

The Diplomats



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Chapter 2: A Day in Jail (But I didn't do anything, honest!)

Night was quickly drawing when I left the cabin. Renald had been standing not far away, a wide grin on his face, but it faltered the moment I stepped out, my father leaning on my shoulder.

There were only three people my father would ever allow himself to lean on while in the presence of others. My mother, Gowan, and now me. It showed to the world exactly who he trusted.

Renald looked like I'd just force fed him a lemon.

Despite my rush to get to V-town, we stayed at the hunter's camp that night. Pitching our tents at the edge of the clearing. My father had offered me the choice of sleeping in the cabin, but that would have been... *awkward*.

Even in our humble tents we were still a step above the rank and file hunters. Everyone else had fled V-town when they'd felt the quake coming, taking little but the clothing on their backs. We on the other hand had the opportunity to pack. Sure there was little left after our months on the road, but even a simple bed roll was a good step in the right direction.

I spent the night in the little tent, cuddled up next to Rebecca. My parents knew we were together, they'd known for a long time, but it still felt odd to be doing anything but sleeping while they were no more than a dozen meters away.

Breaking camp that morning I was annoyed, but not surprised, to see Renald already standing on the grass before me.

He stood straighter today, eyes still narrowed, but tail held low in deference. He bowed his head slightly towards me as I walked towards him.

"Mr. Taggart." His voice held less of the snark that I'd heard yesterday, but was nowhere near as cowed as his posture.

"Gods, don't you start that too." I sat down beside him, motioning for him to follow. "I don't care what my father told you to do, but my name is Tommy. Nothing more."

He sat down, a slight grin edging onto his face now. "What, don't tell me that all the stories going around about you aren't true."

"Gods." I just held up a hand to cover my face. "Do I even want to ask what people are saying?"

He chuckled, an evil sound. "I got more good stories about you last night than I think I've heard about even the great Griss himself." He threw out a melodramatic hand, "Everything from you being a spoiled brat born with a silver bone in your mouth to a weak wristed, can't hunt pansy who's just clutching his father's tail."

I couldn't help but feel a slight growl work its way up my throat. "The second one is closer to the truth. But," I levelled a jab at his chest, "That was a long time ago. I don't know what my father said to you, but it looks like we're stuck together. Just do what I, English, or Rebecca tell you, don't piss with Jon or Amstys, and keep out of the way until I can get rid of you. Got it?"

He did a mock bow, voice dripping sarcasm. "Oh yes, great scion of the Taggert hunting dynasty. I'll do what ever you wish of me. Of course, it's my life's goal just to be bossed around by you."

I wanted to work up some annoyance at the way he was speaking, but, to be honest, I couldn't really blame him.

"Just don't piss me off," I replied, "Or I'll feed you to English. He'd likely be just as happy to make a duster from your tail."

I just about had everything packed away again for the last part of our hike when I stumbled across the bright yellow portable radio that Jon had brought with him.

"Hey, Jon. Does this thing still work?"

He looked over at me, his tight, exacting, police standard actions becoming more apparent with each passing moment. "I would assume so, Sir. There is no reason it should not."

I rolled my eyes. "Jon, didn't we discuss the whole 'sir' thing?"

He took a step towards me, voice lowering as he glanced at Renald and the other hunters milling around us. "Sir, Tommy, we're returning to the city. Or whatever is left of it. And it would not be... *appropriate* for me to address you in any other way." He pointed a thumb to the hunters. "They must treat their alpha and beta with proper respect when in public, I must do the same."

I raised a hand to my forehead. "But, Jon, I'm not an alpha."

He gave me a sidelong glance. "But you have been named the interim mayor by commissioner Sayer."

"Oh yeah. I'd forgotten about that." I'd been trying hard, really, really hard to forget about that.

Jon took the radio from me and punched the single button on the transceiver as he spoke into the small mic. His voice had returned to the perfect clip that was so representative of the service. It was even enough to make a few of the hunters turn and realize that they had one of the police among them.

"This is Constable Oaks reporting in. Requesting a status update. Over."

There was nothing but static on the line for a moment. Then a voice came on in the background, almost washed out. I couldn't make out a word it was saying, but it spoke quickly, rattling off what sounded like instructions.

