

The Diplomats



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Chapter 1: A Growl in the Darkness

The fur on the back of my neck stood straight up. We were racing down the mountain as fast as English's jeep could take us on the cracked and worn asphalt.

The road was already a hundred years without any maintenance, and the earthquake that had just shook us hadn't improved it any. V-town, Vancouver, lay off in the distance, I still couldn't see it. The world hadn't taken kindly to it when the Cataclysm had hit a century ago, wiping out most of the human populations and leaving us half-beasts in their wake. V-town was one of the only cities left in North America.

There was hardly any room in the jeep with the five of us crammed in here, and the rough surface of the road didn't help any.

English was driving, he was the only one who knew how. I could just see around his brown mane to the muscles bulging on his arms as he tried to keep us from flipping over. Beside him, in the passenger's seat, sat Amstys. The massive wolf was almost as big as English. Amstys wasn't as twitchy as the rest of us. He'd never even been to V-town before, but he kept glancing back to me every few minutes, taking cues from the fear that must have been written all over my face.

On my lap sat Rebecca. She was the only human amongst us. Without enough room back here for a proper seat, she was on my lap, my brown fur her only cushion. I had my arms wrapped around her, my nose pressed into her dark red hair.

"Don't worry, Wolfy," she whispered to me, "V-town's ridden out quakes before." Her words were a comfort, but we all knew that the massive shifting of the earth we'd just felt was far beyond anything we'd ever seen.

The last person in the vehicle with us was Jon, a German Shepherd and a member of the V-town police force. He'd been sent with us on our little excursion to the prairies in an effort to protect me.

"Bugger it all!" I heard English swear from up front as we screeched to a halt. A moment later his hands came down to smack the steering wheel so hard that I was afraid he was going to break it right off. "Okay, folks," He popped the car door open, "We walk from here."

Unlatching my own door and setting Rebecca on the ground outside, I followed. Well, it was obvious why we'd stopped. The road ahead had been torn to shreds. There were shards of pavement that shot up a good three feet into the air. Not even English's beloved jeep would be able to make good

time on that.

I didn't bother to wait for everyone as I pulled open the trunk of the jeep and began throwing the packs on the ground until I'd found mine and Rebecca's. Mine was sky blue, and twice the size of her smaller human one. I handed Rebecca's pack to her and helped her settle the weight on her shoulders before I quickly shrugged into mine.

"Hey Mate, why does she get all the special attention?" English quipped as he reached in and pulled his own massive pack out.

I just rolled my eyes at English as I began walking. "Because she's got stuff you don't, English." Rebecca elbowed me in the gut as we headed out. "And because she'd not a dude!" I dodged Rebecca's elbow this time, only to get smacked upside the head by English's paw.

Thankfully, we weren't far from V-town now, the trees were starting to look familiar. It was likely still a few hour's walk, but it was nothing to what we'd covered in the past.

V-town didn't have the same kind of technology that it'd had back before the Cataclysm, contrivances like English's jeep would be an oddity there, so we couldn't hear the city it as we approached. But still... I should have been able to hear *something* by now.

There was nothing but the whisper of wind in the trees and the fall of our footsteps on the soft ground beneath us. We'd said little on the walk, it must have been a good hour by now. The idea of coming upon a city full of the dead and wounded kind of killed most conversation.

I wasn't sure what it was, but I stopped dead so quickly that Rebecca almost ran into my back.

"Hey!" she squeaked. I had to reach a hand back to keep her on her feet.

English stopped next to me, eyes scanning the trees. "What is it, mate?" His voice was soft, not likely carrying more than a couple of meters.

"I don't know..." A scent had come to me on the wind. It still left my nose twitching. It was familiar... in a way. It shouldn't be alarming, whatever it was, but it was cut with a note of aggression.

Amstys was beside me a moment later, so close I could feel his fur brush up against mine. "I can smell it too, young master. We are not alone." Amstys was the only one among us who was a true hunter. I was a wantabe, and English and Jon were lost every time they set foot outside the city.

Oh, and I'd almost forgotten about the 'young master' thing.

I sniffed again, trying to place the scent... Nothing.

A moment later I heard a growl crawl through the trees.

Okay... that wasn't good. Who the heck was growling at us? It couldn't be one of the city's hunters, my father and uncle should have them under control.

A moment later a half dozen forms broke from the underbrush around us, completely encircling our little group. They were wolves and cougars, some of them I almost recognized -- they were definitely part of my uncle Gowan's hunters.

"Hey, what's--" I didn't even have time to speak before one of them leapt towards us, fangs barred.

Our little band might not look like much, but we packed enough fire power between English's claws and Amstys' teeth to take down bloody well near anything that moved.

