers have fled the city, to the forest and the barrens beyond. That is not their domain. It is ours, it is yours."

I took a deep breath. "By the bond between us, forged when I became a hunter and you became my alpha, I enact my right to bring the full force of the pack to find these men. A threat to one of us is a threat to us all."

He watched me for just a moment, eyes narrowing. At last he spoke. "What do you think I've been doing, you silly pup?"

And with those words the spell was broken. He spoke once again as a beta. He was neither happy, nor go-lucky, but he was stressed and harried, and pressed to his limits.

He was a beta, but he was doing his best to help me, to become the alpha he knew he had to be.

"I sent the pack out after them hours ago, Tommy," he continued. "We mobilized the moment we heard they'd been taken. Gods, what did you think we were doing? And I might add *you* didn't bother to even tell us what happened. We had to learn through the grapevine and the news reports."

I fell back into a chair I didn't even know was behind me.

"I... sorry, alpha," I said.

He turned his eyes to the heavens and let out a long suffering sigh. "Tommy, we're family. Did

you really think I wouldn't already be out looking for them? I've been run ragged tabulating reports." I perked up but he shook his head. "We've got a dozen leads but the city is a big place. We're still searching for exactly where they left it."

"I, ahem, may be able to aid you there, hunter's alpha." Jon stepped up from behind me. He looked more animated now, like he'd found an extra reserve of energy now that something had come up. "My forces have been able to track them to the edge of the city. My sniffers should be able to afix your trackers to the proper scent trail." He raised an eye ridge. "Together, we should be able to track them down."

Gowan laughed. Not a condescending or nervous sound, but deep and from his gut. It was what he, as a beta, had been well known for.

"Together? Do you have any idea how foolish that sounds, Commissioner?" he said. "The hunters and the cops have been at odds since time immemorial. Or at least through the carers of our immediate predecessors. And that's as far back as most people seem to be able to remember these days." He laughed again. "But Griss always did call me the stupid one. You're on. We'll follow you're officers through the city and you can follow my hunters through the woods. Let's find the bastards and let's *kill them*."

I heard a deep chuckle from over my left shoulder. Craning my neck around, I saw English leaning on the back of my chair. "You know, Mate," he whispered. "The conditions may not be what we'd wish, but I think this could be the start of a beautiful – if pissy – friendship."

Gowan and Jon disappeared a few moments later, out into the street to start tracking. Rebecca and I were first in line to join them, but they both pushed us back.

"Sir," Jon said, "It may not be advisable for you to join us. You may be too... close to the situation."

"What the dog's saying," Gowan cut in, "Is that you're sitting this one out. We'll handle this hunt and that's the end of it." He gave me a one-hundred percent alpha quality stare to settle the point.

Sitting back on a chair in the lobby, I couldn't quite bear to head back up to the apartment again. Both English and Rebecca were off working with the dogs, doing something or other.

I just felt useless.

"How're ya holding up, cuz?"

I nearly jumped through the roof when the voice came from just an inch from my ear, lips close enough to brush my guardhairs.

"Gah!" I *did* jump high enough to fall out of my chair and kink my tail as I landed heavily on the floor.

A couple of the nearest police dogs paused to glance my way before returning to their work.

"Worse off now that you've given me a heart attack, Lucy!" I snapped at her.

She just smiled and pulled up a chair next to mine. "Well, arn't you glad I just used up all your nervous energy then? It's like a battery. It builds up over time and you have to let it out or risk it exploding everywhere."

I sighed and worked up a smile from some unknown reserve of good cheer. I didn't *want* to feel happy, but it was hard not to smile with Lucy around. She'd grown up the daughter of a beta and Gowan's nature had more than rubbed off on her.

"Just waiting?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Not much else I can do. The cops are doing their thing and the hunters are doing theirs. Neither of them want Rebecca or I in the middle of it with them. They don't trust us to act

rational.” I spat the word. “Though I can't say I disagree with them.” I paused for a moment and eyed her. “Speaking of which, what are you doing here? You're one of the best hunters Gowan has. You should be out with the pack.”

She smiled, showing each and every one of her bright white, and very sharp, teeth.

“You'd think so, wouldn't you, coz? I have to sit this one out. I got in a smack up with a moose last week and twisted my knee. It's still on its way to healing.” She gestured down to one leg. I could see it was slightly swollen. “And anyway, I've got a more important job to do than just being another hunter.”

“Oh?” I asked, cocking my head. “What?”

“Looking after the parents of the kidnapped children. A couple of people in a state like that, and powerful folks too, who knows what they'll do. And I'll tell you a secret,” she said, leaning forward conspiratorially, “They're not know for being predictable. Especially the father. He tends to disappear on a tangent and do his own thing. Not a good idea with things the way they are now.”

I let out a breath and slumped back.

“Fine, Lucy, you've made your point. You can't blame me for being scared. You'd know if you had pups of your own.”

For just a moment she looked offended.

“Coz,” she said with a slight edge to her voice, “You live your life and I'll live mine.” Then she tossed her head and a smile returned to her lips. “But we haven't talked in a while. I should invite the four of you over sometime when this is all done. You can meet Calamine. She'd love to get to know you.”

The rest of the day dragged slowly on.

Jon had taken a radio with him when he'd left. He made check ins back to the lobby every half hour or so. More often then I think he really needed to. I'd put money on the frequency being mostly for my benefit.

In the end it just made me feel all the more useless.

Rebecca was working with her contacts to try and scrape up more information on the HDL, English was sending his bounty hunters hither and yon to double check the city, and I just sat in the middle of it, feeling miserable for myself.

It wasn't until early in the evening that the radio attracted my attention again. Jon was sending in another report.

“They appear to be making better time than us, they're breaking away,” he said, his voice cut with static. “We're in Upper Lynn and they've crossed the creek. Trail has been temperately lost.” He paused for a long moment. “We're going to need a faster mode of transport than foot. Contact HQ. See if they have anything rugged available in the motor pool.”

In the blink of an eye English was on his feet and reaching for the radio.

“Hey, woof, I've got a better idea,” he said. “You remember my baby? The one we rode back from Edmonton in? She's gassed and ready to go, and can take the worst the world has to throw at her. You're in Upper Lynn? I can meet you there by nightfall.”

As fast as English may have moved, Rebecca and I were faster.

“You're not going without us,” she said.

I had only vague memories of English's 'baby'. It was a large, bright yellow jeep that we'd found up in Edmonton. It has been a godsend for getting back to V-town then, cutting our return trip from months to weeks.

But all I remembered about it was how crowded it had been. And bumpy. English hadn't exactly been an experienced driver.

The lion didn't bother trying to dissuade Rebecca or I as we followed him out of the lobby door at a jog. I could hear Lucy yelling from behind, but we quickly outdistanced her. And it didn't look like she was trying all that hard.

English must have called ahead. By the time we reached Storm Front HQ the jeep was parked around out front, its engine idling.

People walking past were giving it curious looks, but no one dared get close to it with a half dozen bounty hunters standing guard.

"Thanks, Brown," English said as he pulled the driver's door open. "She's ready to go?"

The massive bear nodded his head. "And you supplies are stowed in the trunk."

English winked. "You're a life saver, old man." He slammed the door and rolled down the window. "What are you waiting for, Mate? Get in!"

About five seconds later Rebecca and I were buckled up and we were off down the crowded streets of V-town. We didn't see another vehicle the whole way to the forest.

The night was already closing in by the time we hit the trees. English had to switch on the headlights to get a look at where we were going. Thankfully, he had an extra set of lights mounted on a bar above the cab that lit up the forest like day.

The road, however, was a bit more of an inconvenience than the failing light was.

We did in due time make it to the location Jon had reported to us. Or rather, most of the way there.

We were picking our way through the trees when a form appeared around a bend in the road.

"Aiya!" English cried, pitching forward and slamming his foot onto the break. His voice was high enough that I almost thought it was going to shatter the windshield.

We didn't even have time to come to a full stop before the rear door was pulled open and a dark form leapt in.

"Drive," came a command from the backseat.

English was about to turn to glance over his shoulder, but he thought better of it, stamping his foot down on the gas instead.

The lion had come to trust Jon, even if he'd never admit to it.

"What in all the gods' names is going on?" I asked, popping off my seatbelt and twisting around in my chair.

I regretted that decision almost immediately as we hit a rut and my head went slamming into the padded roof of the jeep.

Even with the padding I was seeing stars.

Jon was covered in mud and fighting to pull a pack from his back. His motions were further hampered by a long, heavy canvas bag he had resting in his lap. It was long enough to reach over to Rebecca seated on the other side of the back seat.

A smile pulled at the dog's lips.

"We have them."

My mouth dropped open.

"We *what*?"

The smiled widened. He looked past my shoulder.

"Take a right here, English," he directed before turning his attention back to me. "We know

where they're going. Or at least we have a good idea. Cathedral mountain. That's they only landmark this path leads to."