"I repeat, this is Constable Oaks reporting in." He paused for a moment and glanced at me before adding, "I have Tommy Taggert with me."

There was a moments pause where only static came across, then it died away with a whine. It sounded like someone was tuning into our radio. The voice was clearer when it came again.

"This is dispatch. Please relay your code word and current status."

Jon glanced at me again before turning his back to me and taking a few steps away. He spoke now in a whisper, but I could still make out his voice.

"Code Janus, status successful."

I looked over at English, he's had his ears perked as well.

The radio crackled again, "Understood, Constable Oaks. You are advised to remain at your position. Do not enter the city. We have an unstable situation and it is not advised that you bring your cargo in."

Okay... did they just refer to me as *cargo*?

I heard English laugh. Yep. I was now officially cargo.

I walked up behind Jon, the dog nearly leapt out of his pelt when I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Tell them we're coming into help, Jon. I'm tired of waiting out here."

He relayed the message through the radio, but all we got back was, "That is not advised. We cannot guarantee your safety."

It was less than an hour later that we began to see the towers of V-town poke above the trees. There were fewer than there should be.

V-town was one of the only remaining cities on the Pacific coast, one of the last bastions of civilization after the Cataclysm. But all I saw spiraling overhead were a handful of cracked and listing towers.

The quake had been less than two days ago. I could still hear screaming before we finally broke from the trees.

I hardly even noticed as the forest fell behind me only to be replaced by cracked asphalt under my claws. I was running now, and I could hear everyone, even Renald, doing the same behind me.

No more than a block into the city we came across the first of the collapsed towers. There were people working in the debris, but not nearly enough for the number of voices I heard from beneath the rubble.

And, oh gods, I could see body parts here and there. There was an arm without an owner off to one side and a foot without a leg to the other.

My pack fell to the ground as I ran to the nearest group of people, they were shifting rubble, pulling a woman from the wreckage and laying her on a makeshift stretcher.

"What's going on? How can I help?" They startled slightly when I came up to them.

They did react quickly, I'll give them that. The older one, a horse of some breed, simply pointed at the ground. "You can start digging. My family's still under there." Then he nodded at the body that now lay before us. "Or, if you know how, you can tend to the wounded. The General Hospital collapsed and all the triage camps are filled to overflowing."

I pointed back towards Jon behind me. "He should know first aid."

Less than a minute later English, Amstys, Renald, and I were digging through the rubble. Jon and Rebecca were tending to those we dragged out alive. Most of those we found we could no more than lay out and close their eyes.

I was hot and sweaty, my fur sticking down to me as I worked under the glaring noonday sun. English and Amstys were beside me, the three of us heaving chunks of rubble away to try and get at those beneath. We must have looked like ghosts by now, the dust and powder from the building having coated us a pale white.

I only looked up when I heard Rebecca yelling at someone. "Hey, get away from the bodies!"

Peering over, I could see a group of a half dozen people, lizards and cats mostly, picking through the dead bodies that we'd pulled out.

One of them, a skinny frilled lizard of some sort, just snorted in our direction and went back to stripping the corpse before him.

"Hey!" I was still covered in dust, my muscles aching as I walked up to him. "She said to back off. If you want to help, fine. But we don't need any corpse robbers here."

He looked up at me, slitted yellow eyes bright. His voice was dry and raspy when he spoke. "Piss off, fido. You want to dig 'em up, that's fine. But keep out of our way."

"I said get away from the bodies." I took a step forward now, my hackles raising. I could hear a growl, but it wasn't from me. It was from English who stood no more than a step behind.

The lizard looked up, his own group arraying behind him. "What, do we need to teach you strays a lesson? The city's gone to hell in a hand-basket and you're worried about us shuffling through a stiff's clothes?"

It wasn't the lizard that leapt towards us first, but a mangy dog of some description. The mutt was nothing but skin and bones, seemingly no more than a skeleton. If I hadn't seen him standing calmly a moment before I would have almost thought the glimmer in his eyes was rabies.

I braced, ready for his body to slam into me, but he never got that far.

