

# The Diplomats



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## Chapter 4: Brown Fur and a White Tie

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The cops quickly closed ranks around the near lifeless body of the bobcat, but I noticed that a dozen of them still followed me as I walked from the bridge, English and Jon in tow.

I glanced over at the lion. "What are you doing here, English? I haven't seen you in a week."

He grinned, shrugging off the events with the bobcat like they'd never happened. "I got a mysterious message this morning that I had an appointment at the café. I was waiting there when the dogs around me started getting twitchy and began running this way. Thought I should take a peek."

Jon was watching him a touch more intently than normal, but I was preoccupied as soon as I saw Rebecca coming our way.

One of the police dogs tried to step between us, but she levelled a glare at him that made even the dog back away.

"Tommy!" The tone of her voice gave me the distinct feeling that I'd done something wrong. "What the heck was that?" She noticed the police behind me as they quickly carried away the limp body. Looked back at me, her face held a touch of uncertainty, "Is he dead?"

I shook my head as I closed the last of the distance, putting my arm around her shoulders. "No. The golden lug here just knocked him out."

She glanced over at English, as if noticing him for the first time before putting me back in her squarely sights. "And he was trying to kill you?" One of her fingers came up to poke me in my still bruised nose. "Spill it."

I just held my hands up in surrender. "I haven't anything to spill, babe." I tried to make puppy eyes, but accomplished little more than pulling a muscle in my face. "I know as much as you do. The first warning I had was when he whacked me over the head with that pipe."

Jon's ears perked up.

I turned to him. "Yeah, there was a weapon. It's probably back there somewhere."

He gestured at a couple of the dogs around us and they took off at a run.

Now that I thought about it, that *was* weird. As far as I knew, it was uncommon to use a weapon in an assault. The bobcat had his claws, there really hadn't been much use to hitting me over the head with a pipe when he could have just as easily tore a hole in me.

I'd just stepped foot off the bridge, heading for a little patch of grass by the sidewalk when I

stumbled, my vision blurring.

I could feel something *pop* in the back of my skull -- Like the bone was snapping back into place.

When I next opened my eyes I was kneeling on the ground, my stomach heaving as I vomited all over the asphalt.

"Are you okay, Tommy?" Rebecca was by my side, holding me from falling face first into the technicolour puddle I'd just created.

"I'm..." I had to gasp for breath as something else *popped*, "I'm fine... it's just the regeneration."

A moment later I could feel her fingers pressing through the fur on the back of my head, sliding over the blood that coated me there.

"Gods, Tommy... I can feel the bone!"

I could see lights dancing before my eyes every time her fingers moved.

"Just... just... give me a moment."

My body felt like it was made of marrow jelly as I slipped from her arms to fall to the ground. It took everything I had just to keep my eyes open.

A howl went up around me as Jon and the police dogs closed in. A moment later all I could see was the brown and black of their furred bodies and the blue of their uniforms against the sky.

"Gah!" The breath came hot in my lungs as I spat out a mouthful of ice cold water.

"Told you, Lass," I could hear English's voice from somewhere a few feet ahead of me, "He's right as rain." There was a chuckle, "I've seen him walk away from worse."

"Tommy?" I could feel fingers lightly gripping my face, they were long and slender. "Tommy, are you awake?"

Thoughts rolled around my mind like marbles for a moment before I opened my eyes. I did a quick check to make sure that all my limbs were attached. Yep, all five. Two arms, two legs, and a tail. The pain of my bashed in skull was little more than a distant memory now. The only thing left to show for it was the telltale itch of my regeneration having stitched me back together once more.

I could hear the slosh of water in front of me, a warning that English was likely planning to douse me again.

I pulled my eyes open, the world was prenatuerly clear. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here. No need to drown me."

English's bright white teeth glinted back at me, not a foot from my face. "Aww, you take all the fun out of it, mate."

He was shoved aside by Jon a moment later. The dog reached out his hands to grope around my head, feeling the bump that had gone down and checking for any new ones.