The cougar who had been the first to spring found himself held fast in English's grip before he could even get a single swipe off.

One of the wolves from the group encircling us leapt, following the cougar's lead. He never even landed before, with a wet crunch, Amstys' fist connected with his jaw, sending him spinning back into the trees with a crash. There had been no competition, Amstys was huge, almost twice the size of the other wolf. His muscles rippled under his black and grey pelt.

That strike had pulled back the gates that had held the other hunters from coming at us. There were five of them now, and they set upon us full force.

"Wait! Wait! What's going on?" Nobody answered me as I yelled, ducking to avoid the claws of a wolf who swiped at my face. I had to scramble to get Rebecca behind me, to try and protect her.

Unsurprisingly, she would have none of it. The little human had pulled a knife free from her pack and was brandishing it at the cougar a menaced her.

"Wait!" I tried to strike at the wolf before me, but he danced out of range before I could reach him. My claws caught nothing but air. He was nimbler than I, forcing me back as the hunters pressed towards us. We were weighed down by our packs and wary from our hike. They moved faster, struck quicker. I could already see Jon from the corner of my eye, a shallow gash across his cheek.

"Who sent you?" I tried again, my breath was coming ragged now as I panted, "Did Griss send you? Gowan? What do you want!"

They started slightly when I said the names. A moment later I heard one of them, a tan wolf who was grappling with Jon yell, "Stop."

As one the pack stepped back from us, the tan wolf walking around to stand before me, sizing me up.

"How do you know who Gowan is?" He levelled his eyes at me, the were a dark, unblinking green. "Or better yet, Griss?"

I snorted. "Griss is my father. I'm Tommy Taggart." Now I levelled my gaze at him, though I doubt it was as intimidating. "The better question is who are you? And," I lifted one of my lips ever so slightly to show a tooth, "And what the hell are you doing?"

He raised his nose, defiantly flagging his tail as he all but dismissed me offhandedly.

"I take orders from Griss. Not you. He told me to keep people from flooding into the city, so that's what I'm doing."

I couldn't help the growl that was clawing its way up my throat now. There could be people dying in V-town, and this mongrel was trying to keep us out?

"I'm Griss' son. Let me pass."

He all but barked out a laugh. "Sure. You and a hundred other people. Take off, you hozer. Griss said to keep people out, and that's what I'll do."

All I wanted right now was to leap upon him and rip that smug grin off his face.

The thought scared me.

I wasn't like this, really. It was English who was more likely to reach out and tare someone a new one, not me. That wasn't who I was... I'd spent too much time in the wilderness with English, Rebecca, Jon and Amstys. They all treated me like an alpha. It was hard to admit to, but I'd gotten used to it. I didn't get the same respect from these fools.

"Fine." I had to grit the words out. My teeth snapped shut on every syllable, almost slicing off the tip of my tongue. "Take me to Griss. Take me to my father."

The tan wolf just grinned, holding his hand out before him and buffing his claws on his pelt. "What ya going to do to make it worthwhile? I'm a busy man, got lots of patrols to run out here."

It was English who spoke up now, his fake British accent plied smoothly over his cultured and rolling voice, "You know, friend," He took a step forward, pushing back the hunters who were crowded next to his bulk, "I'm sure we could find something you'd like."

"And what would that be?" The wolf just rolled his eyes.

"Don't you think ol' Griss would be happy to see his wayward son again? He'd be more that grateful to whoever brought him home."

"Grateful ain't going to fill my belly."

English paused for a moment, pulling the last of our rations from his pack. "I've got a couple day's food right here. We won't need it once we get hooked back into civilization. You can have it."

The tan wolf smirked now. "You might not be saying that once you find out exactly what's left of *civilization*." English tossed a pouch of dried meat at him. He snatched it out of the air in a single, fluid motion.

"Fine. Let's go."

Before I took a step, I caught the wolf's eye again. "What's your name, anyway?" I wanted to remember who this bugger was.

He grinned again, showing way too many teeth.

"The name is Renald, runt." He tossed his head and turned from me, striding towards the trees that lined the road, "Though I doubt a nobody like you would ever need to know that."

It had been the better part of six months since we'd been in the forests surrounding V-town. Winter had still had its hold back then, snow on the ground. We'd managed to completely miss spring and most of summer. The trees were full of life again, their leaves above us, providing shade for the moss and babbling streams that ran under our feet.

I hadn't known what to expect as far as 'camp' went, but it looked like it was a fair ways away. We'd been walking for at least a couple of hours now, long enough to loop around a good part of V-town.

I hadn't spent all that much time out in the woods with my father, but this area felt... *familiar*. More so than the rest of the wilderness. This had been my father's personal territory.