It was Renald who met him in mid air. The mutt had moved fast, but Renald was far quicker. They went spiralling off to one side, rolling in the rocks and debris, teeth snapping.

I had only a moment to watch before the lizard I'd been talking to took his place, jumping at me.

The dog had been a concern, looking like he was ready for a fight, but the lizard... well, he was about as intimidating as a hundred and ten pound neon green coat rack.

Even when he pulled a blade from his jacket I couldn't even work up much of a concern.

Now that I looked at them more closely, they were all like this. Skinny. They were all little more than skin and bones, padded up where they could with jackets and clothing, they looked as malnourished as the kids you see on posters for food programs.

I will have to give it to the kid though, at least he knew how to use his knife. It was a switchblade of some sort, it made a clear slide-click when it popped up. A stabbing weapon, he didn't bother to wave it back and forth like a knife, he simply dove towards me.

One part of me wanted to leap forward, to meet him in the middle and rip that blade from his hand with my claws, but... but I couldn't. I could see a small and scared kid in there. Someone who was looking for nothing more than food to survive the day. He'd grown up in a city that had always been able to provide for him, and now there was almost nothing left. He couldn't be the only one, there had to be thousands of people like him, just trying to get from day to day until their lives returned to normal.

I danced back as he thrust the blade towards me. Reaching out, I tried to pull the weapon from his fingers, but he was too fast.

Backing away, I lured him from the bodies. It wasn't as easy as it sounds. The ground beneath us was nothing but rubble and debris, not exactly the greatest footing at the best of times, and less so when you're trying to avoid becoming a shish kabob.

I'd reversed up a small rise, but a touch too late I noticed there wasn't much of a way down. The fall wasn't far, only about four feet, but it was enough to throw me off balance and send me to the ground on my back.

From somewhere in the distance I could hear Rebecca yelling. Too bad I couldn't make out what.

I didn't even have time to get back on my feet before green-boy was upon me. I could hardly move with the ground shifting beneath me. His blade scored a hit on my leg. Right below my scar from where I'd almost managed to get it ripped off.

The blade wasn't all that sharp, but he had enough force behind it to drive it into my flesh until I heard it *ka-chunk* as it met bone. I say 'heard' because the pain hadn't quite reached me yet. It did a

heartbeat later.

I think that just about everyone in a three block radius heard me start swearing then.

Oh ye gods, oh ye flipping gods that *hurt*!

I'd never realized how tender it was there. I was born with regeneration, but even that can only do so much with a wound like what I'd taken back on the Diamond Dice.

The little bugger must have noticed my reaction to his jab. He twisted the blade.

Okay, I'm not ashamed to say it, I screamed. I did get even though, I socked him in the chin hard enough that my fist stung.

The lizard ended up a good few meters away, as flat out on the ground as I was. And he'd left his knife sticking out of in my leg.

Wonderful. This was *not* going to be fun. I considered leaving the blade in place for a moment, but realized that it would only hurt more when I had to start walking.

One more scream later and I'd yanked the knife free. I threw it away into the rubble, drops of blood spinning off it as it flew.

I had to reach out and grab some standing stones to lever myself to my feet now. My regeneration was good, but I was still leaking blood from my leg, and it would be some time before I'd be able to walk properly again.

I'd only just moved fast enough, the lizard was on his feet too.

Gods, I should have let him go. I really should have, but I was seeing red at the edges of my vision now. He was mine.

It took everything I had, but I slowly began limping towards him. His eyes widened as I closed the distance.

He didn't even say a single word as he turned and ran, deeper into the city.

I must have socked him a good one, he was moving even slower than I.

Off and shambling after him, it felt like someone was grinding mill grit into my hip with every step.

I couldn't even be bothered to lurch the last few steps, a quick one-legged jump and my black claws just snagged the hem of his pant leg.

It was him who was doing the screaming now. I had barely even touched him, yet he was already screaming like I was pulling his spleen out through his nose.

I was just about ready to give him a good thwacking in return for wound he'd given me when the lights went out.

Okay, that's not quite it, but that's sure what it felt like.

One moment he was in my grasp, screaming like an opera singer, the next I was laying on the ground clutching my head and feeling like someone had decided to play la-la-bumba on my skull.