"I would still feel better if we were to take him to one of the remaining hospitals. We should not be leaving such important matters as his health to chance."

I fought to push the dog away.

"No, Jon." I was pleased to notice that my voice wasn't slurred. "I'm not going to the hospital. Leave that for the people who need it."

I still had yet to move when Rebecca shoved the dog from view. She was sitting beside me a moment later.

"You feeling alright, Wolfy?" Her voice was quiet and calm. It wasn't until a moment later that I noticed her fingers were sliding through the fur on the back of my head just as Jon's had. She just happened to be more subtle about it. I also noticed that someone had managed to wash all the blood away.

We were in café Bristol, the familiar wrought iron chair under me. Laid out before us was a half finished feast. Yep, English was definitely back in town, there was enough here to feed half an army.

"I'm fine, babe." I gently pulled Rebecca's fingers from my skull, looping her arm over my shoulder. I may be healed, but it still itched back there every time someone touched it.

"Anyone get the number of the steamroller that tried to do me in?" I continued, "That bugger packed a wallop."

Helping myself, I pulled a chunk of whatever meat was closest to me on the table, chicken by the taste of it. I'd never cared much for birds, but I always ended up famished after my regeneration healed anything this major.

Jon cleared his throat as he took a seat beside me. I noticed at least a half dozen more police dogs milling about from the corner of my eye.

"We are currently interrogating your assailant," He began, but I held up a hand before he could continue.

"Wait." I looked him in the eye. "What do you mean when you say 'interrogate'? English and I had a bad experience once with one of your police interrogations."

He looked away from me, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I... I was not involved with that, Tommy... Sir." He still couldn't look up. "The individual who, uh, interrogated you on that occasion was not a member of the police service." He cleared his throat nervously. "That was an outside contractor."

I refused to look away, the dog blanched under my glare. I had the distinct feeling that he wanted to start whimpering.

"And what about the bobcat? Is he getting a going over by an 'outside contractor' so you can keep your hands clean?"

He didn't answer me.

"Look at me, Jon." I demanded, "Tell me what's happening to him."

Slowly, his eyes came up to meet mine. His ears were pulled back flush to his skull, and, although I couldn't see it, I knew his tail was flat on the ground.

"I, uh... I don't know, Sir."

I could feel a growl working its way into my voice. "Then guess, *Constable*."

If anything he became more submissive. This time I could hear the whine in his voice.

"Standard procedure would have him... questioned by someone who is not a member of the police force." His voice was ratcheting up higher with every word, "We only do it when we feel there is a major and immanent security risk." His voice suddenly cut to a whisper. I was sitting right beside him and I could barely hear it. "We don't want to lose you, Tommy. We don't want any of the other candidates to become mayor."

It took everything I had to keep my lips from pulling up over my teeth. Even then my voice came out as a snarl.

"No, Jon. This stops now. Right. Now." I slammed my fist down on the table hard enough to make a platter rattle and send a shot of pain up my arm. "Call headquarters and make them stop." He looked like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming train. "Now."

I bit out the last word like a curse.

"Yessir." The words escaped his lips so quickly as to run together.

He was up from the table an instant later. Two steps and he was whispering into the ear of one of the uniformed police dogs that stood in attendance around us. That dog was off like a shot, sprinting down the street in the direction of police headquarters.

I felt suddenly drained. With a sigh, I sunk back into the hard iron seat. Rebecca's arm was still around me.

English was chowing down across the table from us. I don't think he'd stopped since I'd woken up. He only paused long enough now to speak.

"Your first major change as mayor, eh mate?" He laughed. "Why couldn't you have done *that* a year ago?" He held out one of his arms. Looking closely, I could just make out white lines against his golden pelt. "I've still got the souvenirs of our little tour through their sessions." He paused for a moment to sip a cup of tea. His hands shook ever so slightly. "That, mate, is not something I'd ever wish upon anyone. Not even my blackest of enemies."

I had to focus on the lion to keep the tingling on the back of my skull from driving me crazy. It always itched worst just before the regeneration was finished.