I reached up a hand to rub the quickly receding bump on my head. "Where's everyone else, the force and the hunters?"

For just a moment his smile faltered.

"I decided this was something that we could best handle alone." His expression grew dark. "They're your children, and it's my fault they were stolen away from you. *We* will get them back. You're, ah, uncle didn't agree when I broached this idea to him. I directed Baker who joined me in the expedition to waylay and misdirect the party until we've had time to settle this."

"You ordered Baker to *lie* to them?" Baker was just as straitlaced as every other police dog I've ever met.

The smile slipped back to Jon's lips. "More than that. If worse come to worse he's been ordered to arrest the hunters, and any of the force who side with them, until we've gotten our head start."

There were a million questions I wanted to ask Jon, but there simply wasn't the time. Every few seconds he had to look past my shoulder and direct English down yet another fork in the narrow little path we hurtled down at breakneck speed.

Chapter 13: The Highest Peak in Sight

And that was the way we went until well past midnight.

We did have to stop to make camp at some point. Even English's supernatural reflexes need a rest after hours of the razor's edge driving this route required.

The night was quick and cold, but dulled by the supplies packed in English's trunk. They were possibly the same supplies I'd picked up with him long ago.

My nose twitched as the sun peeked over the peaks to the east.

I'd been sleeping stretched on the hard ground, Rebecca tight in my arms. At first we'd tried to sleep in the back seat of the jeep, but it was too tight and lumpy.

I wasn't yet back to full consciousness yet, but the scent that pulled at me jolted me awake in a heartbeat. I'd promised myself I'd never forget that scent.

Brian Ferguson.

Setting Rebecca gently back to the ground as I stood up, she did a good job of hiding the fact she'd woken. We'd long practice at things like this.

The red furred wolf stood at the edge of the small clearing we'd parked in. He stood with his hands held before him and his head bowed.

"Tommy." His voice was soft.

"What in the gods' names are you doing here, Brian?" I asked. A moment later my eyes narrowed. "You... you're behind this."

He took a step back, his eyes growing wide. "No," he gasped, "No, please believe me. I didn't. Not me, not *me*. But I know where they went."

I took a step forward, but felt a hand fall across my shoulder.

"Why should I believe you, Brian?" I asked.

He gaze fell to the ground. "Because you helped me? And I just want to help you back? You gave me a fresh start in life again. Something I haven't had in a long, long time. The memories are coming back now, quicker than they were before, and I want to help you before I not *me* anymore. I remember who they are, Tommy. And I remember what I told them long ago. They're scared, and they fled to the one place in the world I'd told them would be safe no matter what. Safe because I made it

that way.”

“Where did they go, Brian?”

He began to shake like a leaf in the harsh autumn wind.

“Do you remember the letter we found in my bedroom, Tommy? The one that told of a book, a book of my memories? That's where they've gone, or close enough to. There's a cave in the crest of the mountain, and they've held up in a small fortress just below it. I know it well. I chiseled it from the stone decades ago. It was one of the few times I ever left the city... and it was so long ago that it all seems like nothing but a story now.”

I took a deep breath and stepped forward. Brian flinched away as though he feared it'd hit him.

“I don't care who *he* was with,” I said. “I need to know who *you're* with. Are *you* going to help me get my children back or are you on their side?”

He looked me in the eyes. I could see his adam's apple bob.

“I'm with you, Tommy. *I'm* with you.”

I turned and glanced over to Jon.

“There's no way we can get him back to the city, is there? The force isn't far enough behind us?” The dog shook his head. “And we can't leave him here for them to find.” I turned back to Brian. “Fine. You're coming with us. Get in the truck.”

It was starting to become crowded here. English driving, I called shotgun. Rebecca and Jon were in the back, on either side, with Brian sitting between them.

Jon still had that long, awkwardly shaped package with him. He hadn't had the time to tell us what it was yesterday, and the fact he made a point of not addressing it once Brian joined us was enough for me to let it drop. For now.

This was, as well, one of the few times I've had the chance to watch Jon openly argue with someone. Tempers were frayed as it was, and having Brian along didn't help. It was made even worse when Brian countered half the direction's Jon gave as they raced down the narrow path.

Jon would order English to take the left hand at a fork up the road, but the moment we got to the turn Brian would often as not pop up and command he take a right.

This did not go over well.

Not the least was that when he said such things it sounded less like the frightened *Brian* speaking and more like the commanding and condescending *Brian Ferguson*.

“Mr. Ferguson,” Jon growled after the fifth time they'd gotten in an argument. We were stopped in the middle of the road as the two of them bickered. “I must insist that you hold your tongue. My men have maps of this area, many provided by the hunters themselves. I have committed our route to memory and I can assure you that the best possible way has been chosen. You... may have *memories* but you, whichever *you* we'd like to discuss, haven't been out of the city, by your own admission, in decades. The woods are not like your precious city. Or should I say the way you'd *like* it to be. The world changes.”

For just a moment I could see something in Brian's eyes. Something trying to break through. I unhooked my seat belt and prepared to spring.

And in a heartbeat it was gone. There were only the nervous shake of Brian left.

“I'm sorry, Commissioner,” he said, manner cowed. “I don't want to... it's just...”

Jon let out a sigh. “You are instinctive. You'd never make a good officer.” His voice softened. “I spend so much time around my own men that sometimes I forget not everyone is trained to our standard.”

"Well folks, this looks like the end of the road," English said, throwing the jeep into park not feet away from a sheer rock face. "My baby can handle just about anything, but she's no mountain goat."

He threw open his door and stepped out without another word.

I had to lean forward to see the top of the cliff through the windshield. We were at the foot of Cathedral Mountain.

"Shake a leg, Mate," English said, poking his head back in. "We need to get a move on. The jeep was our advantage. Now that we're back on foot we'll be no faster than the hunters, likely slower. We need to keep moving if we want to beat them there."

I glanced back at Rebecca. She shrugged.

A moment later the rest of us were out of the truck, pulling packs from the trunk. The only one of us not to have one was Brian.

English growled at him. "If you're coming with us then you're carrying your fair share." He glanced over to Jon who was double weighed down by his pack and parcel. "Take the cop's pack," he ordered.

I was starting to have flashbacks to when English, Rebecca, and I went mountain climbing back in Alberta. That was *not* a good thing. I'd fallen a couple thousand feet back then. I'd rather not have have a repeat performance of that little number.

When I'd said the rock face English had stopped in front of was sheer I hadn't been kidding. English had gotten us right up to the foot of the mountain. From here on out it was straight up.

The first thing we did was to gear up. The climbing supplies the lion had bought months ago were coming in more than useful now. Not that anyone but the cat had even the slightest how to use them, and even then not all that well. The heavy ropes and leather straps did at least make me feel better.

"Come on, folks," he said, reaching out a clawed hand to get a firm grasp on the stone. "It's time to show me just how much muscle you've got. Just remember to lift with the legs, eh?"

We had three hours of climbing behind us before the night began closing in. Thankfully it looked like much of the straight vertical ascent was behind us. Brian truly had been this way before. Despite the talking to Jon had given him the wolf had quickly been able to work his way out in front of English and show a far easier way up than we'd ever have been able to navigate ourselves.

The evening found us on a small plateau. We weren't anywhere near the top yet, but this was a nice enough clearing to make camp.

"You holding up alright, Babe?" I asked, setting down my pack. Taking a couple of paces, I stepped up behind her, wrapping my arms around her and brushing a lock of sweat slicked hair from her forehead.

"I was about to ask you the same thing, Wolfy." I could detect more than a hint of stress in her voice, but it was the undercurrent. Far stronger was the grim determination. We were both resigned to what we were going to do, and we both knew it wasn't likely to be pretty.

I let out a sigh and forced a wan smile to my lips. "Just like the old days, eh? You and me, and English, and Jon out on the road. The fate of the world in our hands again, in one way or another. Not exactly what I dreamed of when I was a pup."

She laughed and began pulling our tent from her pack.

"What? You didn't dream of being mayor, of being important, of adventure? What did you dream of as a kid?"

I knelt down next to her and helped assemble the tent. Our actions were long practiced and smooth.

"Honestly, Babe? Of not much. I grew up the only son of the hunter's alpha. My dreams for the future likely paled in comparison to that anyone else. I never wanted *adventure*. No one understood why I didn't follow in my father's footsteps by joining the hunters. Even after I could hunt it wasn't what I wanted. I'd seen what that could do to a person. All I wanted was a nice quiet life. A home, a family I could come back to every night. The old KDP office job wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but it was close."

She laughed. "Then we're about as different as could be, but we knew that already. Growing up on Salt Spring, nothing ever happened. Nothing. I was like most kids, I always dreamed of adventure, of getting away and seeing the world. I only got as far as Edmonton, but I've had enough adventure for the moment."

Dinner was a meager affair of whatever English and Jon had packed with them. We were close enough to the peak of Cathedral Mountain now that none of us wanted to risk a fire in the night and give away our position.