I couldn't even raise myself above the rubble now, but I could recognize the barked voices of police dogs.

Wohoo, the cavalry has arrived.

I was about to try and pull myself off the ground when I got another thwack to the back of the skull.

"I told you to stay down, citizen." The hit was lighter this time, but it still left me seeing stars.

Now I could feel the weight of the dog kneeling on my back. He wasn't being gentle, but, then again, he wasn't trying to crack my spine in two either. The typical by the book of the V-town police department.

Wait a minute, where the heck was Jon?

"... you are already aware that looting the corpse of the dead is an offence. You are already

aware that public brawling is an offence. You are already aware that V-town is currently in a state of emergency..."

He went on and on. I assumed he was reading me my rights or something like that, but, to be honest, my brain was still too scattered to make sense of it.

The one thing I did notice was the click the cuffs made when he cinched them around my wrists.

Oh bugger.

"Just wait a second..." I was talking fast now, trying to think my way out of this.

"Citizen, you have the right to remain silent. If you choose to make a commotion I will have to mussel you."

"What!? Wait, just--"

"That was your last warning, citizen."

I didn't even get the chance to tell him my name. He moved faster than I ever expected. Snapping a band off his belt, the dog wrapped it around my mussel, looped it over the back of my head and hooked it in place.

It was hard black leather, and it kept my mouth firmly *shut*.

I hadn't been about to start cursing the mongrel cop before, but I would have now if I'd just been able to get my lips far enough apart to form the words.

Where in the name of all the gods was Jon? He was a cop, he should be able to get me out of this with a snap of his claws.

At least I wasn't the only one being rounded up. There were a dozen people in cuffs and shackles just like me, none of them I recognized.

Gods, at one point I would have sworn I heard Rebecca calling my name, but I couldn't see her, and this bloody mussel stopped me from doing anything more than whimpering.

They had us together like nothing so much as a chain gang. By the end there were a dozen cops, and a couple dozen of us. They gave a quick bat of their batons every time someone stepped out of line. I'd already gotten my fair share of whacks from those, thanks. I just did my best to stay in the center of the group and keep my head down.

Not that it was all that easy.

I could hardly keep my eyes in my skull. I'd been expecting V-town to be bad, but this was almost unbelievable.

Every third building was either torched from the riots or collapsing from the quake. The roads were all chewed up so bad as to nearly be unwalkable and half the people we saw on the street looked like they were homeless.

We crossed one of what I would only guess were the triage camps. They were little more than clear spots on ground where the wounded and dying were put out to lie. I could see doctors and nurses running from one person to the next, but I doubt they were doing much good.

The walk downtown shouldn't have taken more than an hour, but with the city the way it was mid afternoon by the time we got there.

The police headquarters was an imposing structure at the best of times. Taking up a whole city block, the three story, square, red brick structure was built like a fortress. And it was the only building I'd yet seen that seemed to not have taken even the slightest damage.

Okay, strike that. The small front doors, the only visible entrance, looked to have gone through a hard time. There were burn marks and gashes across them. A team of police dogs were replacing them even as we walked through.

I could remember the first time I'd been here. Even then, on a normal day, the police presence around the building had been stifling, but now there seemed to be a cop literally every couple of meters around the building.

Stepping through the front doors, we didn't even pause for breath in the small receiving room but rather were marched right on through.

My heart began to race when I thought about the possibility of being taken back into the basement again and locked away in one of their 'special' cells.

Thankfully, we were simply slotted into a holding pen in a large room a few doors back.

The room was just short of huge, a good twenty meters to a wall. There were no windows, and only a single door -- the one we'd come through.

Cutting the space up into a half dozen holding pens, there were simple bars that ran from floor to ceiling. And every one of the pens was filled to overflowing.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I'd been dragged in here, but this looked more like a line at the supermarket than a bunch of rough and tough law breakers. There were people here who looked more at home behind an accounting desk or checkout counter than iron bars.

It was obvious that things were well past the capacity they'd been designed for, folks were pressed up against the bars just to make room, and they never even removed our handcuffs.

The cop who had originally nabbed me was back behind me now. Or at least I thought it was him. The vast majority of police officers were dogs, and most of them were German Shepherd. All GSDs look alike to me, they all looked like Jon.

