

# The Diplomats



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## Chapter 3: The Boys are Back in Town

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I will give it to Sayer that he's good to his word. Leaving his office, Jon lead me back to the main floor. I could already see people trickling out from the holding cells.

Opening the door to another room, I expected Jon to be ushering me into the waiting area with Rebecca and English. Instead it was empty.

Turning back to Jon, he'd already closed the door behind himself, standing between me and the only exit.

"Sir..." He coughed, clearing his throat, "Tommy, was it real what you said back there with my uncle?"

I cocked my head at him. "Said what?"

He looked surprised, like it should be obvious. "That you want me to stay on with you. That you want me transferred out of the standard police force."

Oh. I'd never thought of it that way. Maybe Jon wasn't so hot for the idea -- I'd never bothered to ask him.

"If it's what you want, Jon. I just... well, kind of assumed that you'd want to keep on." I let my lips part in a grin. "It was either that or try my luck with a new dog, and I'm not much interested in that."

His tail curled slightly. Jon was one of the best actors I'd ever met -- likely better than even English -- I'd almost never seen him express his mood. His tail was normally so tightly held in check that it might as well be a prosthetic.

"I would very much appreciate the honour... Tommy. The mayor's private detail is one of the most prestigious positions available. It's normally held by at least four officers at any given time."

I just waved my hand in the air. "Fine, congratulations on the promotion. Just remember that this means that you're working for me, not Sayer." I paused to scratch at my chin with one claw. "And I wish folks would stop calling me 'mayor'. It's just Sayer who thinks that. It's not like I've done anything to earn it, or that I've even gotten any power."

Jon straightened, whatever small glimmer of the real man had been there slid away behind his mask again. "That is not the case, Sir. As you recall, City Hall was destroyed in the riots. As far as we know all of the top government officials are dead. Commissioner Sayer is the ranking official at the

moment, and he has jurisdiction to appoint an interim mayor until the state of emergency has passed. He has, in his wisdom, selected you."

I just rolled my eyes. "The old dog thinks that just because I killed Vanderhoom and touched off the riots that I can be mayor? He's more decrepit than he looks. I've got no experience and no desire for the post. Sayer can do what he wants, but I'm out as soon as things stop collapsing."

"As you say, Sir." I could see a small sliver of a smile peek through his lips again. "But by that I assume that you've accepted the role until then?"

"Doesn't look like I've much choice," I replied. "The hunters have gone xenophobic with my father leading them, and the police have taken rule of the law to a whole new level. Am I the only one with even half a brain left?"

With a completely straight face Jon looked me in the eye and said, "You could always suggest Mr. English run things for a while."

Two heartbeats later the dog had to look away. Even I could hear him snicker.

Out of the room and down a couple more twists and turns of the hallway, Jon threw open another door. The room was bare of even the traditional spartan police decor, but Rebecca, English, Amstys and Renald were there.

I had to laugh when I saw Amstys. The huge wolf looked almost despondent. He was about the same size as English, but where the lion had spent much of his adult life in V-town, the wolf had never set foot in civilization. Amstys' black and grey form was folded up on one of the small chairs, scrunched in with the wood creaking beneath him. He looked up the instant the door opened. For a moment I thought it was going to be a race between him and Rebecca to see who could get to me first.

They both lost out to Renald.

I hadn't even seen him lurking on the side of the room. He'd reached me before the other two could even get out of their seats.

I was almost knocked off my feet as he slammed into me, sending us both to the floor.

"You're alive!" His voice was breathless, like he'd been predicting his own demise.

"Renald? Dude, get off me! Personal space, man!"

I practically had to fight the wolf away. He wouldn't back off until I finally growled at him. "Renald, what's your problem?"

He seemed to suddenly realize what he was doing and stepped back, tail to the ground. "I... well, I'm just glad you're alive... that's all."

English had still to get from his chair. His voice came across as an amused purr. "The woof's been on pins and needles ever since you disappeared, mate." He grinned, showing each and every one of his teeth. "I had to beat it out of him to get an answer." He looked over at Renald. "Spill it, mutt."

"It's well..." The tan wolf looked up at me, "If anything happens to you, alpha Griss will have me killed."

"What!/? We're talking about my father here."

He wouldn't meet my eyes. "He's already had two hunters killed for disobeying him. This is my last chance."

My brain didn't seem to want to click in. My father had *killed* two people? I knew that things worked differently in the hunting packs, civilization's laws tended to break down when you were out in the wild... but killing two people?

I felt Rebecca's hand on my shoulder a moment later. "You okay, Wolfy."

"Uh, yeah," I had to fight down the lump in my throat. I'd assumed that my dad had given Renald a good thrashing, but threatening his life? "Let's just get out of here."

English was out of his seat and ushering us through the door a moment later. "Sure, mate. Now, the million dollar question is: Where do you want to go?"

Oh yeah, I'd kind of forgotten about that.

"Anyone know if the apartment is still standing?"

English just chuckled, but it was Jon who spoke up.

"I took the liberty of checking the building inspection logs before I fetched you." He cleared his throat. "The report states that there is 'significant cosmetic damage, but the core structure is still sound'." He paused for a moment. "I also noticed that Commissioner Sayer has placed increased patrols in that area to deter looting."

I just about face palmed. Had he put cops on the beat in my neighbourhood just to try and keep my apartment safe? Of all thing things he could be doing with his men, he seemed to have an unhealthy obsession with keeping tabs on me.

"Fine." I'd just stepped through the front door of the police headquarters building now. It felt good to have the sun in my face again. "Let's get back there and plan our next step."

The walk to the apartment was long and gruelling. We had to detour about four times as we found streets impassable, choked with rubble or blocked off by people doing rescue efforts. There were a couple of times that patrols of police officers veered our way, but they backed off as soon as they saw Jon in his crisp new uniform.

I felt a pull to dive into the rescue efforts, but, to be honest, I was just short of walking dead on my feet.

Rather surprisingly my apartment block, Moreau hall, was still standing and seemed not so worse for ware. There were cracks up it's plaster, but the thing was still in one piece. Chock one up for the police and their inspection report.