Chewing dried meat and dog kibble didn't help anyone's mood, but at least we got to look up at the glorious night sky. Or at least what part of the sky wasn't blocked off black and menacing by the dim outline of the Rockies.

"Do we have a plan for what we're going to do when we get there?" Rebecca asked from beside me.

The night might be complete, but I could still make out the bright eyes of English, Jon, and Brian in the darkness. The starlight reflected off them, making them burn with their own inner light.

"That we don't, Lass," English said. His accent was firmly in place, but I could hear just how hard he had to fight to keep it there. "We don't know much about exactly how they'll be set up. I've never seen this place, and I doubt you have either. We'll simply have to scout the place out and see what we can come up with before we're spotted. With any luck they won't expect us showing up so soon."

I glanced over to Brian as English spoke, but the wolf didn't add anything. There was a hardness to his features that hadn't been there when we'd first picked him up.

"There's only one rule," I said, my voice low. "Don't kill them."

English glanced at me, then Jon. "That's a tall order, Mate. They don't seem to want to play fair, with their guns and all. And we have to remember why we're here. It's not for them, eh? It's for the kids."

A soft growl escaped my lips. "That's why I want the kidnappers alive. Death is too quick a punishment for them. I want them to *suffer* for what they've done. If we kill them then I won't have the satisfaction of showing them just how wrong they were to steal my children away from me."

I felt a soft hand rest of my shoulder.

"We'll get them, Tommy," Rebecca whispered. "And we'll bring them back to the city where they'll face justice. They'll face the courts just the same as any other person would who kidnapped any other child. You didn't put so much time and effort into reforming the justice system to throw it out now. We'll get them, I'll promise you that, but we'll hurt them more by treating them like everybody else than we ever could by stringing them up by their toes." She paused for a moment, then added even more softly, "Not that I don't want to make them suffer too."

This night out among the stars was so unlike the last time Rebecca and I had spent in the

mountains that I could hardly even pull up the memory of us vacationing in the soft, stress free meadow. The ground now was cold and hard, the only soft and warm thing in the world right now was her curled beside me.

It could be no later than two in the morning when I woke. There had been no sound, but there had been motion.

And it had been enough to wake me.

Slipping carefully from the tent, I left Rebecca sleeping. No need to wake her yet until I knew what was going on.

The sky had clouded over, leaving us in near perfect darkness. It took everything my night vision had just to make out the dimist of outlines. And I *needed* to see. We were camped on a small ledge with sheer dropoffs on three sides. One too many steps in the wrong direction and the last anyone would hear of me would be a shrill scream.

I had to stand stone still and wait for the next flicker of motion to come to me. It was a canine silhouette sitting on the edge of the plateau.

"Brian?" I asked, my voice rough from sleep.

He turned ever so slightly, catching me from the corner of his eye.

"I am here." His voice came to me otherworldly, as if someone else were speaking.

"What are you doing up?" I asked, carefully picking my way towards him. He was sitting right on the edge of the drop off, his legs dangling over into the void. It had to be at least a thousand meters straight down. For all I knew the jeep was right beneath us.

He paused a long moment before speaking, waiting for me to find a seat beside him.

"Tommy, I need you to know I wasn't responsible for this. At least not directly. Not me."

I took a deep breath and looked out into the darkness. "I trust you, Brian. At least on that one. You're many things, but I don't think you've ever lied to me."

I heard a soft chuckle. "I'll take your word on that. I didn't even know if I'm telling the truth half the time. The memories... they're coming more and more often now. The closer we get to the mountain, the book. It's the walk itself. I've taken this journey before, recovering my mind each time. Tommy, I need you to know that the man you fought wasn't *me*. It at least it wasn't the original me. I can't tell you how I know, but I know it as sure as the stone beneath us. Every time I've come back... it's almost been like a reincarnation. I'm not the same person. It's the same as how I'm a different person now than when you first met me. I'll regain my memories, but it's the times like this when I'm starting from scratch. What's the term? Tabula rasa? I start as a clean slate and it's what and who I'm with when I first return that works to shape who I am. My memories will pull me towards a centre point, but you and these last few months are the foundation, my memories can only build atop of."

I snorted. "You're getting pretty philosophical for a man who can't remember much."

I could just see him turn to me, his eyes glinting in the nonexistent light. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, you stupid wolf," he snarled. "*I'm starting to remember.*" As if an invisible hand had come up to slap him the growl suddenly fell from his lips. He jerked so suddenly that I almost thought he was going to fall off the cliff.

"Tommy?" When he spoke again his words were soft. "I'm.... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... It's just that things are coming back to me. And they're not all things I *want* to remember. I won't hurt you or your kids. You have my promise on that. I swear by God. You've done too much to help me this time around, but I can't promise you anything after that. Brian Ferguson, the man you knew, or at least closer to it, will be back soon."

I reached out and found his hand in the darkness. It was shaking.

"Brian, I never knew much about the man I killed, but I am honoured to call *you* a friend. You've promised me you'll do your best. There's not much else we can do."

He didn't speak for a long time. We both simply stared out into the black void of the night. The lights of V-town were completely obscured from here.

"I wonder who'd I'd come back as if I did it again," he whispered.

"What?" I had to force myself back to the here and now, I'd been dozing off.

"If I leapt," he said. "Who do you think I'd come back as if I killed myself? I've never committed suicide before. Well, never and been halfway successful. This is further than I've ever fallen before. There would hardly be anything left of me if I jumped from here."

Reaching out, I gripped him roughly by the scruff of the neck and braced myself.

"Let's not find out, shall we? I've already got the stain on my soul from killing you once. I'd rather not have a second one."

He laughed softly. "You don't have to worry. I've already promised I'd help you get your kids back. It's just... something to think about. I wasn't always like the way you saw me, Tommy. I was always a bit of a shut-in, but in some of my lives I at least *tried* to make the world a better place. Did you know I once ran for mayor, long, long ago?"

I jerked, almost enough to send us both hurtling off the edge.

"You what?"

He laughter grew. "I just remembered a few hours ago. It was at least seventy years ago. I ran, and I lost. I don't remember too much more about it. I'll tell you when it come to mind."

A grin touched my lips. "Heh. Yeah, I'd like to hear that. You really ran for mayor?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I think so. I was a different person back then, literally."

Swinging his feet in from the void, Brian stood up beside me, then offered me his hand.

"Thanks, Tommy," he said. "I needed to talk to someone. I think we'd both better get back to sleep now."

Morning came too soon, but I didn't have the luxury to complain about it.

A meal of cold rations, we all looked up at the climb before us. And felt out muscles ache.

None of us were built for mountain climbing. We'd been able to manage it yesterday out of sheer desperation, but it was going to be a bear of an ascent today.

And there was going to be a fight atop it.

I tried to get Brian talking again, in front of everyone this time, but his lips remained stubbornly sealed. Every time I tried to lure him in to conversation his eyes flashed and he turned away from me, from all of us, to stare out into the now bright blue void.

"So that's it, is it?" I asked, scoping the last of my dried meat into my mouth. There was hardly enough to sooth the ache in my belly. "We really don't have a plan. We just walk straight up there and get into a brawl with the people who'd beat off no too few of V-town's finest."

Jon bristled like I'd just insulted him. "I'm sure we'll think of something, Tommy. And in any event, there were a dozen of them against three of my officers. There are four of them now and five of us. Those are far more favorable odds. And," he growled slightly, "They won't get the drop on us this time."

The sound English made was somewhere between a growl and a chuckle. "Don't worry yourself about things you can't change, Tommy," he said, his voice without a trace of accent. "In my old language they have a word for something like this. Loosely, it translates into 'scream and leap'. It's the sign of being a man that you can make something like that work."

I snorted and stood up, leaving the rest of them to sit around where a fire would be if we were

brave enough to start one.

Back over at the tent Rebecca and I had spent the night in, I was just starting to pull the rods out and stuff them back in their bag when a flutter of motion caught my eye.

It spun my head around, pulling the rest of my body with it as I turned to track it.

I could hardly make it out, but there was something there, dashing back into the small strand of trees tucked up against the cliff of the mountain.

Down on all fours before I could even form a coherent thought, I was off and after it.

Gods, it could be one of the humans. We had few advantages, but surprise was one of them. I'm sure they expected us to come, but not this fast, and not in this number. Our only ace in the hole would be lost if one of them saw us and reported back.

There was hardly any space up here on his small plateau. The strand of threes was a meter thick and hardly five meters long, tucked up against the lee of the rock.

Diving into the greenery, I had to throw my hands up to keep from braining myself on the rock cliff that hid behind it.

There was another flash of motion to my left.

Spinning, I leapt. By the time I landed it was long gone.

In the distance I could hear raised voices. Everyone else must have noticed me disappear.

Another flash of motion and I leapt again. I overshot this time, but I finally got a good look at who was chasing. Or more to the point, *what*.

A scraggly hare. It was thin and grey, and I hadn't the slightest how it'd gotten up here.

