

# The Proginers



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

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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 dieing 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.

"Taggert. 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 Taggert," 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.

## Author's Note

And here, folks we are again! Welcome to the fifth, and penultimate, book of *The Hunters*.

Once again there's going to be a lot going on. This book is kinda, sorta (but not quite!) the ending to the series. A lot 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 book) 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 power have shifted with the deaths of Sayer and Griss. Here's hoping Tommy's strong enough to keep things together!

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