My ears perked up when I heard something move in the underbrush to our left. Not just one, a parade of footsteps. I could see Amstys twitch beside me. He'd heard it too.

No more than an instant later I was bowled over, laying stunned on the ground. I heard yelling, a snarl from Amstys and a growl of English. About the only thing I could focus on were the lavender eyes that were no more than a foot from my face.

"Lucy!" My voice was ragged as her weight pressed down on my chest.

"Runt," Her mouth dropped open in a grin, "It's good to see you again." The black furred wolf that now sat on my chest was my cousin, uncle Gowan's daughter.

I hadn't seen her in... gods, had it been that long?

The snarling and clamour around me had grown in my few seconds of inattentiveness. No more than a moment later I watched Rebecca slam her fist down, right between Lucy's ears. The wolf's eyes rolled up into her head as she slid off me.

"Wait! Wait." I had to reach up to grab Rebecca before she proceeded to pound the living daylights out of my cousin. No one could ever accuse Rebecca of not being ready to take on the world. She'd jumped right into to 'protect' me the instant she'd thought I'd been under attack.

Scrambling to my feet, I had to holler at the top of my lungs to try and make myself heard over the fisticuffs that had broken out around me. Not only were Renald and his pack here now, but Lucy it seemed had brought a pack of her own.

English, Amstys, and Jon might be more than able to hold their own, but even they would have trouble with the odds being two to one.

"Wait! Everybody, *just stop!*" My voice came out in a snarl that I hadn't intended. It reminded me of the way my father had spoken to his pack back in the old days, how he'd snarled when they'd disobeyed orders.

It was no more than a heartbeat before every one of the wolves, including Renald, had frozen in their footsteps. A moment later the cats followed suit. It seemed that the only people who were even

so much as able to move were my own little group. Everyone of them, English, Jon, Amstys, and Rebecca backed closer to me, forming a circle.

Well, there was one other person who seemed to have collected her senses. Lucy had pulled herself off the ground, holding one hand to the bump that was already starting to grow between her ears.

"Well, runt, you certainly know how to pick them." Her grin had grown, but there was no menace in it. Her eyes danced when she looked at me, just like they had when we'd played as pups. "I'd heard you'd shackled up with a human, but I never thought I'd ever get to meet her." She turned, "And I take it you're Rebecca?" Lucy winked. "Anyone who can bring out the wild side in my cuz here is someone to be reckoned with."

She took a step forward, holding her hand out to Rebecca. Rebecca paused for a moment before taking it, eyeing the wolf warily.

I had to step in, giving Rebecca a slight poke to the ribs as I whispered, "Don't worry, I've known her my entire life. We used to chase our tails together."

A smile grew on Rebecca's lips. She stepped forward to take Lucy's hand, but the wolf pulled her forward into a hug.

As quickly as it had started, the tension seemed to evaporate from the air. Even Renald's people backed off, though not far. It was obvious that Lucy was the ranking wolf here, Renald showed her the proper deference, exactly that he had refused to show me.

I glanced over at English. He was brushing the twigs and leaves from his mane. The cat couldn't seem to go more than ten feet in the forest without getting himself tangled in something. He shot me a quick glance before returning his gaze to the hunters around us. It was obvious he didn't trust any of them, but he was keeping his claws sheathed none the less.

Jon didn't give me any indication what he was thinking either way. He'd returned to his stoic, almost statue like demeanor the moment the other people had shown up. He was back to being a model police officer again.

Amstys was even harder to read. We'd only known him for a few weeks, ever since he'd wrestled his way free of the she-demon Al-Sedexterous. He hadn't said a word, but simply stood as close as he could get to me, between me and the largest group of hunters.

Stepping from my little circle of friends, I grabbed Lucy by the shoulder and hauled her off a few steps into the trees so we could speak alone.

My voice was hardly above a whisper as I spoke, "Okay, cuz, what in all the gods' names is going on here? We felt a massive earthquake, but that buggar Renald won't let us into the city."

She looked at me oddly for a moment, "You don't know? Things were going crazy even before the quake, there were riots and killings. The cops were doing everything they could, but the species protests had gotten so out of hand that it felt like a quarter of the city was on fire."

I wanted to roll my eyes and tell her to get on with it, but the story had still run my blood cold. "We'd heard reports of the riots, relayed over the radio while we'd been out traveling."

Her normally bright eyes clouded over for a moment as she spoke.

"It's true, Tommy. I don't know what you've heard, but it's likely even worse. We'd almost had things under control for a moment... then, then we'd felt it. Only the hunters seemed to notice. There was something *wrong*. Not just the fighting, not just the riots. There was something more. We all felt it. Every single one of us simply dropped what we'd been doing and made for the forest. We'd felt it coming, Tommy. We'd felt the quake. We... no, Griss, he'd tried to warn the police, the city, but no one believed us."