My mouth watered at the thought of fresh hare for breakfast.

The hare started off again as soon as I reoriented on it, but this time it wasn't fast enough. Now that I knew what I was hunting I could adjust for it.

Springing low this time, my jaws ripped through the foliage.

The hare made one more leap, and this time the great blue of the sky opened up around me as I followed.

"Iyae!"

When I say opened up *around* me I'm serious about it. The hare, in desperation, had leapt right off the sheer face of the ledge, the same thousand meter drop Brian and I had hung our legs over last night.

It was airborne in a slow arc out over nothing. And I wasn't far behind it.

Thankfully, despite what I would have sworn to you at the time, I hadn't gone all that far. My snout was off into the void, and even one of my front paws, but most of me was on solid terra firma.

Or at least enough of me to scramble back to purchase.

The hare must just have realized what it had done too. It twisted and tried and get back to the relative safety of the mountain too, but it was already in mid air.

Reaching out a hand, I simply couldn't let the meal escape. My fingers brushed the hare's ears. An instant later I had it firmly in my grasp.

It was dead before it touched the ground.

"What in all the gods' names is going on?" English yelled from behind me. A moment later I felt his strong arms close around my chest and pull me back from the edge.

Wiggling in his grasp, I turned around and raised the hare.

"Breakfast," I said with a smile. The stress that had been building in me moments ago was still there, but I'd managed to find a relief valve.

We still didn't have a fire to roast the hare, but that didn't matter much to English, Jon, and I. Rebecca never cared for raw meat – having a bit of an odd taste – and I was rather surprised when Brian refused his share.

The wolf looked at the meat with a disgusted sneer, almost akin to Rebecca's. That was odd. I remember him eating fast food before, and that's often served raw.

Setting off again, we were able to find a fairly walkable path hidden among the trees back where the hare had been. We'd never have thought to look there if not for the animal.

Today's walk was no shorter than yesterday's but at least it wasn't *vertical*. Today was a walk rather than a climb, though definitely a steep one.

It was coming up to eleven o'clock and I could tell things were going downhill – figuratively speaking – right away. Brian had been soft spoken yesterday, but today he was positively tight lipped.

When he did speak it was only to tell someone they were doing something wrong or going the wrong way. There were no insults in his words, but there was a venom to his voice that set us all on edge and it only grew more caustic as the day wore on.

“Would you shut your mouth, tail-chaser?” English snapped as Brian abruptly told him he was going the wrong way. “We all *know* you've been here before, but the path's changed in the last twenty years!”

Turning, the lion went face to face with the wolf, lifting his lips and showing his fearsome array of teeth.

Brian narrowed his eyes and looked up into English's maw without a hint of fear.

“Listen to your better, beast,” Brian spat. “You're nothing more than a killer.” Brian paused for a long moment before adding in little more than a whisper, “You're the one who shot *me*.”

“Alright folks,” I said in a breathless pant, pushing my way between them. “I think this might just be a good time for us to stop for lunch. I think we're all tired.”

English steeped away immediately, pulling off his pack and sitting on the hard rocky ground. “I'll second that one, Mate.”

Brian, however, held where he stood. “I won't be eating with beasts,” he said though clenched teeth.

It had been like this all morning, since last night even. Every step we took towards the summit seemed to make Brian nothing but worse. The only people he'd talk to without a snarl were Rebecca and I, and I didn't seem to be far from being dropped from that list.

We'd eaten all of the hare this morning, but at least that left us with a little of the dried rations left for this meal. We hadn't any idea what we'd be doing for dinner, but at least there were a few scraps left for lunch.

As we'd progressed further up on the mountain the conditions had, oddly enough, improved. It seemed the steepest parts were at the foot. Where we were now was relatively pleasant. I wouldn't call it the greatest place for a vacation, but there were scrubby pines here that stretched a good five to ten meters in the air and the ground was covered with a bed of grasses and wildflowers.

Lunch was carried out more or less in silence. We'd gotten through just about all the talking we needed already. We were all just itching to find the humans and get the kids back.

“Brian,” I said, turning to the wolf, “Are you alright? Are you sure you're going to be able to go through with this? You seem... a bit off.”

He favoured me with a scowl that looked to be pure poison. “I'm *fine*,” was all he said.

Concluding lunch, we broke camp. English and I walked into the trees a dozen meter or so together. We were there to see a dog about a man, but I had something else to discuss.

"Hey, English," I whispered, never looking up from my business, my voice nearly drowned out by the sound of falling water. "Are you getting the same vibe off of Brian?"

He grunted, just as softly. "Yeah, Mate. I knew we never should have brought him. I think his mind is coming back too fast. He could turn on us at any moment."

I sighed. "Bugger. What do we do?"

He shrugged as he finished up his business. "What can we do, Mate? Just hope he holds it together long enough. It was a lucky shot I got in on his last time. He'd be a right horror to try and take down out here."

Returning to camp, we began pulling on our packs and getting prepared to head out.

"Everyone ready?" I asked. There was a round of nods.

Except one.

"Where's Brian?" I asked, keeping my voice mild. The wolf's pack was sitting on the ground next to where I'd last seen him but he was nowhere in sight.

"Bugger," English swore under his breath.

A moment later both he and I had dropped our own packs and started out into the trees.

"Jon," I called over my shoulder, "You and Rebecca stay here and watch if he comes back."

Jon was weighed down with his still mysterious package and I didn't want Rebecca following us in a headlong sprint over mountain shale.

Tracking anyone by scent can be a difficult proposition, made only harder when you're in unfamiliar territory. Trying to track a fellow wolf across the side of a mountain was no small task. Thankfully, this wasn't Brian's home turf either. He was a city dweller. I was a hunter.

We still managed to make good time. Brian's head start was only scant minutes and we were gaining. It wouldn't be long until we'd be able to make out his footsteps.

My heart went cold when a new sound came in at the edge of my hearing. I would have welcomed it if I hadn't been tracking. The gentle trickle of a mountain stream.

"Drat."

Like an arrow, Brian's trail led straight towards the water and dove in. The stream was perfect for his needs. Only perhaps six feet across and no more than a foot deep, it was easy to ford and even easier to walk up or down stream. And the current carried any and all scent of him away.

I looked over to English. He said it best.

"Bugger."

We still spent a good half hour trying to pick up his trail again, but it was hopeless. Brian was many things, but he was not a dumb man. He made sure to cover his tracks.

He was gone.

And we were in very big trouble.

Chapter 14: The Spartan Way

English and I returned to where we'd left Jon and Rebecca. We made better time on the way back. I wanted to sprint all the way, but I knew we'd still need the energy for the rest of the climb. Not to mention what would come after it.

English was beside me step for step.

"I knew we couldn't trust that bugger," he growled. "A weasel is a weasel no matter their species. I'll bet you dollars to donuts that he'd never lost his memory in the first place."

I didn't say anything. How could I put into words for him the night I'd spent with Brian, the confusion there had been in his eyes, the fear?

I gave myself a mental shake. English was right. No matter what I might have wanted to believe Brian had betrayed us. He knew this mountain better than we did. For all we knew he might just have well been leading us in the wrong direction, or even into a trap.

That thought made my feet fly even faster.

Jon and Rebecca waited for us at camp.

"He's gone," I said, nearly out of breath. "Divvy up what he was carrying and let's get going. If we hurry we might be able to make it not long after he warns them. That's all we can hope for now."

Jon nodded. "Already done. But," he motioned us closer, "We do have one advantage." A feral smile pulled at his lips. I'd like to introduce you to what the force has been working on these last few months. Tommy," he nodded at me, "You're more intimate with this than anyone save myself."

Kneeling down, he unzipped the long canvas bag he'd been totting with him since we picked him up on the forest.

"This is the outgrowth of project Phoenix. We call it Iapetus. The piercer, father of the god that created mankind."

Reaching inside the bag, he slowly pulled free what looked more than anything like the rifle Renfu had fired at us long ago. Only this one had far more circuit boards and blinking lights.

Jon flicked a switch and the gun made a distinct *zi-hi-hi-um* sound as it powered up.

"What does it, uh, do?" English asked, taking a step back and making sure he wasn't in front of the weapon.

Jon's smile grew wider. "It's a weaponised form of the computers from Edmonton. We've discovered how to store the energy of their calculations. This... tool has been charged with two shots. Whatever it hits will be affected the same way as what we're familiar with."

"What's it good for?" Rebecca asked.

For just a moment Jon looked crestfallen that we'd have to ask.

"Primarily? It will knock out *anyone* it hits. Secondary, considering what's happening to begin with, I think it's safe to say the HDL will lose it's fight when they discover we have the power to make them... *not* human."

He flicked another switch and the weapon powered down. Pulling out a carrying strap, Jon slung it over the shoulder.