"This way, citizen." The dog grasped me by the shoulder and led me towards one of the cages. It looked to be a touch emptier than the others, but they were all packed full.

I could hear people shouting, pleading to get out, crying, but the officers seemed to do their best to ignore them. I couldn't tell you for sure, but it looked like the stress must be wearing at even V-town's finest. The institutional mask that they all wore seemed a little thin.

A good half dozen people must have tried to escape when they stuffed me in the holding pen. Or I think they were trying to escape, either that or they were just being pressed out of the cell by the sheer force of people behind them.

I slowly worked my way through the mass of bodies around me. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to who they'd stuffed in here. There were men, women, teenagers and folks old enough to be greyer than my father. We were all pressed in here together with our hands cuffed behind our backs.

Gods but this place stank. I don't think they'd ever intended the holding cells to keep people for this long. They hadn't included any toilets.

The bars that separated the cells were shared between pens. I was pressed up against the bars on one side and the folks in the next pen were up against me.

It took me a few moments, but I recognized the large red skull of Max. He'd been my friend and neighbour back when I'd worked at KDP.

"Max!" I tried to shout over the din of people around us. To be honest, I'm not sure it did much good. My voice seemed to be swallowed up as soon as I opened my mouth.

He must have better hearing than I'd given him credit for. He turned a moment later. I would have waved to get his attention if I hadn't been cuffed. All I could do was jump.

"Tommy!" He shouldered his way towards me until he was standing on the other side of the bars. "Gods, man, it's good to see a friendly face."

I couldn't help but smile. It had to have been at least six months since I'd last seen him... that had been just right when the riots were first starting.

"Max, you okay? What's going on? I just got into the city and they hauled me here."

His face looked weathered, like he was about ready to breakdown. "Gods, Tommy. It feels like the world is coming to an end."

Max had been the one running the radio while I'd been out of town, he'd been my lifeline to what was going on.

"It almost looked like we were getting things under control, Tommy. Then the hunters stormed in one day and made off with your parents. Just like that. No words, just growls and snarls as they carried them off. The next day the quake hit."

"How did you get in here, Max? I thought you were with Storm Front when they merged with the police."

He gave me an uneasy half-grin. "I was. I couldn't stay here after the quake, I had to go back to my apartment and see if it was still standing. Kate and I," He paused for a moment, drawing in a breath, "We went back for a look, but there's almost nothing left of the building. We were digging through the rubble when a patrol came. They accused us of looting and dragged us both in here. That was yesterday. I don't even know where Kate is anymore. Gods, Tommy, what's happening? They're pulling people off the street if you so much as look at them funny. I tried to tell them that I was working the radio for them but they won't listen."

I wanted to answer, but I really didn't know what to say.

I hadn't any idea how long I was in there. There were no windows, and the lights never changed. All I knew was that every so often the police would come by and stuff a few more people into the holding cells. They never let anyone go.

Someone must have noticed the stench. They did finally come by with some small portable toilets, then later food and water.

Now, keeping in mind that pretty much every single one of us in were wolves, cats, lizards or daemons like Max, but I'd never really thought of us as *animals*. The moment there was food and water... well, that opinion changed.

I can't say that I really blamed them. I hadn't been in here long compared to some people, but seeing the rush once there were handouts... I was just amazed the people weren't killed.

Even then they still didn't remove anyone's cuffs. That was an interesting sight, watching a couple hundred people try to drink with their hands cuffed behind their backs.

I heard a slight commotion among the guards sometime later. I was pressed too far in the back to see a thing, but something was happening.

One of the officers began shouting a few moments later, but I couldn't make him out over the din. They must have noticed, for a few seconds later all the officers in the room began shouting in unison, almost as if they were singing.

It was my name.

This was either really good or really, really bad.

"Over here!" I shouted back, for all the good it did me.

I began muscling my way towards the front of the pen now. It was slow going, but I made it there eventually.

The one thing that did make me laugh was there seemed to be at least one person from each holding cell that was pushing their way towards the front, yelling, "I'm Tommy Taggart!"