I felt the breath catch in my lungs.

"And that was it, Tommy. We ran, like scared pups. Gowan went back to get Griss from police headquarters, but the rest of us ran as far and fast as we could. The police couldn't keep order without us. It was two days before the quake hit, and the city was burning the whole time."

"What about now? Surly things must be back under control?"

She shook her head.

"Griss forbid anyone from entering the city. He says it's too dangerous."

I leaned against a tree, having to take a deep breath to steady my heart.

"Lucy, there could be people dying in there..."

I looked up at her and saw something that I'm not sure I'd ever seen before in those lavender eyes. Fear.

This was a girl who could play her father, Gowan the hunt master, like a harp. This woman was one of the best hunters in the city, and she was frightened.

"Your father took over the hunters as soon as my Dad pulled him from the city." She wasn't looking at me anymore, "He's running things now, not Gowan. He's the alpha. Griss says we're not to go into the city, so we don't. He says that we're not to allow anyone else to either, so we don't."

I let go of her arm. This couldn't be my Dad. It couldn't. He'd been the alpha of the hunters when I'd been young, but he'd had to give up that mantel years ago when he'd hurt his leg. My Dad was... my Dad. He'd never let people die like this.

I let go of Lucy's arm and turned to walk back to where everyone else stood. There was still an uneasy standoff. No one trusted anyone.

"Fine." I turned my gaze to Renald, then back to Lucy. "Take me to my father."

Renald laughed, "Sure, pup." He spat something onto the ground. "Whatever you say."

The camp wasn't much further away. Soon we were running into packs of hunters every few minutes. Some of them I didn't know, many of them I did. The more I met, the more who lowered their ears and tails to me. This was not what I'd been expecting. I had been hoping for a little more respect than I'd gotten from Renald, but they were treating me one step short of royalty.

Glancing back at the tan wolf, Renald was looking a tad bit unsettled now, and more with every hunter who bowed to me.

We finally entered camp. I use the term 'camp' loosely. There wasn't much here. Most hunters don't truly live in the wilderness. They work here, but returned to civilization every night. The small clearing before us was worn to mud by the passing of hundreds of paws, the grass lying trampled. In the centre was a small, hastily built cabin. It was no more than five meters square, and roughly framed, but it was the first real sign of civilization we'd seen since leaving Kicking Horse Pass.

We'd crossed half the clearing, no more than a dozen strides from the building when I heard a growl from within.

It was deep and low, more menacing than anything I could ever remember hearing. It rolled out of the dark, open door like a tide, pulling my tail to the ground.

Around me, I could see it had the same effect on every single one of the hunters. They all stopped dead, turning towards the cabin and lowering their eyes and tails.

Even English, a man who normally prided himself on being aloft and beyond such influences, seemed cowed.

I could feel Rebecca's grip come to tighten around my shoulder as she stepped closer to me.

"I don't care what you *think*! I gave you your orders. Get out there, get us some meat, and start following directions or I'll bust you down the same way I did Marcus!"

A second later a cougar ran from the cabin, ears flat and tail limp. He joined up with a group of

hunters as they melted into the trees without another word.

I was frozen for a second, my brain almost refusing to work. I knew that voice. It was the same one that had recited me bedtime stories and whispered me encouragements when I'd been learning to hunt.

It was my father.

Stepping forward, I noticed that no one else followed. Rebecca was still clutched to my arm, but I gently pulled her hands from me as I stood in front of the doorway.

There was no wind, and the presence of so many hunters milling about trampled any scents that I might be able to pick up. I couldn't see into the room, it was dark and shadowed.

"Who in the name of Hades are you? I didn't call for you. Get the bloody well out of here before I rip your tail off!" The voice was rougher than I remembered, lower and more ragged, but there was no mistaking it.

"Hi, Dad." My words were softer and meeker than I'd intended as I stepped into the cabin, the shadows closing in around me.

A strangled cough came from somewhere in the darkness. My eyes were just starting to adjust to the light when I saw his form hove from the shadows, limping towards me.

My father's smile was... well, there was no other way to describe it. Ugly. Well, terrifying might also be a good fit. His teeth were huge and sharp, weathered on more kills than I could count. And to me, it was beautiful.

Anyone else and I likely be running for the hills, but I knew my father.

An instant later he was upon me, arms wrapping around me as his weight bared down, almost forcing me from my feet.

"Tommy! Oh gods, son." For a moment I almost thought he was going to cry. I'd never once seen my father cry.

It wasn't that he was all that bigger than me, his grey furred body looked like a mirror image of my brown and cream one, but he was pure muscle, and his weight practically pushed me off my flat.