"Where have you been all this time, English? You up and abandoned me right when the paperwork started falling down like rain."

He grimaced slightly. "I didn't abandon you, mate." He looked down into his cup of tea for a moment, "Well, okay, perhaps I did. But gods, mate, I needed to." He'd stopped eating now, almost looking like I'd put him into a panic. "I couldn't stay there, mate, too much bureaucracy, too many stuffed shirts. Anyway," He gave a quick wave of his hand and tried to effect his more aloft air, "I had to get things done too." A slight grin edged on to his lips, "Had to get the jeep, my beauty. Had to go check on my own pad, and lets not forget, had to get Storm Front back up and running."

"Storm Front?" I cocked my head, "I thought we killed them dead."

The lion laughed, "Nah, mate. You only killed Vanderhoom. That sly lizard had been turning the company inside out, but there was still enough left for me to salvage. We're not the size we were before, but we're still in the game."

He laughed again before continuing, "And that reminds me," His voice lowered conspiratorially, "Seeing now that your the great high mucky muck in the government and all that, what say you help send a few contracts my way, eh? We could really use the work."

I had to blink and replay the lion's words a couple of times in my head to make sure I'd heard them right.

"English, are you asking me to play favourites with Storm Front?"

He just smiled.

"Dude," I lowered my head to the cool wrought iron table before me, "I threw KDP out of my apartment because they were asking for just the same kind of thing."

A quiet, strangled sound came across the table from his direction. "Tommy, mate, it's nothing like that."

I raised my head just enough to glare at him. "This is exactly the same. You laughed with me when I tossed out KDP, and now you want the same thing."

There was a pained expression on his face, his whiskers drooping. "Mate, after all we've been through, you can't just toss a couple contracts my way? Its not like it's a big deal."

I had to take a deep breath before I could respond. "No, English. No." I lowered my head back down to the cool metal. It felt good against my fur. "And, English? Please don't ever bring it up again."

When I looked up again the lion's eyes had narrowed to slits.

"Perhaps you're right, Tommy." The lion's voice was immaculate, fux British accent perfect. "I think it's best if we don't speak of this again." There was the harsh sound of scraping metal as he pushed his chair back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work to get to. I still need to earn a living."

"Are you alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca was still at my side. She paused for a moment, a quick look around. The only one in hearing range was Jon, and he sat silently. "Did you just tell English off?"

I slowly raised my head, the lion was nowhere in sight.

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. The tingling was gone now. "I guess I did."

I could feel her arm tighten around my shoulders as she whispered in my ear, "I never thought I'd see the day." Her tone wasn't mocking or sarcastic, it bordered on frightened. "I always thought he was your best friend."

It took everything I had to keep my voice calm. "He was..." I could have slapped myself, "He is. I guess money does change a lot of things." I sighed, "And speaking of money--"

I'd just realized I was naked, I didn't even have my vest on. And that meant I didn't have my wallet.

"Uh, babe?" I glanced over to her, "You wouldn't happen to have any cash on you, would you?"

Her expression turned a touched panicked. "I haven't a dollar. I left all my money back in Horseshoe Bay."

I was just about ready to let my head sink back down again. The table was filled to overflowing with food, just the way English liked it, and I hadn't seen him pay the waiter when he left.

Jon gave me a light tap on the shoulder, his voice pleased.

"You needn't worry, Sir." His lips twitched up in just the merest hint of a smile. "You haven't been taking your wage as mayor. And, in any event, this can be drawn from your expense account."

I really didn't feel like going back to the apartment, but I could see Jon's point on wanting to get me off the street. We'd already had one person try to knock my skull in today, I didn't feel like giving anyone else the chance.

With a dozen police dogs in formation around us, we headed back towards the apartment.

"Hey, Jon?" I tapped the dog on the shoulder, he turned to look at me, "I'd rather we head back in the way we went out. I don't really feel like dealing with the mob just yet."

He nodded.