The rest of the journey wasn't as fast as I would have liked. It was only after Brian was gone that we realized just how much he'd been helping us. Jon knew *approximately* what rout to take, but he'd never been here before. At least Brian had been here once long ago. Any hope we might have had of beating Brian to the summit, or even making it a close race, was long gone.

Soon enough though our progress improved. Once you get this high there are only a few ways up the mountain. We were following the same path as the kidnappers. I could smell them.

"Alright, folks," I said, "I can smell fresh tracks. They can't be far ahead, only another half hour or so." I took a deep breath. "We need to know what we're getting into. If this was a bounty I'd be happy enough to just spring on them... but it's not."

English put a hand on my shoulder. "I've got this one, Mate."

"What? You can hardly survive out in the forest."

He grinned. "Yeah. But in case you hadn't noticed, the forest stopped a thousand or so meters down. And I'm not a bad hand at mountaineering, or had you forgotten?"

He pulled out the ropes and harnesses from his pack. "They'll be expecting us to approach on the path. I don't plan to entertain them."

He tied one end of the rope around an outcropping of rock and the other around his waist. Then he was gone over the edge.

"English!" I scrambled to the edge and poked my head over. He was clinging to the sheer stone like a spider and grinning up at me.

"No worries, Mate. Be back in a jiffy."

We sat there, in the middle of the path, keeping an eye open in case anyone was coming.

"You ready for this, Babe?" I asked.

She adjusted her red leather jacket. It was only now that I realized she was dressed in the same outfit she worn so long ago when we'd fought our way into Storm Front. Knives glinted from her belt.

"As I'll ever be, Wolfy." She sighed. "I was doing my own research while the police and hunters were tracking them down. I *know* them."

My ears pulled back. "Yeah?"

"Well, I already *knew* that I knew them, but it's more than that. One of them, his name is Trevor. I went out with him back when I was couch surfing, before I met you."

I had to force myself to swallow. "Yeah?"

She looked up at me and forced a smile to her lips. "It's not like that, Wolfy. I've hardly seen the guy in years. The last I remember of him was when we were in Horseshoe Bay. He was a nice enough guy, but a..." She laughed. "A bit of a hardline."

"A bit?" I replied dryly.

She shrugged. "He wasn't like this last time I saw him. Trevor was a nice guy. He was like me, lost both his parents. It's not an easy thing to live through when you're young."

I shivered slightly. "Okay, I'll give him that one, but it's no excuse."

She set her lips in a ruler straight line. "It's no excuse. I just wanted you to know, Tommy. These are *people* we're going to be fighting. Not figureheads. They're humans, not HDL. Gods, from what I'd heard the HDL is all but dead now. Jon and the cops came down on them so hard they nearly imploded. These people are all that's left. It's their last stand."

Jon perked up from where he sat a few feet away, watching the road.

"She's correct. I've received no further reports of HDL actions since the kidnapping. It would appear they put all their remaining resources into the attack. They don't have the backing of the general populace anymore. If we're fortunate this may be the end of that particular threat."

"*If we're fortunate*," I repeated. "These are our children we're talking about. We can't take the chance something will go wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong, Sir," Jon said, returning to the perfect and crisp motions of the service. "I am responsible for their loss, and I will not allow failure again."

Rebecca gave him a hard glare. "*You're* responsible? I'm their mother. I was *there*. I'm just as responsible as you are."

For just a moment I almost thought they were going to get into an argument – not a good thing with tempers flaring already as they were, but we were interrupted by a grunt from over the edge.

"A hand here, Mate?"

Crawling to the edge I could see English, his belly plastered to the rock face.

"I'll pull you up."

The lion was *not* light. I had to get Jon and Rebecca to give me a hand with the rope to get him safely back on solid ground.

"What did you find?" I asked almost before he had time to steady himself.

"Just a tick, Mate," he replied between pants. "That took a lot out of me. Gods, I'm not as young as I thought. Another five minutes out there and I would have just as well lost my grip."

Reaching up, he brushed a strand of grey hair from his eyes with a snarl before continuing.

"The cops were right with their guess of four. That's what I counted."

"What about Brian?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I didn't hear him. Remember, folks, I didn't exactly have the greatest view, below and beside as I was. I had to count voices. I heard four humans, three male. I didn't hear Brian, but he could just as well been keeping his yap shut."

I took a deep breath. "Could we have beaten him here?"

Jon shook his head. "Unlikely. Unless he slipped from the path and fell to his death, I can see no reason he wouldn't already be here."

I furrowed my brow. "Brian talked about a book he'd stashed here on the mountain. Somewhere above where the kidnappers had holed up. He could have gone there."

Rebecca glanced over to me. "We'll have to assume he's already been here, Wolfy. He could have let them know we're coming then continued on."

I suppressed a shiver. "Fine. But we have to remember how deadly Brian is. The humans may have guns, but he has regeneration. *You can't kill him*. Jon," I looked over to the dog, "Will your gun work on him?"

He shrugged. "I would have to assume so. The effect worked on you, Tommy, without consideration for your regeneration. In fact, you said it canceled it out after the change."

"Fine. Jon, whatever you do, make sure to save at least one shot for Brian. We don't know if he's here, but if he is we have to neutralize him."

Jon nodded.

"Fine." I held a growl back from my voice. "What about the kids, English. Did you hear them?"

The lion nodded. "I thought you'd never ask. They were there. I'm not sure if they stuck soothers in their mouths or just flat out gagged them. They didn't sound particularly happy, but they weren't shrieking to high heaven either."

"Both of them?" I asked.

He nodded. "I couldn't make them out individually, but I heard one of the kidnappers talking about feeding them." He let out a dark chuckle. "Wet nurses these men ain't. Sounds like Beth's taking to the bottle well enough, but our boy Ging is giving them a run for it. Sounds like he managed to all but bite off one of their fingers."

I glanced over to Rebecca. She began laughing.

"Fine." I glanced up at the sun. It was getting towards late in the summer's afternoon. "We better do this now. The sun will be at our back as we approach. This has to be clean. Let's try and make it count."

Rebecca set her hand over mine. "We're doing this together, Wolfy."

I smiled. "I might just have a plan."

Walking up the path, hand in hand with Rebecca, we kept our pace slow and sedate. She had her knives carefully stowed inside her jacket, out of sight.

Jon and English were nowhere to be seen.

Rounding the last turn, my jaw nearly dropped. Brian had once referred to this as a fortress. He hadn't been far off.

It wasn't all that large, perhaps being only ten or fifteen meters a side, but it was carved straight from the face of the mountain.

Large, square, and likely ageing concrete of some sort, the kidnappers were in a miniature castle that hung out into the void.

One of them saw us as soon as we rounded the last corner. He was still a good hundred meters away but I could hear him cry out clear as day.

For just a moment I had a vision of a colony of ants mobilizing after the hill has been kicked. Only problem was that there were only four ants and we were still well away.

"Don't come any closer!" one of them cried.

Rebecca and I came to a stop in the middle of the path. We still had to be a good dozen meters from the front entrance of the fortress.

The fact that it still stood open was hardly lost on me. Peering about, I took another look at where they were holed up.

Ancient, that was for sure, the worn grey concrete was definitely of pre-Cataclysm make, but this didn't look like much of a place to make one's last stand.

There was no way to shut the front entrance, and I doubted there ever had been. The walls were high, but not so high one couldn't climb over them given a little time. All in all it's only redeeming factor was that it was surrounded on two sides by open air and the mountain on a third.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself, fighting to keep the growl out of my voice.

"We're here for our children," I said. I knew my voice was strong enough to carry, even over the cold mountain winds.

"Go away, Taggart. Go make some more pups. We're here for the girl."

I blinked. 'Taggart'? I'd been expecting them to call me 'beast'.

"You know I can't do that. They're my children. Would you let this happen to your kids?"

I'd been fighting to keep the growl out of my voice, but the human didn't even bother trying.

"Kids? I *want* kids! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a human woman? It's like you practically took the last one in the whole city! The government was targeting them specifically during the purge. There's hardly enough left to even keep our population constant."

My blood ran cold.

"You kidnapped Beth to *breed* her?"

The ice in the man's voice was clear. "What do you think we are, Taggart? Monsters? She's a little girl. I'm not sick!"

I took a step forward, my self control slipping.

"Give me back my children," I snarled.

A shot cracked the air and a chip of stone flew up from the patch a few feet away.

"That's your last warning, Taggart. Turn around and walk away. We won't hurt the girl. She's one of us."

It wasn't what he said that made me shiver. It was what was left unsaid.

"Where is my son?" My voice was harsh.

Even from this distance I could see the man smile. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"The flea-bitten fiend? Don't you worry, he's staying with us. We can't hurt the girl, he's our insurance you'll leave us alone."

"What do you hope to accomplish? You can't last out here. You have no food, no supplies."

He laughed. "We have all the resources of the city behind us. Don't we, *Administrator*. You want your kids to stay alive and you'll provide us with everything we ask for. We starve and they'll starve with us."

I was ready to leap forward and see how much of the distance I could close before he got off another shot when Rebecca's hand fell across my shoulder.