He'd been able to practically leap across the room at me, but now his leg gave out, he'd left his cane behind.

With a grunt, I was able to get him back across the room, helping him down on the rough wooden chair before my own legs folded.

He wouldn't let go of me, his arms wrapped around my shoulders like a steel trap.

"Oh gods, Tommy. I almost thought I'd never see you again."

I had to fight to get myself untangled from him. His voice had changed from the near feral growl it had been moments ago to exactly what I remembered.

"What's going on, Dad?" My blood froze for a moment as I remembered one of the reasons we'd been rushing back to V-town, even before the earthquake. "I'd heard you had a heart attack."

I was in front of him now, kneeling on the hard packed dirt floor. My eyes were still adjusting to the dim light, but I could make out his face now. It didn't look good.

My father had always had grey fur, he'd been born with it, but the grey that surrounded him now was more than that. He looked old. Old and tired.

He was panting for breath now, as if even his split-second burst of energy had drained him.

I could just see the glint of one of his teeth in the darkness before he began to speak. "You heard right." He let out a slight chuckle. "Retirement was not good for me. Aggie and I were holed up in the police headquarters when my soul decided to try and leave this world."

His hand was still clenched in mine. I couldn't help but squeeze it when he continued.

"I guess those mutts are good for something at least. I hadn't even hit the ground before there

were so many of them around me that I could hardly move. They have a whole surgical suit in the basement of that building, did you know that, son?"

I shivered slightly as I held his hand. The police had a lot of things in the basement of that mammoth headquarters of theirs. I'd had the misfortune of getting on their bad side once and they'd locked me away down there.

He brought his fingers up to his chest now, I could make them out in the darkness.

"They sliced me open, didn't even bother to shave away the fur." He barked out a laugh.

"Sliced me clean open like a butcher would some prey, and by all accounts fixed me right up."

I could see a line that ran down his chest, met by two more, one at the top near his collarbone, and one at the bottom near his abdomen. They formed an 'I'.

I was shaking now. I could feel the sweat between my toes.

"Are you okay, did everything work?" I couldn't keep the quiver from my voice. It made me sound like a pup, but in front of him that was okay.

Reaching down, he rested his mussel lightly between my ears and wrapped his arms around me. Just like he had when I was little, and he was the indestructible Big Bad Wolf.

"I'm still here, aren't I, son?" His voice was strong, but even I could hear the touch of fear. "I'm still here, still breathing for another day. That's what matters."

He relaxed his grip on me, but pulled me up beside him on the seat. I could feel the warmth of his body.

I saw his teeth flash again. "But how stupid can I be, Tommy? Your mother is out there somewhere, and she *will* kill me if I don't let her know you're here." He raised his head, looking towards the door now. When he spoke the growl had returned to his voice. He was yelling, ordering, and I doubt anyone had the backbone to do anything but obey. "Hey! Someone! Get in here!"

A moment later a hunter stood in the doorway. He was bent, nose nearly to the dirt. So submissive that it almost hurt to look at him.

"Sir?" His voice was little more than a whine.

"Find Aggie and bring her here. My son has returned." An instant later the hunter was gone.

I looked over to my father's face as he spoke. I almost wished I hadn't. Now I knew how other people saw him. His face was a mask of rage, fangs barred and ears back.

"What's going on, Dad?" I asked tentatively after we were alone again. "You don't lead the hunters anymore. Doesn't Gowan do that?"

He let out a slight snort as he sat back, eyes closing. "Don't forget, Tommy, that I'm the elder brother. Gowan is a good hunter and a fine leader, but I'm the alpha here."

"Fine." I huffed out a breath. "You're the alpha, he's the beta, what does that make me, kibble? I can't even get into the city. I just get kicked around by your lackeys out there."

A growl grew in my father's chest again. We were close enough together that I could *feel* it, not just hear it. It wasn't a theatric snarl like what he had been tossing around before. This one was real.

"You are my son, Tommy. You needn't be anything more." I could see another flash of his teeth. This time it wasn't from a smile. "And you haven't anything to fear from my hunters. You are of my blood, and they will treat you as such..."

He was about to say more when my mother arrived. She wafted silently through the doorway, as if carried on nothing more than a breeze. She looked human, but she didn't move like one, she was far too graceful. She was a sprigen.

"Tommy!" She was by my side a moment later, I hadn't even seen her cross the distance. Her hands ran over my face, as if making sure it was truly me. "We were so worried about you!" She sat on my father's lap, he let out a slight 'Oof'. "We weren't sure we were ever going to see you again."

We'd heard such things about your travels."