It was like someone rang a bell the moment I stepped back in the apartment. I hadn't even the chance to speak to Amstys or Renald before the first government bureaucrat arrived, wanting my attention.

I was just about to get back into the swing of things when Amstys got to his feet and slammed closed the newly reinstalled door. I could hear the click of a deadbolt sliding into place.

"I smell blood." The black wolf's voice was level, but deep enough to send chills down my spine. "It's yours." He levelled a blue eyed glare at me.

Renald was beside him a moment later. But where Amstys was almost serene, Renald looked like he was ready to freak out.

"Uh, yeah," I self-consciously scratched the still tender back of my head. "We ran across a cat who didn't seem to like me much." I wasn't sure why I was so nervous about telling them this, it was like they were my parents. "He tried to bash my head in with an iron rod. It's alright, Jon took care of it."

Amstys didn't move, but Renald practically fell off his feet.

"Who was it?" The smaller wolf's voice was rushed and frantic, "Are they dead?"

I shook my head. "A bobcat of some stripe. Fought like he was a hunter."

Renald's eyes shot open. "A hunter? Where is he now?"

I shrugged. "The police took him into custody. Probably somewhere under police HQ."

"I have to report this." The tan wolf was gone a moment later.

I couldn't call the next three days quiet, but at least no one tried to kill me. I worked my way through at least two good oceans worth of paperwork.

There were fewer of us in the apartment now. Amstys still sat in a corner watching everyone, but other than that it was mostly Rebecca and I.

Rebecca was smiling less and less these days. I tried to get her out of the apartment, there was no reason that she needed to be swamped like this, but she was as determined to see it through as I was.

Looking up from yet another one of the endless forms that covered the counter in front of me, I noticed something through the open door.

There were two police dogs standing guard in the hallway as usual, but a black panther stood talking to them, waving his hands. The cat was dressed in a red blazer.

Where had I seen that before?

It wasn't until the cat turned away in disgust that I saw the yellow lightning bolt emblazoned on the back, with the words 'Storm Front'.

"Wait!" I tried to make it to the door before the panther could leave, but the towers of papers piled on the floor kept me back.

I only made it to the hallway to watch the door to the stairwell close behind him.

One of the dogs stationed here looked over at me. "Is there something wrong, Sir?"

I didn't bother running to catch up to the panther, my legs were already cramping up from days without exercise.

"Who was that?"

The dog shrugged. "I couldn't rightfully tell you, Sir. He just arrived, having somehow gotten past security on the first floor, said he had a message for you."

"What was it?"

The dog shrugged again. "Don't know, Sir. He hadn't an appointment. My orders are to not allow folks in without an appointment."

I just about smacked my head against the wall. "Did you at least ask if it was important? He was from Storm Front. It could have been a message from English."

The dog had the good sense to look a little abashed. "Sorry, Sir. I have orders to allow Mr. English to enter should he arrive... but dare I say, Sir, that *everyone* says that their problem is important." The dog's face was still as stone, but I could detect just the slightest roll of his eyes. "I've been assigned to guard duty of the sitting mayor for four years now, Sir. Never once have I seen someone barge in only to say, 'well, it's not really that important after all'. It just doesn't happen, Sir."

"Fine." I couldn't keep the scowl on my face after an explanation like that. "But send someone to try and find out what the message was, would you?"

The dog nodded and gestured at another of his kind down the hall. The other was off like a shot.

It was a few more hours before I had the opportunity to be interrupted again.

The sharp, polite rapping at the door could be no one other than Jon.

"Sir?" He was back in his police uniform, as crisp and pressed as the day I'd first met him.

I looked up. Bad choice, I could feel the vertebrae in my spine pop. I had to fight back a wave of light headedness.

"Uh. What is it, Jon? Another truckload of paperwork?"

He shook his head. "No, Sir. You need to get ready for your engagement tonight."

Okay, what's it? I couldn't keep my head from cocking to the side.

Even Rebecca seemed to be surprised. "*Engagement?*"

Jon nodded. "Didn't you read the entry in your schedule?"