The power was even on inside, though most of the lights were either burnt out or shattered. I guess someone must have gotten electricity back up and running.

Heh. I'd never even noticed it at police HQ, but their power and been up and running too. Electricity was just one of those things that you never realized you used so much of until you don't have it. Good thing the dams outside the city were still running.

None of us were stupid enough to try and take the elevator, so up the stairs we went.

I didn't see a single soul the whole time. I hadn't the slightest where all the other tenants had gone, but I had a sneaking suspicion that the police had been keeping them away. Hopefully they'd be returning before too much longer.

The third floor was much as I remembered it. There were a few cracks in the drywall and a few stains on the floor, but it was better than I had any right to expect.

My nose twitched as I walked. I could smell police dogs. They had been here. But, strangely enough, it didn't seem as though they'd entered the apartments themselves.

Once again I'd managed to lose my key to the door. This was becoming a habit.

I put by weight into it, but the door wouldn't budge. Gods, with the way my life went I should just replace the lock with something made out of Styrofoam.

"Step aside, mate." English picked me up by the shoulders. "Let an old hand take care of this."

The lion was about to set me down when Amstys stepped up to the door and kicked it in with a single fluid motion. The wood of the frame splintered as the door bounced against its stop.

The wolf just looked over to me. "What? You wanted the door open."

Things were more or less exactly the same as we'd left them when we departed for our trek

across the mountains, other than all the food in the fridge having gone green and hairy.

It was the most I could do to simply flop on the bed and pull Rebecca to my side. I hadn't the opportunity to sleep on anything soft in months. The sun was just beginning to set in the sky, but I was already out like a light.

The next morning came far sooner than I would have liked. Rebecca was still asleep beside me when I was awakened by the sounds of yelling on the street.

My blood ran cold for a moment as I sprang to the window, fearing that the riots had started again, but it was someone hawking fresh meat.

Meat? That meant the hunters had to be working again. Popping open the window, I peered down the street. There were people here and there, some of them were picking up rubble, others were prying the boards off shops and reopening.

I couldn't keep the silly grin from my face. Well, this was better than I'd ever expected.

Rebecca still hadn't awoken as I turned and snuck from the bedroom. Amstys and Renald had crashed out in the front room, and I could hear the sound of English's snores coming from across the hallway. Jon was nowhere to be seen.

Emerging out onto the street, I had to pick my way through the rubble to make it to the man who was shouting out his wares.

"How much for a side of venison?" I asked him.

"What ya got? Money ain't much good yet. Can you trade?"

I hadn't much with me, but I was able to make a deal for some of our camping supplies. A few minutes later I had about as much meat as I could carry and the merchant was walking off with a couple of our bed rolls.

Everybody was still asleep when I got back. Frankly, I'll take my meat raw, and I think most people will agree with me, but Rebecca had this odd fetish for cooked food.

I gave the little stove in my apartment a kick. It took a while, but it sputtered halfway back to life. I guess they must still be working on getting the gas back up and running.

As if on cue, English sauntered through the door. I'd left it open behind me. His eyes were a touch bloodshot and his mane looked like the world's biggest bed head, but it was obvious that he was as happy about having spent the night in a real bed as I was.

"Morning, mate." He took one look at the meat before tearing off a chunk nearly the size of my head. I swear that he took half of it down in one bite. He must have all but unhinged his jaw to be able to do that. "I see you're already out and providing for us mere mortals."

"Don't you get started." I waved a claw at him while I fought with the stove. I hadn't much experience working these things, and it was being even pickier than usual. "I don't care what Sayer has to say about this, I just want to get back to life as normal."

"Normal, mate?" He laughed, voice loud enough to make Amstys snort and roll over in his sleep. "Just look out the window, mate. Can you tell me *that* will ever be normal again?"

I just sighed. "You know what I mean, English. I don't want any more treks across the frozen mountains, no more fighting off she-demons, no more ghosts or magic machines. And especially no more race riots."

"Heh." He chuckled as he tore off another hunk of meat -- I'd just realized that I hadn't yet had a chance to get any for myself. "Well, mate, you might just get that wish. You notice that there isn't a single human among them? My money's on them all still being holed up in Horseshoe Bay."

Ah, gods. I hadn't thought about that. The humans had all been pushed out of the city when the riots had first begun. They could be dead for all I knew.

"Do you think they're okay..."

I trailed off as I saw Amstys' ears twitch. No more than a heartbeat later he was on his feet, stalking towards the door with a growl in his throat. A second later I heard the doorway to the stairwell open.

I could have told you they were police dog before I even saw them. The click of their claws came in perfect time as they marched down the hallway.

I couldn't say I was surprised when they stopped at my open apartment door and politely knocked.

Amstys was still there, barring their way and growling from deep in his gut.

"Down, boy, back!" I grabbed the huge wolf by the scruff of his neck and hauled him a few steps from the door. I could see English grinning from the corner of my eye.

Amstys looked about ready to take a chunk out of the two cops who stood before me, but had to content himself with glaring while I stood between them.

Neither of the cops were Jon, I could tell that much. They were both German Shepherds, but they were just different enough that I could tell them apart.

The only other thing I knew for sure was they were of higher rank than Jon. All the police uniforms are identical; Sayer, the top cop, was dressed the same as the dogs who walked the beat. The only difference between them were the small pips of rank that they had on their lapels.

Frankly, I had no clue what the different ranks were, but these two, by the amount of brass they were wearing, were closer to Sayer than Jon.

"Mr. Taggart, Sir." The two of them spoke and nodded to me in unison, as if of one mind.

I just leaned on the door frame and glared at them. "I thought I told Sayer that I didn't want a guard. What are you two doing here?"

They glanced at each other nervously before one of them spoke. "We're, uh, not guards, Sir. I'm Superintendent Able, and this is Superintendent Baker. We're here to provide you with your daily situation report and to return your instructions to Commissioner Sayer."

"What?" It was all I could to lean my head against the door frame.

From behind me I could hear English burst out laughing.

