

The Proginers



By wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1:	The River may be Running, but I have no Urge to Chase it.....	1
Chapter 2:	To Say This Was Unexpected.....	12
Chapter 3:	A New Breed of Cop.....	25
Chapter 4:	Pot Marks and Ashes.....	37
Chapter 5:	A Wolf for a Father and a Lion for an Uncle.....	55
Chapter 6:	Dirty Politics.....	68
Chapter 7:	I'll Rip Your Heart Out. By the Gods I Swear It.....	80

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 expect 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 then 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.