"Trevor." Her voice was soft but it carried. "Don't do this. We both know what it's like to be hunted down, to lose what's dear to us. We both lost everything we cared about. Don't do it now, Trevor. You know Tommy's done more than anyone else to save the human population. We both seen it with our own eyes. Actions like this only make things harder. They make us look like extremists in the eyes of everyone else."

He face screwed up. "Maybe that's what we need. To be more extreme. You've seen it. Taggart canceled all the special concessions we were getting from the government. Made us compete with everyone else. How in all the gods' names am I supposed to compete with all the non-humans? I'm not as fast as a rabbit, not as strong as a horse. The dockworks only wants otters and their ilk. I'm *human* I can't compete with people like that."

"So you want to be treated differently? Isn't that what caused this problem in the first place? We're human, Trevor. We're just the same as anyone else. We need to work for what we get. We can't simply expect the government, or anyone else, to shore us up if we can't survive on our own."

Another crack split the air. This time the rock chips flew up close enough to sting my leg.

"Get out of here," Trevor yelled. "This isn't up for debate. We have your kids. We're going to find out how you managed to give birth to a human and we're going to use it to bring back the human race."

I took a deep breath. I had to keep telling myself that we were standing out here in plain view for a reason. I had to keep him talking. And, more than that, I had to get the other three kidnappers out

here.

"I know why she was born human," I said, my voice low. "I can tell you."

The man looked like he'd been shocked with an electric cable.

"What? You said you didn't know!"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "I lied. I know how she was born human. Give them back to me and I'll tell you."

The man's eyes narrowed. "No. You tell us first. *Then* we'll decide if you get them back."

I took a quick glance around. I still had to stall for time.

"Show me my children. Prove to me they're safe."

Rebecca elbowed me in the side.

Another human walked into view. He was holding a riffle in one hand and a bundle of cloth in the other.

The bundle was squirming.

A moment later there was a scream of pain.

"He bit me! Again!" the human yelped.

A smiled slipped to my lips. A real one. Pups grew their milk teeth quick, and by the gods were they *sharp*.

I glanced over to Rebecca. She looked about ready to burst into laughter.

A moment later there was a yip of pain. That sound was *not* human.

"Ging!" I took two steps forward before another bullet ripped through the air.

"Stay back!" Trevor screamed.

Staring into the long shadows that grew around the stone walls of the fortress, I could just make out the other human. He was still holding Ging, encircled as the pup was in a swaddling blanket. He was holding him well from from his body now, and with both hands.

Trevor spared a glance at the pup.

"Keep back, Taggert. Take one more step and you'll regret it." He took a deep, nervous breath. "The pup will regret it if you come any closer."

"Give me my family!" The snarl roared through my lips as my vision went suddenly red. Seeing Ging in their hands, and having them threaten him...

I fell to all fours and began running forward.

From the corner of my eye I could see a tawny form leap over the far wall, silent as a ghost.

And from behind me I heard the distinctive *zi-hi-hi-um* electric sound of Jon's rifle powering up.

I was still three strides from the humans when Trevor raised his rifle. He we experienced, knew what he was doing.

And he was moving faster than I could ever hope to.

The other human's eyes went wide when he saw the mussel of the rifle swing towards him and the squirming bundle he still held in his hands.

"Trevor, no!" I was never sure where the words came from. It could have been the human yelling, or Rebecca, or me.

I was still a good two strides away when the rifle leveled on Ging's small form.

I was too late.

There was a bang and a scream.

I leapt.

My outstretched claws found nothing but the thin, cold mountain air.

Temporally deaf and dumb from the gun shot so close, I landed in a heap on the hard concrete ground and went sprawling.

But the tears that sprang from my eyes had nothing to do with the bumps and scrapes that covered me. "Ging!" My voice was hoarse. "Gingivere!"

Forcing my eyes open as I fought back to my feet, for a moment all I could see was the clear blue sky.

Turning, I saw Trevor laying sprawled out behind me. Atop him, snapping and snarling was Brian.

And there was no confusion in his eyes.

The other human, the one still holding Gingivere, was staring at us wide eyed. On the wall behind him and only scant feet away were the pot marks of buckshot.

The bundle squirmed again.

"Ging?" This time my voice was little more than a whisper.

The bundle giggled.

I leveled the man with a glare that only my father could have matched.

"Give me. My. Child."

His jaw dropped open as the blood drained from his face.

Turning, the man sprinted off, deeper into the fortress.

And he made it about three steps before quite literally running flat into English's muscle bound chest. "Give the man back his kid." The lion's voice was as flat as the prairie.

Without a word the man held Ging out to him.

The smile that split English's lips hadn't the slightest hint of humour to it as he took the child in one huge hand.

Just as English's arm closed around the bundle the human yipped.

"Serves you right, you bugger."

Swinging around his free hand, English clubbed the man soundly on the head. He fell to the ground like a side of beef.

"Where's Beth?" Rebecca asked.

"Deeper in the observation platform," came a voice from behind me. I recognized that voice.

Turning, I flexed my claws and raised my lips.

"Hello, Brian Ferguson."

The red furred wolf nodded at me from where he stood atop the struggling Trevor.

"Yes." His voice was not that of the confused pup-in-a-wolf's body who I'd known for the least few weeks. It was the same man who had tried to kill me. "I am. Again." His eyes narrowed. "But I made you a promise, Tommy. And I am a man of my word."

"Let me up, your traitor!" Trevor screamed, struggling again. "This was all your plan to begin with! You told us to do this if anything should happen to you! You *gave us these plans!*"

Brian took a long breath and let it out through his nose.

"The man you worked with is dead. Brian Ferguson is dead. Long live Brian Ferguson."

It took everything I had to turn my back on Brian.

"English," I said, touching the lion's arm as I stepped past him. "Stay here. Watch Brian. And... watch Ging. If anything goes wrong, run." I looked straight into his eyes. "If anything goes wrong, *run*. At least save Ging. If Rebecca and I don't come back out... he's yours."

The lion didn't say anything, but he nodded. I could see his adam's apple bob.

I hadn't realized just how far into the mountain the fortress dug. I thought it perched on the edge, but instead it was rooted deep into the heart of the rock.

A moment later I heard the measured click-click-click of black claws on the concrete behind

me.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I couldn't get a clear shot."

"Don't worry about it, Jon," I replied, reaching back to find his warm hand. "The battle's just begun."

Rounding a corner in the tunnel there were lanterns and compact camp lights bolted to the concrete ceiling. They didn't provide light so much as they created shadow.

And from somewhere up ahead I could hear a child crying.

Beth.

The hallways were cramped in here, dark, twisty, and labyrinthine. I could pick up the scent to two humans up ahead.

None of us said a word as we crept forward. I was on all fours, holding back a growl, Rebecca was right behind me, just out of range of my swishing tail. She had her knives free. Jon had taken up the rear. He was slow and clumsy, holding the long rifle out in front of him. He'd had to power it down again. Its flashing lights, not to mention its sound, would be a dead giveaway.

Poking my nose around yet another corner, I nearly got it shot off.

The booming echo of the gunshot felt like it would never end in the concrete tunnels. It rolled around us again and again like a marble in a glass, threatening to deafen me.

"Keep back!" This time it was a woman's voice. High and shrieking, there was a note to it I couldn't quite grasp. "Anyone tries to take her away and I'll kill them!"

"Give us back Beth." This time it was Rebecca who spoke. Good thing, I don't think I was in any position to form words right now.

Edging back up to the corner again, I played the old trick of lowering my head flush to the floor before peeking around. It worked. I could make out a low, wide, room made of poured concrete. It was lit by camp lights and glowsticks.

And out in the middle of it stood two humans. One was a woman, holding a still smoking rifle. The other was a short, black haired man.

He was holding one of the larger machine guns I've ever seen.

"You won't take her away from us!" The woman cried.

There was a note to her voice. Something in the way she screamed... it was more than I would have expected. I'd been out on more than enough bounty hunts over the past few years to know how people acted when they were backed into a corner.

Hysterical, yes. Maniacal, sometimes. Coldly calculating, not this time. There was something in the woman's tone, the way she spoke, that was more than what I would have expected.

It was the way Rebecca or I would be if our places were switched.

I held my breath and peeked around the corner again.

It was hard to make out in the dim light, but now that I was looking for it the signs were plain as day.

The human was pregnant.

"Oh bugger," I whispered.

I wouldn't let Rebecca or Jon poke around the corner – they didn't have may regeneration and the human's aim was too good – but I filled them in on the details.

Oddly, Rebecca was more worried about the machine gun and Jon was more worried about the woman.

Though not in the way I'd have expected.

"This could make things more difficult," the dog whispered. I was about to nod in agreement when he continued. "Her decision making and rationality may be affected. She will be harder to predict."

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand. "That's all you're about? Not the child?"

He looked at me funny. "Of course I care about the child. Beth is why we're here."