"Oh you shut up!" I called at him over my shoulder. He just laughed harder.

The dogs wouldn't go until they had 'briefed' me. Amstys didn't care for them much, but the wolf quieted down once I gave him some breakfast to occupy his mouth.

"I'm assuming that you would like the short version, Sir?" Able was seated at the kitchen table now. Both he and Baker had refused any meat.

"Yeah, that would be good." Sitting across from them, I was gnawing away at a tough piece of what was left of the venison I'd bought. I'd been too slow at getting to it and was left with what no one else had wanted.

"Very well, Sir." The dog nodded at me, "The orders you gave yesterday have been carried out, all the citizens in the holding cells have been released save for those accused of serious crimes. We used our discretion."

"Good, good." I was only half listening to them as I gnawed away.

"The release was in exchange for signed agreements that they would donate one fifth of their time to the municipal reconstruction project, of course."

"Huh?" I almost dropped the meat in my hands. From beside me I could feel Rebecca looking up from her own meal.

The dog stopped for a moment. "We were under the impression that you were already aware of

that..."

"Fine, fine. Discretion. I'm going to have to have a talk with Sayer about that." Was all I could get out though gritted teeth.

I was about to break into a tirade about the difference between 'discretion' and 'forced labour' when Amstys perked up again behind me, a fresh growl in his throat.

"What is it now?" I lowered my head to the table. "More of you're police dogs to come give me a migraine?"

I could just see the two dogs exchange a glance. "No, Sir," began Able. "The force is under strict orders to respect your privacy."

The footsteps that came down the hall this time most certainly didn't sound like the police. They were neither tight and exacting nor in perfect time.

"What a dump," one of the voices muttered from outside my open door, "What room is he supposed to be in anyway?"

I recognized that voice. It was... it was...

A dark furred bull strode abruptly into the room.

It was Hayfair. My old boss from KDP.

You've got to be kidding me. You've got to be freaking kidding me. I just about burst out laughing.

The bull had a few extra scars and grey hairs on his face, but he looked almost exactly the same as he had when I'd last seen him a year ago. When I'd threatened to kill him and he'd fired me.

Behind him was Jameswell, the same cat I'd last seen him with.

I was at a loss for words. The bull and cat simply waltzed into my apartment like they owned the place. Not even Able or Baker said a thing.

Amstys sat in the corner of the room, his growl slowly growing in volume.

"You." Hayfair pointed at Able, "We heard the new mayor is here. Where is he?" His manner was not that of a humble question that one might ask another person, but like he was addressing in inferior.

The way he'd used to talk to me when I'd worked for him.

I did have to give it to the cops. They turned to face the men as one, raising from where they sat to place themselves between me and the interlopers.

The police weren't aggressive, not as such, but you could see in there every motion that they were as ready to spring as Amstys was. Or Renald for that matter.

"Do you have an appointment with the mayor?" Able said, his voice calm.

"I don't need an *appointment*," Hayfair snuffed. Beside him, Jamewell was grinning. "We're here as representatives of KDP. We're still the largest employer in the city."

"That may be so," now it was Baker speaking. They were so alike it was hard to tell them apart. "But *we* are currently meeting with the mayor. Unless that is," He paused for a moment, but didn't take his eyes from the two, "You would like to speak with them, Sir."

I could feel Hayfair's and Jameswell's eyes scan the room. They dismissed Amstys offhandedly, Renald and myself a moment later. I don't even think they so much as acknowledged Rebecca. That just left English.

Well, the lion was certainly looking like royal material. He'd managed to get himself cleaned up since we'd returned to town.

"Don't I know you?" It was Jameswell speaking now, his voice was as slimy as I remembered. "I've seen your face before... Weren't you a bounty hunter?"

The two police officers didn't move to to block him as Jameswell stepped up to take English's



hand.

"I'm sure we'll get along perfectly, Mr..." The cat continued.

English glanced my way for just an instant, his eyes mischievous. "You can just call me 'Sir'." His normally slightly nasal, British accent was replaced with a deep booming baritone that perfectly fit the stoic expression he now held.

It was all I could do to keep from laughing. The cat and bull were rambling on to English about something or other, but every few moments the lion would shift, posing like he was in a photo op.

"... So I'm sure you can understand, Mr. ... uh, Sir, that KDP is fully at your disposal. We had an excellent relationship with the previous administration, and we've been sent by the board of directors to ensure that we can work hand in glove with you."

"Unrmph." Was all they got from the lion as he melodramatically rubbed his chin.

"To start with," Hayfair cut in, "We'd just like to ensure that KDP employees have been, of course, exempted from this *reconstruction* plan of yours." The bull rolled his eyes. "You just can't expect that the company could ever allow its employees the time off to rebuild civic buildings. We are, obviously, working on contract for you anyway, so it just doesn't make sense."

"Contracts, yes..." came English's voice from deep within his chest.

I glanced over at Able and Baker who were still standing motionless as stone between me and Hayfair and Jameswell. Their training was too good, they had hardly moved, but I could see the telltale signs of their mouths all but hanging open.

"There is much that must be considered first," English's voice slid back in, smooth as syrup. "But I am not the one you need discuss it with."

Hayfair's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes, I'm sure you would prefer we go through your *underlings*, but KDP is the largest employer--"

English waved his hand, silencing them, "Yes, yes. I completely agree." His grin widened, becoming predatory. "But I am, as you say, an *underling*. You will have to speak with the mayor himself if you want anything done." I could hear a purr start in his chest as Hayfair's jaw dropped.

"But... I thought you were..."

English just shook his head slightly, slowly raising a finger to dramatically point in my direction.

If Hayfair's jaw had been open before, it practically fell from his face to clatter on the ground once he recognized me.

"You! You're..."

I couldn't keep a slight wag from my tail as I met his gaze. I guess this whole 'mayor' thing did have a few benefits.

"Hello again, grass-muncher." It took everything I had to keep an amused growl from my voice. "Remember me?"

"What are you playing at, Taggart?" Hayfair was just short of trying to leap over the kitchen table to get at me.