I couldn't keep the stupid grin from my face. "They were all more than likely true. I'm happy to be home... well, almost home." I looked back to my father. "Any chance I can slip past your goons and get back into the city?"

He rolled his eyes. "The orders are in place to keep out the looters. Gods, Tommy, you wouldn't believe what happened once the city began to break down. Society is gone, I swear it." A pained scowl crossed his face. "That and... we and the police force did not part on good terms. I can't afford to have any of my hunters dragged off by those dogs."

I had to fight to keep myself from just snuggling down and relaxing with my parents at my side. My father had always been such a titan in my life, it was hard not to just sit back and let him take care of everything.

"Dad, you should know that we have Jon with us. He's still technically part of the V-town police service."

I could feel him stiffen slightly when I said those words. His voice, however, was calm. "If he's with you, Tommy, then he's welcome." He shook his head slightly. "You've made some of the oddest friends that I could ever imagine. Then again..." He glanced over to my mother, "We did the same when we were young."

I forced myself up a few moments later. I sorely wanted to stay and feel some of the stress drip for me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it when I didn't know what was happening in V-town.

Bringing in my own little band of renegades to the cabin, it was a tad bit cramped now. My parents had already met Rebecca and English, they were both welcomed with open arms. Jon got a touch cooler reception, but it seemed to go well.

Amstys, however, bloody near got slack jawed awe from my father. You've got to realize that my father has been hunting his whole life, and he personally knew every single hunter in V-town, and I doubt he'd ever seen a wolf the size of Amstys.

And it didn't help that the freaking lug wouldn't stop calling me 'Young Master'.

I gave my parents a quick run down on what we'd been doing since we'd last seen them. Last time I'd seen my parents had been just shortly before we'd left V-town on our fool's journey. I decided to leave out that the map we'd been following -- the one provided by English -- had been a fake.

English took the opportunity to steal the thread of conversation from me a few times. He leapt about and made his voice a caricature of those we'd met. And he noticeably skipped past the part where he'd tried to kill me.

That was probably a good thing. Knowing my father, he'd likely try to return the favour.

It wasn't long before we'd come to the end of the story. My father's only question was, "And who was the mongrel who didn't recognize you as my son?"

I had to think for a moment to recall his name. "It was a tan wolf... he was running a pack of his own..."

My father rolled his eyes. Any pretence of being alpha, anything more than my father, was long gone. "That only narrows it down to about a half dozen, Tommy. I'm running all the hunters in the bloody city here. You've got to be more specific."

English gave me a good jab in the ribs from my side. "Come on, mate. Don't tell me you've forgotten that blighter already. And after he was so..." He paused for a moment, making a face. "Inhospitable. His name was Renald, mate. Renald."

I don't think I even knew half the curses that my father spat out. It was enough to make even English blush, and I'd seen his spit out some good verses of his own.

The next command out of my father's mouth was simple. "*Renald!*" His voice was booming, and enough to make even me pull back. My father's lips were pulled back so far now that I could see his pink gums, and his pelt stood on edge so that he looked twice his size.

I knew my father was lame, he couldn't walk more than two steps without his cane, but even then I wouldn't fight him for the world right now.

The form that came through the door was the same tan wolf that we'd seen earlier. Renald was bent so low that his belly nearly touched the ground. He was acting like a pup who'd just been caught with his nose in the pantry.

"Everyone out. Except," My father pointed a single cracked black claw at the tan wolf, "You."

I couldn't have told you how we did it, but every single one of us were up and out of that little cabin in the space of three heartbeats. I was surprised we could even fit through the door that fast.

All of us that was, except for my mother. She quietly shut the door behind us.

No one said anything for the space of five seconds, then English doubled over laughing.

"Did you see the look on his face, mate?" The lion had to pause for breath, he was leaning against the wall of the cabin now. "God, mate, is he in for it." He wiped the tears from his eyes for a moment before giving me an appraising glance. "I never knew you had it in you, mate. I wouldn't have thought you grew up with a father like that."

I had to grab English by his mane and start dragging him away. I could hear the muffled bellows of my father from the other side of the wall, and I didn't want to think about them.

"That wasn't the man I grew up with, English." Okay, I had to roll my eyes at that one. "Well, it was, but not like that. He wasn't like that with me."

Even Rebecca was laughing now. "Come on, Wolfy, you spent your childhood growing up under the alpha of all the hunters, and he never treated you like part of the pack?" She slipped her arm in mine now as we walked on.

I had to close my eyes for a moment to gather my thoughts. "No. I wasn't part of his pack. I wasn't a hunter when I was young. I was his son, his family. It's different."

English had stopped laughing now and extracted himself from my grasp. "It's alright, Mate." He gave me a glance that said much more. "We know. There's more to it when it's family."