One of the German Shepherd police dogs was walking from cell to cell, checking the people who claimed to be me. It wasn't until he got to my pen that he nodded at the other dog who was holding the keys.

"Step forward, Sir. We need you to stand in front of the door." The officer's voice was calm,

clipped, and neutral.

"Hey! Why does he get out!"

"Yeah! We've been in here longer!" voices called from around me.

"You will all be processed in due time," the dog replied.

It did little good. The crowd had been frightened but calm before. Now that nervous fear was turning to anger.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to stand in front of the door *right now*." His neutral voice had slipped a measure as his eyes watched the press of people behind me.

No sooner had I gotten to the entrance of the cell than the other dog yanked it open. Two more dogs reached through and pulled me out as the door clicked back closed so fast it almost caught my tail.

It was a good thing that the wound in my hip had healed over. No sooner was I out than two dogs seized me by the elbows and began double timing me out of the room, following the one who had identified me.

It was a good thing they were moving so fast, but even then it was the longest walk of my life. I could feel the eyes of all the people who were still trapped in the holding pens. Many of them were pressing their hands through the bars, grasping at me. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget their cries of 'Help us!'

And I could still see Max, pressed in the back towards the wall. Just watching me.

Out of the holding cell and down a half dozen corridors, the dog in the lead eventually opened a door to a nondescript break room of some sort.

"Place him in here." The clip on the dog's voice was so tight that I was surprised he didn't bite off his tongue.

"Are you sure, Constable? It's against standard protocol to leave a single officer alone with an suspect."

"He's not a suspect anymore," the lead dog replied. "The charges against him have been dropped."

I couldn't see the faces of the dogs who held me, but I could feel them tilt their heads to the side in almost perfect unison.

"Dropped the charges, Sir?" one of them asked. "I wasn't aware that the courts had been restarted."

"They haven't," the lead dog replied, his voice taking on an edge. "This is by special order of Commissioner Sayer."

"Understood."

As one they released me and filed out of the room. I was alone with the lead dog as he clicked the door closed behind him.

For a moment it was all I could do to stretch. I know it sounds silly, but that's the truth of the matter. I'd been holed up in that cell for so long that bloody well near every single one of my muscles had cramped.

And that was when I realized that the dogs had taken my cuffs with them when they'd left.

Now *that* was something to celebrate.

"It's good to see you again, Sir."

I'd almost forgotten that there was still one dog left in the room with me.

Turning slowly, I took a good look at him. He was the picture perfect image of a police officer. A German Shepherd dog in a precisely pressed uniform and an exact clip to his voice and manner.

In fact, he was a to perfect. All the other dogs I'd seen today were a little warn, a little rumped,

having been out working in their uniforms.

"Jon?"

He smiled.

"Sorry it took so long to retrieve you, Sir." He chuckled slightly.

I had to keep myself from wrapping my fingers around his brown furred neck and strangling the life out of him.

"Where in all the gods' names were you back there? They took me into custody and I didn't see hide or hair of you!"

His grin grew slightly. "Might I remind you, Sir, that it was your decision to get into a scuffle and attract the attention of the passing patrol. In any event, if I'd come to aid you in the field my credentials would have been refuted and I would have been in there right along side you."

Sighing, I sat down heavily in one of the plain wooden chairs that littered the room.

"I had to check in with the service," he continued. "Then meet with my Uncle Sayer, then find you. And might I say that locating you was no small task." He shook his head. "We have over one hundred holding cells in this building. You were in number eighty-seven. I trust you had a pleasant stay."

I just laid my head back and closed my eyes for a moment.

"Where's everyone else? Did they get arrested too?"

He shook his head. "No. You were the only one taken into custody. I was able to effect a retreat before anyone else was apprehended. They are waiting for you in one of the receiving rooms." He paused for a moment, glancing quickly over his shoulder to the closed door. "And I don't mind telling you, Tommy, that your new companion, the hunter..."

"Renald?"

"Yes, Mr. Renald, was uncharacteristically distraught about your disappearance."

I raised an eye ridge at that one. "Really? I would have just as well thought that he would be laughing all the way back to the hunter's camp if I got steamrolled."

He just shrugged. "It would appear not."