I shook my head. "Not just Beth. The unborn baby."

At that both Rebecca and Jon stared at me, their mouths just about falling open.

"I'm sure you're kidding," Jon whispered.

The fur on my spine went up.

"No." It came out as more of a growl. "We're here for Beth. But I won't allow us – or anyone else – to sacrifice the life of one child for another." A wicked grin came to my lips. "We'll make the adults pay, but the unborn baby has done nothing."

Rebecca shook her head, a smile on her face but at the same time looking ready to cry.

"Tommy," she whispered, "I love you."

There was only one way into the chamber where they held Beth, so that limited our options. Thankfully, the humans didn't seem to be doing much. They simply stood where they were, in front of the wooden table they'd laid Beth out on, and waited for us.

Beth, for her own part, was unusually quiet. She laid there calmly, watching, eyes wide.

A moment later the distinct electric sound of Jon's rifle powering up echoed through the chamber.

Zi-hi-hi-um.

It sounded far more menacing down here in the depths of the earth than it had out in the open air.

"What was that? Can you see them?" The male human asked.

The woman spared him a quick glance. "Shut up, Howard."

In my head I silently counted to forty-two. That's the number we'd agreed upon.

Tensing my leg muscles, I sprang.

The distance between us and the humans was much too far to take in a single leap, at least a good twenty meters. They would have cut me down long before I cleared it. Instead I scrambled off to the side, parallel to them where a support rose from the concrete floor.

And in any event, my goal wasn't to get to them anyway.

My claws clicked on the stone as I took off. But it was only too late I realized that I hadn't the purchase I thought.

Rear legs sliding out from under me, my clear jump of the distance to the support pillar was cut short. I hardly made it more than half the way before falling flat on my belly.

From behind me I saw a flash of red move. Rebecca's leather jacket among the shadows. Jon held out an arm to keep her from rushing to me.

Scrambling to my feet, I heard the human's cry out as I started running.

The support pillar was only meters away...

My fingers brushed the concrete and iron support as I heard the bark of a gun from nearby. It was joined by the scream of the machine gun.

Anyone who's ever referred to the operation of a machine gun was a rat-tat-tat has obviously never been in close proximity to one as it's being used.

It felt like someone was taking a baleen hammer to the inside of my skull via my ears canal as the man fired. The woman might have squeezed off another shot or two for all I knew but I couldn't

hear it.

Two more steps. That's all it was. I could feel the bullets kicking up flecks of concrete behind me as I ran. They were getting closer.

One more step...

My toe crossed the threshold to safety. I let out a sigh of relief.

And a second later it felt like my collarbone had been ripped from my body.

A scream escaped my lips. Thankfully, my momentum carried me on, into safety. I had to fight to stop lest I step right out the other side.

I could feel every beat of my heart as my blood coursed through the gaping wound right above my right shoulder.

Another inch or two and I would have been shot straight through the neck.

As it was it took everything I had to draw a breath. It felt like I was trying to drive red hot nails into my lungs.

Falling to my knees, I was panting, holding back tears.

"Ha!" A cry came up from the other side of the room. "Did you see that? I got him!"

"Tommy?" My name came as little more than a whisper.

I glanced over to Rebecca, still huddled in the safety of the hallway. I nodded at her.

Then I flinched, letting out a groan of pain.

The wound in my shoulder *should* be healing by now. But it wasn't.

I felt a cold shiver run through me.

Glancing back to Rebecca, I saw the fear in her eyes as she realized as I did. These were anti-regeneration bullets. No wonder Brian hadn't volunteered to come in here with us.

Drawing another breath, I gestured to Jon with my good arm.

Get ready.

Straightening, one agonizing inch at a time, I stood again, still safely behind the pillar.

And I ran.

I hadn't the slightest where I was going, but I ran. Directly away from Rebecca and Jon. I had to draw the humans' attention from them.

I got about ten steps before my foot caught in a crack.

"He's still alive!" came the woman's cry. "Kill him! Kill him! He'll take her from us!"

A moment later the machine gun picked up again. Its hail of bullets turned towards me.

For a moment all I could see was the flash from the muzzle. Fractions of a second with each shot, it lit the dark room.

Then, from the hallway a dark form moved. It was dressed in blue.

It took Jon a good five seconds to level his rifle. It was long, heavy, and ungainly.

Exactly the same length of time it took the human to bring me to bear in his sights.

Jon pulled the trigger as I felt the first of the bullets rip into my toes.

I hadn't been sure what to expect from the cop's new weapon.

A flash of light, perhaps? A boom? A laser beam?

Whatever it was, I didn't get it.

Even over the rain of bullets, I could somehow hear Jon pull the trigger as clear as day. It was a heavy mechanical click, somehow seeming at odds with the high-tech look of the rifle.

And then the human's machine gun came to a stop with the strangled snarl of cooling metal.

"Howard!" The woman's voice was a panicked scream. "Oh, gods, oh gods, what have they done to you?"

Rolling onto my side, I couldn't stand. All I could see from here was the woman unsteady

silhouette kneeling over a prone figure.

She shifted slightly and I could make out the limp form of a ferret beside her, dressed in ill-fitting human clothing.

Next came a muffled set of footsteps. They were fast and direct. A shadow slipped past my vision.

“No! You can't have her!”

The woman's rifle barked again. This time it was answered by a canine grunt.

Jon fell into a heap not feet from my side.

“Give me back my child.” Rebecca's voice came from somewhere I couldn't see.

“No!” The woman waved her gun, back peddling towards where Beth lay. “She's not yours! She's not yours anymore. She's mine! She's just a baby,” the woman screamed. “She needs *proper* parents. Not monsters like you!”

“Like *us*?” Rebecca's voice was cold. “We're the monsters?”

“You're all monsters!” The woman screamed. “All of you! You're one of them!”

The woman took another step back, standing right beside Beth.

The wall stood in shadow behind her, but I could see a pair of eyes burn in the darkness.

Rebecca stepped slowly forward from behind the woman, carefully avoiding Beth.

And Beth remained oddly silent through all this, not making a sound.

“You can't have her!” The woman rambled, “You can make another one, another wolf. She's--”

The woman never got to finish. Rebecca stepped up behind her and gently unsheathed one of her knives.

“*Never* threaten my family,” she whispered into the woman's ear as she raised her blade ever so lightly rest against her throat. “Just be glad my husband has decided to spare your life. I'd gladly kill you here and now.”

A moment later there was a loud metallic clang as the rifle dropped from her hands.

“Please...” the woman whispered, crying now, “Please don't hurt my child.”

I was fading in and out of consciousness as Rebecca tied up the humans. Or the human and one ferret, I should say.

She came to Jon and my side as soon as it was safe. And after she'd checked Beth.

“Tommy? Can you hear me?” Her voice was soft as she propped me up against the pillar I'd been taking cover behind just minutes ago.

I reached out with my tongue to flick her nose.

The four of us stumbled out of the labyrinthine hallways looking like a bunch of horror play rejects.

I was still dripping blood from a wound that was still trying to close now that Rebecca has dug the coated bullet out and Jon had taken a shot to the leg. We were leaning on each other, shuffling forward.

Rebecca had her hands full too. Beth it seemed had just been waiting for us to show up before coming alive. She was, in intervals, laughing and squirming and trying to make up for three lost days of meals.

Stepping out into the late afternoon sunlight, it was near blinding after spending the better part of an hour in the dark.

“English?” I called, expecting the lion to be waiting.

There was no reply.

I didn't think I had anything left, but my heart began racing again.

"You still have one shot left, Jon?" I whispered as I let go of him to stand myself. He'd carried the rifle back out with us.

He nodded

I glanced back at Rebecca. She already had her knife out. I could see in her eyes that she wanted to join me, but she wasn't about to set Beth down after all we'd done to get her back.

Limping forward, I was hardly the most elegant sight. It was all I could do to keep my claws from clicking on the weathered concrete ground.

A moment later I heard something move. Then a high-pitched canine laugh.

Poking my head around a corner, I saw Ging sitting on the ground, giggling, playing with English's tail.

The lion was out cold.

"What happened?" I asked as soon as we could get the man up and moving again.

"Gods, Mate, I haven't a clue," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "One moment I was out here with Brian and the humans. I was just going to check on the men's bonds when everything..." he shrugged. "Then you were slapping me."

I'd already checked on the two human prisoners we'd left out here. They were still bound, and out cold as well.

Brian, however, was gone.

"Do you think we could track him?" Rebecca asked.

I shrugged. "Don't know. He's more than a match for any of us at the best of times even without his his memory back. Now?" I sighed.

We were just getting ready to pack up and move out when I heard footfalls on the path leading to the fortress.

Poking my head around, there was a wave of hunters and police dogs sprinting our way. They were moving in perfect synchronization.

"Hey, Jon," I said, glancing back at the dog, "I think the reinforcements just arrived."

Chapter 15: The End of an Era

Gods, had time gone that fast?