It took me a moment, but I noticed that all of the hunters around us were treating me differently now. They had simply been wary when we'd walked in, now they were stepping back as I moved forward, whispering to each other.

I guess news travels fast. Folks must have heard about Tommy, the son of great Griss, back from his foolish escapades across the mountains.

The cabin was the only structure around, so I simply walked until I was back among the trees, and out of the mud, before throwing myself to the ground.

I didn't bother to look back at anyone else before I pulled open my pack and began rummaging around.

"Anyone got something to eat?" I asked. I was quickly getting to the bottom of my pack with no food in sight.

I could hear English's amused purr from behind me. "Don't look at me, mate. I gave the last of our chow to that bugger. I'm tapped out."

A second later I felt something wet and heavy hit the back of my skull.

"Heads up!" It was Lucy's voice.

I heard English scramble to catch whatever had thwacked me before it could hit the ground.

I was all but seeing stars, but I did manage to yell, "You're supposed to yell that *before* you throw something at me!"

She just laughed in the distance.

My nose began twitching almost before I got the words out. What ever it was, it smelt good.

Turning, I was happy to see that English had a leg of freshly killed venison cradled in his arms. It was even wrapped in wax paper, just like you'd find at the butcher's shop.

"Say what you will about the hunters, mate," English smiled, "But they take care of their friends. Hello, beauty," he purred at the meat, "Where have you been all my life?"

"Give it here." I snatched it from his claws. "You'll just eat it all if I leave it with you."

He put up a pained expression for a moment. "No I wouldn't. I'd just be... checking it. To make sure it's safe." He grinned at me, exposing more of his teeth than was strictly necessary.

"Yeah. Sure. You can check it *after* you've helped Rebecca get a fire going." I moved the leg of meat behind my back. "I trust you with food about as much as I trust Jon to take a joke."

The German Shepherd's head popped up at moment I said his name. "Sorry, Sir? I didn't catch that."

"Exactly." I stalked off into the underbrush.

Even from this distance I could nearly make out the occasional words that echoed from the cabin. I never knew my Dad had that kind of lung capacity.

At first I'd expected that this would be a big deal, something to turn the other hunters off me, but soon enough I realized that it must be at least a semi-frequent occurrence.

No one seemed to notice or care. All the other hunters just milled around and went about their duties.

It was the better part of an hour before the door to the cabin opened again. I didn't pay it much attention, I was too busy eating, until one of the hunters came up to tap me on the shoulder.

"You're wanted by the alpha," was all she said.

Back in the cabin, it was again hard to see in the shadowed darkness. I had to rely more on scent than on sight. My father was still there, but my mother wasn't. Renald was sitting huddled in a corner.

I was only relieved so far in that I couldn't smell the salty tang of blood in the air.

When my father spoke, he did so like an alpha. This was the first time he'd ever truly done so in front of me.

"Renald has apologized for his inexcusable behaviour towards you, Tommy." I could hear a slight growl in his voice, "And..." He paused for a moment, casting a withering glance towards the brow beaten wolf, "He will do whatever it takes to make amends."

"Uh, that's... great." Truth be told, I hadn't the slightest what to say. I'd never expected something like this to happen. Sure I'd been annoyed when Renald had acted the jerk, but he'd just been following orders.

"And that's why," my father continued, "He has begged for me to let him join you."

The expression on the young wolf in the corner suggested anything but.

"Dad, that's a nice offer, but--"

His growl cut me off before I could even finish. I'd done many things to annoy my father when while been growing up, but I'd never heard him growl at me. Not like this.

He turned a moment later, eyes levelling on the tan wolf. "Renald. Out." He lifted a claw, pointed towards the light streaming from outside. "And close the door behind you."

Renald scrambled past me no more than a second later, escaping as quickly as his feet could carry him. I did, however, still see a 'you're going to get it now' expression on his face.

The door clicked shut behind me, blocking out nearly all the light. It left me alone in the darkness with my father.

No more than an hour ago I'd been by his side, calm and content, just about ready to doze off in his arms. This hardly seemed like the same man.

Every motion, every twitch of his tail spoke *alpha*. Even his scent was different. He was the boss here, and he knew it.

His voice, however, when he spoke was a mix between what I remembered and what I had just heard moments ago.

"Tommy, come here."

I couldn't help but feel my tail fall as I stepped forward, within his reach. I wasn't sure why I was so scared... this was my father. But I was.

He reached out a hand, gently grasping my mussel and lifting my eyes to meet his. His voice was now back to that I knew well... but there was more. Like a velvet wrapped steel girder.

"Tommy, you're my son, and you know I love you..." His voice petered off for a moment.