It took Jameswell a few more moments to realize who I was. It made sense, I'd only ever met him once before.

The cat laid his hand on Hayfair's shoulder, reining him in somewhat. "I'm sure Mr. Taggart here is a reasonable man. After all," He gave me an appraising glance, "He must have been selected as the new mayor for *some* reason." He paused for a moment, clearing his throat. "I believe we were discussing exempting KDP from the reconstruction program."

"Yes." I let out a breath. "By some archaic definition of 'discuss'."

He didn't even seem to notice what I'd said.

"Very good. The board of directors has determined that the restrictions placed on our time would make an unacceptable reduction in the corporation's profits. Not to mention," He turned up his nose slightly, "No small number of us in the management groups are expected, *ourselves*, to be involved in the effort. Without pay."

I couldn't keep my lips from raising. Though, to be honest, I couldn't tell you if it was in a smile or a snarl.

"So you'll call this whole silly thing void then?" Jameswell finished, a self satisfied smirk on his face.

I glanced over at English. He was grinning from ear to ear, loving this.

"Of course, Jameswell," I began, choosing my words carefully, "I'll make sure that KDP is released from its obligations..." Able and Baker's faces were falling now. "As soon as the project is complete and not a moment before."

I set my hands on the table before me, sorting the scraps of meat I'd held out between us. "Do you seriously expect me to release you from public service when we need you most?" I blew out a breath. "You said it yourselves, KDP is the largest employer in the entire city! If I released you it would take twice as long to rebuild. I don't care what this does to your profits, you can help us rebuild the same as everyone else."

Hayfair's face hardened as I spoke. "Listen here, you little runt," he began, "I don't care who you think you are--"

Amstys' growl cut through the room like a knife. "Do not threaten the young master." His voice was little more than a snarl, deep enough to feel in my bones.

"Master?" Hayfair's eye's almost bugged out. "Is that what you're playing at?" He spat, a glob of mucus falling to the floor in front of my toes. "You disgust me."

I couldn't hold back my laughter. "You're still as stupid as last time I met you, grass-muncher." I levelled a glare at him. "Get out of my home."

He took a step back in surprise. "Are you a fool, Taggart? You can't hope to run this city without the support of companies like KDP."

I just waved my hand in the air, dismissing him as I began gnawing on my haunch of meat again. "I don't plan to run the city, just keep it from imploding. I think we're done here."

"You'll regret this, Taggart." He looked at me suspiciously. "How did you become mayor anyway? I didn't vote for you."

I laughed again. "Good question." There was the sound of ripping flesh as I tore free of hunk of meat. "Let me know the answer when you find out, I know about as much as you do," I spoke through a mouthful of food.

Another growl from Amstys and they were on their way out a second later. Remind me that I *really* have to get my door fixed. I couldn't even slam it behind them.

"Are you sure that was a wise choice, Sir?" Superintendent Able had returned to his seat across from me, his expression guarded.

I rolled my eyes. "Probably not. But I don't expect to stay mayor for long anyway, just until a real one can be elected." I smiled, "They can suck it up and help rebuild. Sayer came up with the idea, didn't he, and I'm not about to nay say him." I tore another chunk of meat from the bones before me and tossed the rest of the stingy thing into the garbage. I was still hungry. "Okay, boys," I levelled my eyes at the two dogs, "I'm assuming that you came all the way out here to tell me more than 'everything's going great'. Out with it."

They sighed in unison. One of them pulled a stack of papers from a briefcase that I hadn't even noticed he'd been carrying.

"There is the matter of some paperwork and procedures you'll need to sign off, Sir..."  
From behind me I could hear English laughing.

It was almost a good week before I could get my nose outside the apartment again. I hadn't the slightest why they'd glomped on me so, but the police and civil service couldn't seem to so much as brush their own tails without me signing for it.

The cops weren't the only ones who liked me now. Everyone from the department of water and sewer to agriculture seemed to want a piece of my time. They kept cycling through my apartment to the point that I was seriously considering getting a revolving door installed.

At least the police had decided to punch up security a bit. I still didn't like having them around, but they did keep KDP from coming back after a couple of cops had taken up residence in the lobby.

The worst part was that it wasn't as though I was actually doing much. It would have felt better if I'd known I was making a difference, but all the stuff I signed off on was about the equivalent of 'invoke the disaster recovery plan and try to stop things from catching fire'. Well, okay, for the water and sewer people it was more like 'try to stop things from flooding'.

I hadn't the slightest where English had scuttered off to. He'd spent the first day laughing at me, then disappeared when I wasn't looking. Amstys seemed to be slowly transforming into nothing more than a guard dog, and Renald had managed to hide himself in a corner and do as close as he could to nothing at all.

Rebecca was the only one who was doing me the least good, and she didn't look happy about it. With each new person who tried to batter their way in she was there, holding them back and helping me sort out who really needed to talk to me vs. who was just trying to get some face time.

I would have been swamped if not for Rebecca, but every day she seemed to slowly drift further and further from me. We barely said anything at night, the both of us just falling asleep, dead tired after yet another day that never seemed to end.

She was in my arms now, the night having fallen and the endless line of people having been beaten back.

"You okay, babe?" I whispered, my lips no more than a hair from her ear.

She murmured slightly, almost as if asleep before answering. "What happened, Wolfy? What are we doing here?"

I really wish I had an answer to that.

"It's like we're not doing anything at all," she continued. "We've just been caught up in the machine, like were cogs spinning in place and not getting anywhere."

I wrapped my arms more tightly around her, pulling her to my chest. Her naked skin was warm to the touch.

"I know, Babe." I let my lips raise slightly as I kissed the back of her neck. "You're always right, eh?" She giggled slightly. "What do you say we tell all these folks to stuff it tomorrow and go see if we can get a look at what's going on in the real world?"

She wriggled slightly, turning over to face me. "Are you serious, Tommy?"

I rolled my eyes. "Why not? You just said that we're not doing anything of true value here. Let's go get our feet on the ground again. I wasn't born for this," I reached over to lick her nose, "And I doubt you were either."