"Well," I struggled up from the chair, my muscles had already gone stiff from the time I'd spent in the cell, "I guess I shouldn't keep them waiting." I let my tongue hang out. "And I'll be more than happy to see Rebecca again after all this."

I wavered slightly on my feet, Jon wrapped one of his hands around my elbow, steadying me. His grip was a little tighter than it really needed to be...

"I'm sorry, Sir," His professional mask had slipped a small measure while we'd been talking, it was back in place now, "But I can't let you see them just yet."

I twisted slightly in his grip, turning to see his face. "What now, Jon? I thought you were on loan to me, anyway? Don't you have to take me where I want to go?"

Just the barest of grins slipped onto the dog's face. "I was on special assignment to you, Sir. That ended once I reported back in. But anyway," He began walking me forward out into the hall, never letting go of me, "I doubt that you'll have much issue with the situation. You have an appointment with Commissioner Sayer."

We worked our way through a countless number of near identical corridors, slowly climbing stairs here and there. Now and then I could see the occasional group of dogs working frantically to patch up some bit of damage to the building.

Figures, leave it to the police to worry about patching up their home fortress before actually going out to... oh, I don't know, *fix the city*.

We were up on the third floor now, the top level of the building. I'm pretty sure this is the flag floor, the one that houses the offices for all the top dogs, but it looked the same as all the others. I never was able to understand how the police were able to find their way around the inside of this maze. There were no signs anywhere, not even on the doors, and all the unadorned, whitewashed halls looked the same.

Stopping in front of a simple, unmarked door, Jon pushed it open without knocking. Within was a small reception area. There was another German Shepherd sitting at the desk here. For all I knew it could just as well be Jon's clone.

He glanced up without a word. One look at me and he disappeared through a door in the other end of the room.

"This should only be a moment, Sir," Jon said from behind me.

A second later the dog was back, he held the door to the inner office open for us.

I wasn't too sure what to expect. Last time I'd seen Sayer the man had been little more than a ghost, a scarecrow. The thin, sheet white Great Dane had looked like he'd only had days left to live, and that had been months ago.

The office, likely the top one in the entire building, was as empty and spartan as every other room. The only thing that gave any indication that there was anything important were the stacks upon stacks of neat papers. They filled every square inch of desk space, some piles over three feet tall, and all of them impeccably squared. I got the feeling that the dog planned to read each and every page, too.

The dog himself... well, it looked like it hadn't been a day since I'd last seen him. He was still pale as a sheet and thin as a ghost. He was propped up in a simple, unpadded wooden chair behind the desk, his grey eyes watching me keenly as I stepped into the room.

The moment we crossed the threshold I could feel Jon's grip drop from my arm. He stopped by the entrance, closing the door behind us and standing in front of it without a word.

There was a single chair before the old dog's desk. I took it.

I wasn't sure what to say for the longest time. I was half expecting Sayer to start the conversation, but he simply sat silently.

"It's nice to see you again, Sayer." I fumbled the words out. Every other time I'd met with the dog I'd had English with me. English and Sayer went way back, they'd bounty hunted together years ago. "I, uh, got a tour of your holding cells."

I wasn't quite sure what reaction I been expecting to get from that second line, but the dog pulled back like I'd slapped him.

"Yes..." His voice was only slightly above a whisper, but it was stronger than last time we'd met. "That was... unfortunate and unintentional. The officer who failed to recognize you has been reprimanded. You can expect a formal written apology within twenty-four hours."

I just shook my head. "Reprimanded? Apology? What in the names of the gods is going on here? You've got thousands of people down there! Who's apologizing to them?"

He didn't seem to understand what I was saying.

"It is unfortunate, Mr. Taggert. The service understands that, in your position as Mayor during a time of crisis such as this, we must allow you to take the prerogative, but you must understand that we need to follow our disaster contingency plans."

"Contingency plans?" I slammed my hands down on the desk before him. Hard. It sent papers flying off in all directions. The dog on the other side didn't even react. He simply watched me levelly with his watery grey eyes as though he'd predicted my every move. "It feels like you've got the entire city locked up down there for little more than jaywalking!"