"And you can say anything you want to me in private," His grip around my mussel tightened now, "But if you ever contradict me in public again, so the gods help me, I'll rip you apart like I would any other hunter." He let go of my face. "I'd cry about it after, but I would." He sighed, falling back into his chair. "There's too much happening, Tommy. Too many people."

Slowly, I sat down beside him, feeling his warmth again while he continued.

"I thought I'd given this all up, Tommy. The hunters, being the alpha. Gods, you have no idea how *good* it felt when I broke my leg, had to hand the reins over to Gowan." He let out a heavy breath. "To be able to just be myself again, not have to worry about being an alpha anymore."

"Then why'd you take it back again, Dad? Gowan's a good hunt leader, he really is."

He tossed his head slightly, teeth glinting in the darkness.

"Gowan is just that, son. He's a magnificent hunter, talented hunt leader, and a piss poor alpha. He always grew up under me. He's an old hand at getting people to do what he wants, even at coming up with tactical plans, but that's it. He lives in the moment, thinks for the hunt at hand. He's never been a strategic thinker. As long as the status quo is kept he's the best man you could hope for. But not now. We're dealing with something completely new, something we've never seen before, and Gowan simply can't deal with that. That's why he pulled me from the claws of those police dogs, and that's why he forced me back into the game. If I don't do this, Tommy, then people are going to die." He paused for a moment, a slight chuckle escaping his lips. "Truth be told, people are going to die even though I'm here, but I can only hope to try and reduce those numbers."

Almost without pausing he switched gears, nearly so fast as to leave my head spinning.

"Take Renald with you, Tommy."

"What, why? I don't want a jerk like that." I said.

"Because I can't keep him here." My father sounded old now, old and tired. "He's more talented than he looks. That little flea-bag can stalk like no one's business. His only problem is that he knows it. I thought I might be able to calm him down by giving him a pack of his own, occupying his time and focusing him. I can see it didn't work. I can't keep him here, Tommy. No matter what I do, short of killing him, he'll be a poison nettle in my side, undermining me."

"And so you're handing him off to me?" I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

He gave me a gentle cuff to the ears.

"You can look at it like that if you want to, but I've told him in no mean words that if he even thinks about double crossing you it'll be the last thing he'll ever do."

I'd never seen my father threaten a person's life, but the mere thought of it was enough to give

me pause.

"Is that the best way to do this, Dad?" I froze once I realized what I was asking. Sure, we were in private, but...

He looked down at me, curious, "What is it, son?"

I had to take a deep breath before I could continue. "The way you're running the hunters." I paused. "I... I haven't been here long, but it feels like you're running everything through fear, intimidation. Is that really the way to get people to do what they need to?"

He let out a long breath, closing his eyes. When he spoke again he sounded old, older than I'd ever remembered hearing him. "It's not what I want, Tommy, but we haven't any choice. People are frightened, scared for their lives. They had to leave a lot back in the city, homes, families... Aggie is one of the only non-hunters we have out here... well, her and your friends. Fear isn't the best tool to get people to do what they need to, but sometimes it's the only option. I don't want to have to do this, Tommy, really, I don't, but we just don't have the time to do it any better way."

Chapter 16: Author's Note

Well folks, here we are again for a three-peat. *The Hunters* is now a trilogy.

With this book we've now reached the midpoint of the series. *The Hunters* and *The Explorers* helped to setup the world and introduce all the main characters. Now with *The Diplomats* you'll be seeing a fairly major shift in the plot.

The Diplomats was an fun story to write. And a fast one. Coming off of writing *Little Brother to a Lion*, I'd just finished a two book break from the series and was ready to get back to Tommy and Co. with a vengeance.

The Explorers was written over a vacation. In less than two weeks I bashed out the entire 110,000 word story. To this day my record still stands of 10,000 words written in a single day. I wrote more in one day than most folks read!

This may be a little telling for the direction the story is going to go, but I binged on the old British television show *Yes, Minister* before and during the writing of this book. I don't think I really managed to capture the political nuisances and infighting of the TV show, but I did manage to replace them with way too many different sides, all trying to pull Tommy to their advantage.

A number of new factions were introduced in this book, and a number of them returned from the previous two stories. For those of you who thought the line about Tommy being named mayor back at Kicking Horse Pass was a throwaway, you'll likely be surprised.

The hardest part of this story was the... ahem, politics. Give me a story about racism, or just a flat out fight scene and I'm in my element. Trying to create huge, multilayered quagmires of political intrigue take way more effort. I'm only lucky that Tommy's out of his element too.

The major three factions in the story are the Government, the Hunters, the Police, and Business. I'm not sure if they map too closely to the real world, but they seemed a good fit. It was a bit of a