Able and Baker returned the next morning with a fresh briefcase of papers to sign. I could have framed their expressions when I told them to bugger off.

"Sir?" Able's eyes were wide as he watched me work my way through my breakfast, another

plate of venison. This time I'd been able to buy it from a proper store.

"You heard me, Able. Get someone else to sign your papers. I'm out for the day."

He almost looked like he was going to panic. "But, Sir, we need the authorizations..."

I didn't even bother to look his way. "I'm the boss here, right?" I could hear him murmur an affirmative. "Fine." I waved a hand in his and Baker's direction. "You two have authorization to sign on my behalf. Do what you think I would." I grinned slightly, "You're smart people, you can likely make better decisions than I. It's not like I even know what I'm signing half the time."

"But, Sir, what about all the people waiting to speak to you?"

I laughed. "They can speak to *you*, or whoever else we have left in the government. Anyone who wants to talk to me personally can wait. I'm closed."

I watched the dogs nod in perfect unison.

"And one more thing," I added, "Where's Jon? He's supposed to be my personal attache, where's he gone?"

Able cleared his throat nervously. "He's, um, well, Sir..."

Baker cut in, "He's been managing the security of the building."

"Fine," I waved a hand, dismissing them, "The two of you can handle the signing. There's two of you, so it shouldn't take long. And send Jon up here while you're on your way out."

They were gone a moment later.

I looked over at Rebecca. "Care for a walk, babe?"

She smiled as I took her hand and helped her to her feet.

My mood fell a moment later as Amstys and Renald were at our shoulders.

"No." I turned, waving a finger at them. "Not you two. You're staying here."

"What?"

"Young master?"

I pushed them back, away from the door before they could get anything more out.

"That's an order." I tapped Amstys on the nose as I gave Renald a glare. "We'll have Jon with us, we'll be fine."

"But, but, young master..." Amstys looked like he was on the edge of tears.

I just smiled at him while I gave him a pat on the shoulder. "You can stay here and keep Renald company, big guy." The tan wolf scowled at me for that one. "And," I was probably going to regret this, "You're welcome to anything in the fridge."

That lightened his mood slightly.

Jon met Rebecca and I before we'd even made it to the stairs. The power had been steady, but I still didn't trust the elevator.

"Can't we just get away by ourselves?" Rebecca whispered into my ear.

I just laughed under my breath. "With our luck, someone would have a heart attack if we tried to slip off alone." I eyed her critically, "You're ferocious, for sure, but I'm not convinced you'd make much of a bodyguard."

She bopped in the nose with one of her fingers for that comment.

Jon stood in front of us now, holding the stairwell door open.

"Good morning, Sir, ma'am." He bowed his head slightly. His uniform was so sharply pressed around him that I could almost hear it creak. "I'm under the impression that you're looking for a tour of the city," He paused for a moment and winked at us, "To view your reconstruction efforts first hand."

I just sighed. "Yeah, sure. That's it." I glanced back at him while we worked our way down the stairs. "Say, Jon, any chance you could ditch the uniform? I was kinda trying to leave this whole

'mayor' thing behind for a while, and having you in uniform attracts a little too much attention."

He paused for a moment on the stairs behind me. "That can be arranged... Tommy." His mouth dropped open in a grin. "If you'll be so kind as to wait for me on the main floor before stepping out into the lobby." He turned and was out of sight before I could say another word.

"He's not going to be back in the chains and leather that I first saw him in, is he?" Rebecca sounded almost worried.

The first time we'd met Jon he'd been assigned by the police force to escort English and I as we'd tracked down the human minority. Apparently Jon's definition of 'undercover' was a little more extreme than most. He'd looked like a whipped puppy. If he dressed up like that again we'd be attracting even more attention than if he was in uniform.

Down on the main floor, I could hear a commotion outside as we waited in the stairwell. I couldn't make out what was going on, it must just be construction. I hadn't been able to hear it from my apartment as I was on the other side of the building.

Jon was back with us a moment later. He looked... normal.

Normal was not a word I would often use to describe Jon. The dog was a good man and a trusted friend, but I'd never thought of him as *normal*.

All he wore now was a simple closed front forest green vest over his brown and black fur. The pockets in the vest bulged just enough to make me wonder what he might have concealed in there.

When I'd first met the dog he'd had a dozen tattoos cut into his pelt, they were all but invisible now. He looked like anyone else I might expect to meet on the street.

Even his voice had changed. It wasn't nearly as dramatic as what English was wont to do, but he'd managed to file the edges from his normal police clip when he spoke.

"Tommy, Rebecca." It felt odd to hear him refer to us by our first names for a change. "We can depart whenever you wish." He paused for a moment, peering out the stairwell door towards the front entrance. "Though I might suggest that we exit through the rear of the building."

I blinked at him. "Why, whats going on?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes. "It might be best if I let you see it for yourselves."

He lead us through the hallways of the apartment building to a small rear door that I'd never even knew existed. It dumped us out into a cramped alleyway. I noticed that there were two police dogs standing guard at the door. They eyed Jon until he flipped open one of the pouches on his vest to display a badge.

Coming out of the alley, Rebecca in hand and Jon in tow, I made a lazy circle back towards the front of the building.

Half the street was choked with protesters carrying signs and shouting slogans.

I was about to suggest to Rebecca that she slide back into her cat disguise, these could be more anti-human protesters for all we knew. She already had.

Tapping a hand on Jon's shoulder, I tugged him into a small niche in a building across the way.

"What in all the gods' names is going on here?"

He could only just meet my eyes when he responded.

"It's... well, it you, Sir."

"What?" I had to fight to keep my voice down.

"They appeared five days ago. They're protesting your position as mayor."

Before he could say another word I'd gently pushed Rebecca into his arms and turned to walk back out onto the street. "Stay here," I hissed.

I was clad in nothing more than my brown and cream pelt, not a single scrap of clothing upon me, nothing to show my so-called position of 'mayor'.