"I can assure you, Mr. Taggert, that we have less than ten percent of the city's population

currently incarcerated." He said it so smoothly that it made my blood run cold. "And every single one of them has preformed an act that permits me to do exactly that under the city wide sate of emergency declaration. In fact," He paused for a moment, eyes focusing slightly, "I have little choice to do anything else. I did not write these plans. I am simply the senior surviving officer after the riots and quake. These plans were written by those who came before me, and I am bound to follow them. That is the law, and I will enforce it."

"The law!" I'd raised my hands now to wrap them around my head. I could feel the beginnings of a migraine coming on. "You really think that some paper pusher planned for something like this? I haven't even seen this 'contingency plan' of yours, but I can still tell you it's nothing more than best guesses and wishing thinking. People don't *plan* for things like this, they just pray they don't happen. You can plan for a power outage, you can plan for a fire, you can't *plan* for half the city in shambles!"

"None the less," His eyes hadn't flinched from me, "The plans are the law, and I am bound to follow them."

"Fine, fine." I let out a huff of breath, "You said I'm the interim mayor, right?" He nodded. A short and quick motion that almost seemed enough to snap his thin neck. "Then I want to change the law. Get those people out of there and focus on just the people who are causing the problem."

He gave me an odd look. "They're all causing a 'problem'. They all broke the law."

"You know what I mean, Sayer." He cocked his head slightly as I spoke. "You've got people locked up in there for nothing more than trying to salvage what's left of their homes."

"But they were breaking the law." He repeated flatly, like an automaton.

"Use your discretion!" I almost screamed it at him. "Your cops are smart." I pointed a thumb at Jon behind me. "Let them figure out who needs to be taken in and who's just trying to collect their lives."

"But... but... that would not guarantee rule of law. How can we maintain a society if everyone is not treated equally?"

I just about began whacking my head on the desk in front of him. "Things aren't exactly *normal* right now, Sayer. Just do the best you can." I levelled a glare at him. "The police service is here to serve the people, not the law. Start doing it."

With the way he looked at me one might have thought I'd grown a second head.

"What?! We... we can't operate without the laws!"

I rolled my eyes. "Not without the laws. Just do your best to keep the peace and let the city get itself back under control. You can do it, you've got some of the best people in the city."

He brightened slightly at that. "No, Sir, I've got *the* best dogs in the city. And, speaking of that," his gaze shifted to Jon standing behind me, "We still have the matter of your security detail to discuss." A pained look crossed his face. "Your parents who you asked us to protect... they..."

I cut in with a wave of my hand. "They're fine. I spoke to them on the way in to the city."

A palpable look of relief crossed the dog's face. "Very good. Will we, uh, be hearing from the hunters again soon? Our supplies of food are running low."

I couldn't keep a grin from my face. "Well, that depends on how soon you send an envoy out to open the lines of communication with them. I'm sure they'll be happy to come back into the city once they've heard you've released all the people in the holding cells."

A slight look of pain crossed the dog's face. "Yes. We'll get to that immediately. We'll have all the detainees processed within twenty-four hours."

I sat back, slumping in the chair. "Good. Now all I need is a hot meal and a hotter shower."

Even Sayer cracked a grin at that one.

"As you say, Mr. Taggert. I'll have a security detail escort you wherever you need to go.

Constable Oaks will, of course, be remaining here for a full debriefing."

My ears perked up at that. "No you don't. No, no, no. You are *not* going to be ordering another pack of dogs to start tagging along behind me like you did last time. You've got more important things to do with your men than send them chasing my tail." I levelled my eyes at the old dog. "Like getting people out of lock up."

"Very good, Sir." He gulped slightly. "But I can't leave you walking the streets of the city alone."

I didn't think I'd ever be saying this, but... "Fine. Then leave Jon with me." I grinned now, my lips raising. "But I want him reporting directly to me. No skulking around, Sayer. Jon can stay with me, but he works for *me* now."

The old dog's eyes widened slightly, and I could hear a strangled cough from Jon where he still stood behind me.

"This is... highly unusual. There will be a large amount of paperwork to be filled out to move him under your jurisdiction..."

I waved a hand. "That I'm sure you can do after we leave. Is it a deal, Sayer?"