Now I was laughing. "I have a schedule?"

The dog dug around on my paper covered counter for a few moments until he uncovered a leather day-timer. It was the first time I'd ever seen it in my life.

"Jon, you might want to start telling me about these things."

The dog nodded curtly. "Yes, Sir." His lips twitched slightly towards a grin. "This is your first formal social engagement as mayor. A number of the surviving social elite have staged a 'reconstruction' party at the home of one Mr. Allen West. You, as mayor, received an invitation three days ago."

I let my head sink down to the papers before me. "I'm guessing this isn't just going to me a nice, informal, little get together where I can lay back and relax?"

The dog did grin now, but only just for a moment before returning to his normal stoic demeanor. "No, Sir, I would think not. Do the words 'white tie' mean anything to you?"

I just groaned.

Jon tried to drag me off to some official 'Police Tailor', but I would have none of it. If it was anything like the people who made the police uniforms, I might just cut myself on the seams.

We were out on the street now, and despite my best efforts I could neither get Jon's honour guard, nor Amstys to stay at home. Oddly, I hadn't seen Renald since he took off days ago.

"Where are we going, Wolfy?" Rebecca was by my side, stretching her muscles in the cool afternoon air.

I grinned. "You remember when you first met me, Babe? I had a suit back then."

She smiled back, taking my arm. "How could I forget, Wolfy? You looked so cute all dressed up like that."

"Well, it was the only suit I've ever worn." I turned a corner onto a tree lined street. All the shops here were small and discrete. "It was made by a friend of..." I paused for a moment, "A friend of English's. The guy was Smith Arrow."

Rebecca perked up when I said that name. "Arrow? I know him. He was the tailor who made my dress back when I was working on the Dice."

"Really?" I glanced over at her, "I thought he only did men's clothing."

She blushed slightly, "Normally. I was hired on short notice, and," Her voice fell a notch, "I'd spent so much on my disguise that he was the only place I could afford."

"Afford?" I laughed. "Last time I saw Smith's prices you'd have better luck affording a small island."

She gave me a light punch to the gut. "I only got the dress for cheap because he'd never designed anything for a woman before." Her voice fell again, "He was one of the only people back then who knew what I was. He..." She blushed slightly, "One of my ears fell off when he was measuring me."

I couldn't help but laugh at that thought. "Good thing we don't have to worry about that now, babe." It took me a moment to even realize she had her cat disguise back in place again. "You, uh, don't really need to wear that anymore. The riots are over."

She gave me a hard look. "That's easy for you to say, *Wolfy*. You're not a human, you don't have to be worried about being the only of your kind in the city."

"Oh, yeah." I pulled her a bit tighter to me. "We'll have to send someone out to Horseshoe Bay

to let them know that they can come home now. It should be safe again."

She didn't look up at me, but I could hear soft voice, "We're *working* on making it safe, Wolfy. I doubt it's safe yet."

We were in front of the store now. It looked much the same as the first time I'd been here with English, a year ago. Most of the boards had been taken down from my last visit, and I was thankful to see there hadn't been too much damage.

I felt a little naked coming here. Smith Arrow was one of English's oldest friends, almost a second father to him... I'd never been here without the lion.

Walking up to the scarred, dark wooden door, I pulled it open and stepped within, Jon, Amstys, and Rebecca at my back. The rest of the police waited outside.

The inside was darker then I remembered. Shadows seemed to envelop nearly everything, only a couple of lights glowed weakly. One was above the front door, the other over the desk.

There was no one in sight.

"Uh, hello?" I felt a little nervous to be speaking in here, as if it were a mausoleum.

The only answer I got was a sputtering cough from the back room.

"Smith?"

I walked around the counter, careful not to knock any of the mannequins that were lined up with suit after suit upon them.

Another fit of coughing let me home in.

Through a doorway and around a corner, I found a small work room. If anything it was dimmer in here.

"Go..." There was a sticking wet sound as he tried to pull in a breath, "Go away. We're closed."