In only a few strides I'd joined up with the crowd. They didn't seem overly organized, I couldn't even make out what was going on. There was about five dozen people here, of all species and creeds, and they were working their way through three or four different chants at the same time.

The mob was bumping up against the front doors of the apartment building, but there were a dozen police dogs there, big ones, who were keeping them back and in order.

Fighting my way to the front, it took a few moments before I was able to work out the signs that were scrawled across their placards.

At least a third, possibly half, of all the people in V-town were illiterate, so it wasn't much of a surprise that the signs were a challenge to make out.

'We want free vote'

'Old government was better'

And, rather eloquently, 'Flay the wolf, we won't be run like a pack'

I was starting to feel a touch light headed now. These people were here because of *me*? I hadn't even done anything of note. All I'd been able to do was sign a few papers saying that we should begin the reconstruction and let folks out of jail!

I was milling my way back through the crowd, rather pleased with myself that no one seemed to be able to recognize me, when I noticed one of the protesters pausing for a break, sitting leaned up against the side of a building. The sign next to him read: 'No dictators'.

I fell heavily to sit beside the feline. He was a cat of some sort.

"Hey." I nodded to him.

He looked over at me, yellow eyes tired but friendly. "Hey." He angled his ears towards the group. "You here for the rally too?"

I nodded. "Something like that. I heard about it from a couple streets over and came to take a peek."

He looked surprised. "Oh. So you're not on the clock?"

"The clock?" I couldn't keep the suspicion from my voice.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Aren't you with KDP? They're paying us overtime to come on over here after our shifts and carry the picket signs. Not too sure what it's for, but any money is good after all this." He stretched his back, I could hear his spine pop. "Gods, it's murder after a day's work, then the hours moving rubble around, but I can barely put food out for the kids with how much the prices have gone up."

I forced a smile to my lips. "Yeah, ain't that the truth. But no clue what the whole deal is?"

He shrugged. "Who knows. The high mucky mucks at the 'P are always riled up over something or other. It's the first time I've ever heard of them pulling something like this, but it's none of my concern. They told us that the new mayor is bad for business and that he stole the job. That's all we need to write up some signs." He yawned. "Not that it matters much anyhow. As long as we're here and we're loud, that's all it seems to take to get the cop's blood pressure up." He grinned. "Who cares about the mayor, I'm just enjoying the chance to square one away with the mongrels without them having a chance to fight back."

"Anyway," He continued, cracking his back again, "I better get back on it, protesters don't get coffee breaks." He pointed a thumb to the sign. "Do you want to carry the placard for a while? The bloody thing's heavy."

I held my hands up in front of me. "Uh, no. That's okay. I gotta get back to work too."

He shrugged. "So be it. I'm not sure I'd be out here either if I wasn't getting the kick for it."

I was off and back with Rebecca and Jon a moment later. None of the 'protesters' even payed us

the slightest bit of mind.

Jon didn't say a word as I returned, but Rebecca just sort of grabbed me by the tongue.

"Spill it, Wolfy. What's going on over there?"

I couldn't keep the scowl from my face. "You remember the two jerks I kicked out a week ago? The ones from KDP?" She shook her head. "Anyway, it looks like it wasn't the greatest idea. The whole thing is staged. They're payrolling the people to march around over there and shout."

"What?" Jon's jaw nearly hit the concrete.

I glanced over at him. "Didn't you know? They were more than happy to tell me when I asked."

He shook his head. "We don't open dialogues with protesters." He looked down at the ground for a moment. "It's not part of procedure. We simply contain, direct, and disperse them."

"A whole week, and you didn't even try to figure out what they were protesting about?" I couldn't hold back my shock.

The dog's eyes were firmly in place on the ground now. "We... I never thought to. There have always been protests under the previous administrations. They were dealt with more harshly then, forcefully dissolved. I let this one sit as... as I thought it would be what you wanted."

I sighed. Well, I couldn't fault him on that. The only thing that could have made it worse than to let that little boil of hate sit, would be to stir it away with a stick.

I set my hand on the dog's shoulder. "You did the best you could, Jon." I tried to relax my voice, "We'll deal with this after we come back, it can sit until then. You did good." His face brightened. "Now, let's get out of here."

Before I could get two steps the dog cut in again, "I was expecting that you would want to do something like this eventually, I took the liberty of setting up an itinerary for you."

"What? Gods, Jon..." I raised my hand to my forehead as Rebecca giggled. "This is my day off! I don't want an *itinerary*, I just want to relax."

I'd never realized it before, but Jon had just about the best puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen. Gods, a full grown man, who I'd seen take down people twice his size and stare down death without flinching, looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"But, Sir, I've..." he trailed off.

Rebecca elbowed me in the ribs as I tried to resist. With a sigh, there was nothing more I could do. "Fine, Jon, what do you have planned?"

His face lifted in an instant as his tail began to wag -- that might be a first for him.

"Well, Sir, I was planning our first stop could be the local police station, to demonstrate the reconstruction of the service on a local level..."

Gods.

It's been four hours and Jon had dragged Rebecca and I from one building to the next, most of them police oriented. With how many stations we toured it was like the dog couldn't get enough of the simple, spartan buildings.

I will give it to folks though, it had only been a week, and no small amount of the damage from the riots and quake had been repaired. In between stations we'd taken trips through a half dozen stores and municipal buildings.

Thankfully, the only people Jon identified us to were the other police officers, and that gave us more or less free run of the city.

It was sometime near noon now and we were picking our way down one of the main streets of V-town. There were a half dozen folks to either side clearing rubble as we passed.

I thought I saw something from the corner of my eye, but it was gone before I was able to track it. It reminded me of when Gowan had given Rebecca and I a hunter escort through the city. I could almost swear that there was someone out there, at the edge of my sight -- but I couldn't quite prove it.

"Everything alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca's arm was linked in mine.

"Yeah, babe." I forced a grin to my lips. "Just a bit jumpy being back in the city is all."

She smiled now, poking me in the chest with a finger. "You'd hardly been outside the city when we first met. Quite a change, huh?"