It was only yesterday we'd celebrated Ging and Beth's fifth birthday. The two of them were growing faster than the most tenacious weeds. Ging had demanded a set of science books as a gift and Beth got a new pair of hiking shoes – only the most expensive she could find, of course.

English, Rebecca, Jon, and I were seated around our normal table at Café Bristol. The sun was out and it was looking to be yet another wonderful day. The storms we'd had over the last little while were long gone, swept clean from the clear blue of the sky.

We were lucky to have our spot in the café. All the other tables were full, the place was running a booming business these days.

“All I had to do was dumb down the menu,” the lion had muttered. “These people wouldn't know fine cuisine if it bit them.”

And speaking of other dinners, Amstys and Molly were seated not too far away at another table. Ging and Beth were playing with their kids – all four of them – off in the corner. A couple of dalmatians and their own pup were seated nearby, the Fire Chief and his wife – Neither had aged a day.

We had enough trouble with two kids, I hadn't the slightest how they managed to look after *four* little wolves.

“Hey, Jon,” I said, glancing over to the dog. “We know the lug is a lost cause, but when are you going to settle down?”

A smile slipped to his lips, but all he did was shrug.

Heh. I think Jon was already married to the force.

I was just starting to relax into an inviting sunbeam, with Rebecca curled at my side, when the distinct footsteps of a messenger came to my ears.

I groaned.

Opening my eyes, a rabbit was standing in front of me, dressed in a government uniform.

“For you, Sir,” he said, holding out a small envelope. “It arrived on the last ship from Japan.”

I cocked my head as I took the letter. I didn't know anyone in Japan.

The front of the envelope was addressed with my name and nothing else. The penmanship was impeccable.

I glanced over to English as I slit it open with a claw. The lion, now well on going grey, shrugged.

Dear Mr. Taggert,

I thought it best I should contact you. It's been sometime, but I am once again working in the best interests of Vancouver and those who live in it. I don't think that's something I'll ever be able to stop.

I am currently in Chiba City. I've been having meetings with a most agreeable company here. It seems they are familiar with your lion. Especially the lady that runs the organization.

I've been able to reach a trade agreement with them, most favourable – please see attached. They are under the understanding that I am an official representative of the city government.

Anyway, I'll be off in a few days, heading west. From here on in I'll be making my way through China, then India. Who knows, perhaps I'll pass through Africa as I follow the setting sun.

God willing I might just make it all the way around. It could take me eighty years, but I might just cross the Atlantic and walk the parries to see you again.

I'm not the wolf you knew, Tommy. Neither one of them. Some days I wonder what it would have been like if you hadn't thrown me from my home.

Respectfully,

Brian Ferguson

There was something to the hand of the writing. It was the one I remembered, but at the same time it was looser, calmer, more relaxed.

"Heh. Well, I guess some time away has been good for him."

I handed the letter to Rebecca. Her face paled as read it. Until she got to the end and laughed.

"You might be right, Tommy." She handed it on around the table.

Sitting back for a moment, I took a look at the city spreading out around us in all directions. We'd had enough time now to truly see the difference Brian had made, for better or for worse.

The city was growing now, far more organic and alive than it'd ever been before, more *open*. Though that's not to say that everything was going perfectly. We'd had some more riots, one good one a year ago, but things did seem to be getting better.

"Hey, Jon," I asked lazily as I leaned back and let the sun hit me flat in the face. "What's the word on the great and grand Prometheus project?"

He didn't even bother to straighten as I said the name. We'd unveiled Prometheus to the public a good two years back. Just as soon as they'd gotten it working again. You have no idea how temperamental those computers were.

A smile edged onto the dog's lips.

"Moving along at about the same speed it ever was, Tommy. There's a waiting list a good six months long to get transformed. So far we've been able to keep the system working well enough to do a group every week or so." The smile bloomed into full force. "Last I heard people were coming literally from the other side of the planet to go through it. You'd never think there were so many humans wanting to feel more normal or so many of us wanting to leave our pelts behind."

"Yeah. But what about replicating it?"

His smile faltered for a moment.

"We're still working on that. We're not going to be able to make new computers at anywhere near that level of complexity until we've managed to recreate almost all the technology from before the Cataclysm."

“What about the messengers sent out to Japan and beyond?”

He shrugged. “We’re working on it. Everyone *wants* it, but it’s going to take a long time, and quite possibly the resources of the entire planet.”

English yawned from across the table.

“So you say, friends. I’ve seen that world. People are people. Give them a goal, something they want and can strive towards and you’d be amazed what they’ll pull off to get there.” He grinned. “Just look at us. A scrawny little wolf, a homeless human, and a street starved dog.” The grin grew wider. “And me, a prince.”

A lazy hour or so later Rebecca and I were ready to head off. But not before giving English a hug. The lion’s golden pelt was still the colour of the sun, but it was now mixed with the silver of the moon to even it out.

Wrapping my arms around the man, I could feel just how much weight he’d lost over the years. He felt smaller now, more brittle.

But yet calmer.

We were heading back to the apartment, but as anyone with kids knows, you can’t just go in a straight line when you’re being pulled in every direction.

“Not too far out!” Rebecca called as both Ging and Beth made a break for the shore. The kind august sun had warmed the sea enough for them to go swimming.

Sitting in the sand with Rebecca in my arms, we looked out across the waves at the endless parade of trade ships passing through the harbor.

“Is Salt Spring Island still out there, Babe?” I asked.

She nodded. “Last I heard they were still keeping any nonhumans out.”

I sighed. “Any regrets?”

“With you, Tommy?” She laughed. “No. Not one.”

We sat there and watched. The kids splashed in the shallows, the ships moved in the distance, and somewhere, off beyond the horizon, a particular wolf was working his way west.

The one thing that wasn’t to be seen were any guards. We didn’t need them anymore. There hadn’t been a threat on our lives in years.

Returning to the apartment, carrying an exhausted and dripping Ging and Beth in our arms, I waved at Pine as we made our way down the street.

The dog had lost his ear, giving him an off balance appearance. The force had tried to transfer him to another position, and that’s why he didn’t work for the force anymore. He worked for the government. Now he really was my attaché. His office was in the building next door.

“Good night, darlings,” I whispered as I tucked the kids in.

Walking back out into the hallway, I glanced over to Rebecca. She was reading one of my old history books.

“You okay for a while here, Babe? I going for a shower.”

She glanced up at me and smiled.

“Sure, Wolfy.”

The warm water soused over me as I stepped into the large shower stall. It immediately turned grey as it fell down around my feet.

This was... it was the same shower Rebecca and I had been in the second time we'd been tougher. And the same place I'd fled to years ago after I'd almost killed a hoodlum on the street. And the same place Rebecca and I helped the kids get cleaned up in every day.

Out in the hallway, and beyond it, I could hear the sounds of the city at night.

It was the peaceful calamity that we'd all gotten used to living through everyday.

Silently, among the countless drops of water that fell around me, I cried.

Beth wanted to be an explorer, climb the Rockies, and Ging wanted to be an author, record the history of V-town.

The world was carrying on and I cried.

"Tommy, are you alright in there?" Rebecca asked softly from the hallway.

Holding back a sniffle, I raised my head into the warm spray.

"Yeah, Babe. Everything's fine."

Author's Note

First, something to set the mood: Try this The Good Catches Up.

And here, folks we are again! Welcome to the fifth, and penultimate, book of *The Hunters*.

Once again there's a lot going on. This book is kinda, sorta (but not quite!) the ending to the series. A number of plot threads that have been kicking around for a long time are going to be brought back together, and the main theme of the story will come to an end. That's not to say it's *over*, but simply that you're going to get some conclusion with this book.

I'd like to thank you all who have read this far. *The Hunters* has been an awesome ride, and I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have.

An interesting piece of trivia, this book was planned way back when I first started writing the series. Before I'd even finished the original book, *The Hunters* I knew it was going to be the first in a series. I made it sextology (six books) because... well, frankly, because I wanted to be able to say I had a *sextology*!

All of our major character have had their character development by now, Tommy, English, Rebecca, Jon. Even Amstys and Max got a little bit. The *big* difference is that the political landscape of V-town has changed as of the ending of the previous book. Two major powers have shifted with the deaths of Sayer and Griss. Here's hoping Tommy's strong enough to keep things together!

Whew! Well, that's that. I'm afraid that things make have become a bit stereotypical and predictable with the birth of the twins, then their kidnapping, but I like to think that the police department's little side project kept the plot a bit off-balance.

Anyway, what's next? Well, first a bit of a break. I've got one final book left to post, then I'm out. Not sure if that's a good thing or not, but it'll certainly be a change. There will be a break of a month or so with no posts except for a short story or two. I don't have any remaining non-Hunters books to put up, so I'm going to have to spend that time getting the final adventure ready. And a small warning: If you want the series to conclude with a fairytale ending, this is where you should stop reading.

As for what that adventure will be, well...

The Mourner.

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