I rolled my eyes. "You've got me there, Babe." I turned my head towards Jon and raised my voice a notch, "Hey, does this tour include a lunch break? I'm running on empty over here."

The German Shepherd wagged his tail slightly as he continued on. "I planned for that, Sir. We have one more stop before your reservation at café Bristol."

"Bristol?" I had to laugh, that was English's hang out. "The place is still standing?"

The dog let his jaw drop open in a grin. "It would appear so, Sir. As my understanding goes, a private citizen made a substantial cash investment to it so as to insure it would continue operating. I believe he is the new owner."

I just shook my head. "Fine. Let's get going, I'm hungry."

The last stop on our morning tour was apparently a massive pile of rubble. Well, okay, that may not quite be accurate, but it was all I could make out of the mass of collapsed walls and the throngs of workers that swarmed over them.

"Where are we, Jon?" I asked.

He cocked his head at me, as if in surprise. "You don't know, Sir?"

I shook my head. "All I know is that we're up somewhere near Charlson park. Other than that I've no idea."

"It's, um, City Hall, Sir."

"This was City Hall?" I took another look at the mountain of debris that stood before us. Not twenty feet away people were pulling a body from the wreckage. "But... but there's nothing left. All the other buildings at least have *something* still standing. This has nothing..."

Jon nodded gravely beside me as Rebecca held fast to my arm.

"You are correct, Sir," the dog continued. "The building was a primary target during the riots, and sustained a significant amount of damage..." He glanced over at me. "And it was of the most modern construction."

I knew what *that* meant.

Modern construction was a euthanasia for cheap, shoddy, quick, and above all, form over function. That was the reason why we still had more buildings standing from before the Cataclysm than after it. The humans who had come before us had long known the fundamental rules and techniques for building. And we, seemingly, had forgotten them.

The City Hall had been a perfect example. It had been made of billowing towers of glass that soared into the sky. It had been as impressive as anything you could imagine, but that was just about it. It had likely been easily overrun during the riots, then crumbled to dust when the quake hit.

A chilling thought hit me.

"Jon... is that the reason why no one from the government survived?" I could only get the words out through clenched teeth.

The dog steadfastly kept his gaze locked on the debris before us, refusing to look my way.

"The disaster plans of the previous administration stated that all members of the government and their families were to seek shelter in City Hall in the event of a civil disturbance." The dog paused,



clearing his throat. "It was advised against by the police service, but the mayor believed that the only safe place would be a building constructed by our own hands..." His voice petered off.

As we watched, another three bodies were pulled from the rubble before us. Two of them were kids. They were all dead.

A sudden thought flashed through my mind. I nearly fell back on my tail.

"Jon, all those disaster plans I've been signing off on... were they..."

Now he did turn to me. His eyes were soft, not something I thought I'd ever seen on him before.

"No, Sir." His voice was low. "As your personal liaison, I've been taking the liberty of speaking to each and every ministerial head before they saw you." For the first time I realized how tired the dog looked. "And I informed them of your strict policy of safety compliance."

Now I couldn't help but smile. "I don't know how much I'm paying you, Jon, but I think you earned a raise."

He smiled. "Thank-you, Tommy," A slight chuckle escaped his lips, "But I, like every member of the service, am payed a single base wage."

The city hall site was huge, it took us the better part of half an hour to just circle around a quarter of it.

Jon had set off to find the foreman to provide us with an update. Rebecca and I were finally alone for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

"So, babe, what do you think about all this?" I whispered.

She giggled slightly as my tongue came out just a fraction to lick the inside of her ear.

"I haven't the slightest, Wolfy." She kicked some random piece of debris on the ground before us as we slowly walked onward. "Everything's moving so fast. We only just got back to the city a week ago, and before then we were both nobodies."

I had to grin at that. "I guess it goes to show you the difference that being in the wrong place at the wrong time can make." I paused, grinning at her. "That, and one insane police commissioner who seems determined to make a messiah of me."

I could see her opening her mouth to say something, but it never got out.

The first thing that hit me was a sudden ringing in my ears. Then the world seemed to slip into grey for a moment as the ground rushed up to meet me. Then it struck me... I'd been, well, struck over the head.

It felt like someone had just tried to bash to top of my skull in with a rusty pipe. It didn't help that a second later I was face-planting onto the hard, cracked concrete. A canine's face isn't flat. Now I had a cracked skull and a broken nose to boot.

I almost thought I could hear Rebecca scream something, but there was nothing but the ringing in my ears.

My regeneration was likely the only thing keeping me conscious, I could almost feel it rushing through my skull, trying to keep me from blacking out.

I couldn't raise my head, but I could just keep my eyes open enough to see the shadows that danced on the ground before me. One I recognized immediately, Rebecca, the other was almost half again her size, and it had a tail.

"Uhhg." I rolled over, cradling the back of my head in both hands. I could just make out Jon in the distance, sprinting towards us.

My assailant was a ruddy furred bobcat. He still had a short length of iron pipe clutched in one hand. The rusted thing was dripping blood, my blood.

Rebecca was grappling with the man, and doing a surprisingly good job of it, but she was still

being forced backwards.

Another groan escaped my lips and the bobcat's head twitched my way. A moment ago he'd simply been trying to beat back Rebecca, now I could see his eyes widening as I slowly staggered to my feet.

His moment of inattentiveness made him the perfect target for Jon who leapt upon his back.

I'd only ever seen Jon fight once before, and that had been up in the snow covered passes of the Rocky Mountains. He'd been smoothly cold and clinical then, almost taking his opponents apart like he'd been giving instructions in martial arts.

Now the dog moved fast, nearly too fast for my still hazy and unfocused eyes to follow.

One moment Rebecca and the bobcat had been grappling, the next she was away with a savage kick as Jon joined the fight. Jon and the cat were squared off, the feline seemingly having forgotten about the length of iron bar as he tossed it over his shoulder.

If you'd asked me in that moment, I would have put every dollar I had on Jon taking the cat apart in ten seconds flat. I would have lost.

Jon launched forward, claw tipped limbs flashing, and the cat met him blow for blow.

I hadn't the slightest what style Jon followed, but I knew the cat's moves. He was a hunter.

There was just something about the way a hunter moves. It wasn't that we were *trained* per se, but rather that all hunters seemed to adapt certain styles and moves as we learned how to chase down prey.

And this cat was a hunter of the first order. He could give my uncle Gowan a run for his money.

The world was just starting to come back to me now as the ringing fell from my ears. I could hear people shouting and screaming from around us.

I was on my feet now, still a little unsteady, but just about ready to jump the cat from behind when Rebecca beat me to the punch.

She'd found the iron bar that the bobcat had tossed aside. She made him regret that decision now as she swung it, aiming at the back of his legs.

The cat must have heard her coming. He jumped the pipe as she swung, throwing Rebecca off balance as he dived towards Jon.

I'll give Jon credit, he'd been able to hold his own against the cat, and that's something I can say for few non-hunters. But the bobcat had switched tactics now. Before he'd thought he could win this battle, but now realizing there were three of us he swiped his claws towards Jon's face and turned to run.

I could hear a sound like tearing silk as one of the claws caught Jon's mussel. There was a flash of red from the dog's face, then the cat was off.

For just a split second I was torn. Rebecca was laying on the ground, struggling to her feet, Jon was clutching his face, and the cat was running off to the north.

It didn't take long to decide. I normally like to keep my hunting reactions held strictly in check, but I let my chase instinct take over as I sprinted after the cat. He'd hurt both Rebecca and Jon -- I would have him.

My head was clearing just enough now that I could begin to think rationally again. I still let my wolf side, 'biff' as English had once called it, guide my feet, as I tried to think critically.

We were heading north, sloping downhill from City Hall towards the water, buildings and trees flashing by past us. Around me I could hear the barking of police dogs as Jon called out to them, they were converging on us.

This was Cambie Street... it should keep heading north until it got to the bridge. Was the bridge still standing?

It was all I could do to keep the bobbed tail of the cat in sight as we sprinted on. Gods but that feline could move! The tongue was lolling out of my mouth now as I scrambled for breath, my heart racing in my chest. How long could a bobcat keep up like this? Almost any cat could run faster than a wolf like me, but they usually couldn't do the distance.

A second later Cambie bridge reared up ahead of us. I couldn't see it through all the signs and barricades on the street. The cat simply leapt over them. There was nothing I could do but follow.

From the corner of my eye I saw something golden flash between the buildings. I didn't even have time to make it out before it was long gone behind me.

We were on the bridge now, water opening up around us. The cat came closer with every heartbeat. He was tiring as I closed the distance.

A few more strides and I could see the dark blue of the surf open up ahead of us. The bridge was out.

The concrete and steel beneath us fell away like a splintered piece of wood, falling to the waves a good hundred feet below.

The cat skidded to a stop just inches short of the drop off, almost slipping over the edge before his claws caught. I slowed more carefully, leaving a good ten meters between us.

This was a man who had fought Jon to a standstill. I didn't want to take him on if I had a choice.

"Wait... don't..." I could barely speak as I panted for breath. "Don't jump."

The cat looked little better than I felt. His tongue was hanging from his mouth and his hands shook so violently that I almost thought he was going to have a heart attack.

The fear I saw in his eyes didn't help much either. It was like he was looking upon the face of death every time he glanced my way.

"You can't take me back..." His voice was high and reedy, with a slight surfer's twang, "He'll kill me if he finds out what I've done." He paused for breath again, flecks of white saliva foaming at the edges of his mouth, "I... I needed the money... I needed the food for--"

His voice cut off as his eyes focused on something over my shoulder. He'd been scared when he looked at me. Now it was like he was staring at an on coming freight train.

The roar almost deafened me, leaving me seeing double and feeling like I'd just been thwacked over the head again.

The glint of gold I'd seen a moment ago came back again in force. English rocketed over my shoulder, arcing through the air to land upon the smaller cat.

The bobcat was strong, fast, and incredibly talented, but he didn't last ten seconds against the lion.

By the time I'd crossed the distance between us English already had his hands wrapped around the smaller cat's neck, squeezing the life out of him.

"English, let go!" I yelled it at him, but he didn't even seem to hear me. His was focused on the other feline, yellow eyes contracted so tight that I almost couldn't see the pupil.

"English!" I tried it again, but this time I smacked him on the back of the head as hard as I could with my fist. "Let. Him. Go." My voice had fallen to a growl.

Almost as if he'd just realized I was there, the lion looked up at me, grip on the bobcat loosening slightly.

For a moment the only sound was that of the bobcat's pained gasps for breath.

"Uh... Sorry, mate." English's accent was wavering as he got back to his feat, dragging the bobcat behind him. "Got a little over excited there." The smaller feline tried to gasp out a few words, but English cuffed him over the head roughly enough to send his eyes rolling up into his head.

"English!" I had to hold myself back from smacking the lion. "He was just going to say something!"

"Uh... Sorry?" Was all the lion said.

Before we'd even got the chance to move around I could already hear the scrape of claws on the bridge behind us. Lots of claws.

Turning, there were at least two dozen police dogs there, all standing with their fangs and claws barred. Jon was in front of them.

"Sir. Mr. English." His voice had a slight lisp. The slash that lead from his left ear down to his chin was still oozing. "I see you have apprehended your assailant." He threw English an odd look.

"You will hand him over to us." He paused for a moment, eyeing us both. "Now."

"Hey, now," English began, "You can't just--"

I'm not sure if I'd ever heard Jon growl before. He did now. It was not a pleasant sound.

"There has been an attempt on the life of the mayor of V-town. You will hand him over to us for proper interrogation immediately." The way he said the word 'interrogation' sent chills down my spine.

"Do it, English." I didn't even bother to turn back towards the lion.

A moment later I heard the limp body of the bobcat hit the concrete.

"Good choice, gentlemen." Jon's features had fallen back into place as though nothing had happened. If not for the slash on his face he would have looked like this was just another day at the office.

"Now," He continued, "Shall we move onto lunch?"