The fox, Smith Arrow, sat on a small stool in the workshop. His pelt had been formerly red, now it was as light as silver.

"Smith, uh," I looked down at the withered fox before me. His hands were clasping a pair of scissors and a measuring tape. "It's me, Tommy. Tommy Taggart."

"Tommy?" He began groping around on the desk in front of him for a pair of glasses.

I reached out and gently pressed them into his searching hand.

"Remember me? I'm English's friend."

"Bah. Of course I remember you, young wolf." His lips lifted ever so slightly in a smile, "Everyone in the city knows your name by now." He looked over my shoulder, seeing no one but Jon, Rebecca and Amstys. "Where is that no-good pussy cat, anyway? I should have seen him by now."

I shrugged. "I, uh, haven't seen him in a while. But, Smith, I need to talk to you about a suit. It's urgent."

"Bah." He took my hand in his weak grip as he slowly fought his way to his feet. "It's always urgent when someone wants something." He grinned again. "There's a big to do coming up, I haven't been this busy in years. I've been booked solid for the last four days."

"Oh." I felt my ears fall. "I was going to ask if I could have a suit made for this evening."

He patted my arm. "Never you worry, young wolf. I take care of English's friends. And anyway," His grin widened, "You have access to the city purse, I can charge you whatever I want."

I tried to pull away from the fox's grip. "Uh, Smith... I'm trying not to use up the city coffers." It seemed like every time I went to talk to someone they wanted to milk me for everything I was worth.

Jon set his hand on my shoulder, quieting me, "That won't be a problem, Mr. Arrow. I checked your account with the government. Will standard payment terms be acceptable?"

"Yes, yes. Fine, fine." The fox fell into another fit of coughing. "Lets get on with this, shall we, young wolf? I knew you'd be coming here. Every time there's a big too-do my list fills up. I made

a deal with one of the staff. He got a repair on his suit for free, I got to see the guest list -- and your name was near the top." He began leading me back further into the store before turning and waving a finger at everyone else. "You three stay here. We're going for a fitting and I don't need peeping toms."

I decided not to mention that I couldn't exactly take off my fur coat.

Smith really must have been expecting me, for a few moments later he had me slipping into one of the strangest garments I'd ever seen.

He started off by stepping me into a pair of trousers. These weren't just pants... well, I guess the right word for them really was *trousers*. They were jet black, and I swear to the gods that I think they were made of pure silk. The backs of them were the oddest part -- they came up in a V shape around my tail, and the whole thing was so loose that I had to hold them up with a hand.

Next came a spotless white, button up shirt. The neck of the thing was so stiff that it instantly began chafing against my fur. I didn't get much sympathy from the fox.

You know, I think this is the first time I've ever seen suspenders, likely so much as warn them. I'd only ever read about them in my old books, something that the humans used to wear. Now I had a pair of them looped around me, holding my pants up.

"Do I really need these?" I asked as the fox fashioned them in place.

I got a growl at that. "This is a white tie event, is it not? You'll wear what is appropriate. Just remember," He held back a cough long enough to poke me in the nose and lecture, "Suspenders are *underwear*. No one should ever see them."

"Uh... sure."

Next came a vest to go over the shirt and suspenders that were already on me. Gods, he was layering on enough clothing to boil me alive.

He disappeared around the corner, into another room. When he came back, I swear to the gods, it looked like he was carrying a garrote. It was white cotton, and he had it wrapped tightly around his fists.

"Give me your neck," he commanded as he came forward.

I stumbled back, almost falling on my tail.

"Careful you stupid cur!" he nearly shouted. "You'll rip the suit!"

His hands reached out towards me, wrapping around my neck.

"Hold still!" His voice was weak, but the command caused me to fall as still as stone.

His hands pulled and tugged at the cloth he'd wrapped around me until at long last he seemed happy with it. Gah, it was just tight enough to make me feel my own pulse.

I brought my hand up to it, tugging and pulling, only to realize it was a white bow tie.

"Stop that!" He slapped my hands away. "You'll ruin it."

I was just about to start complaining when he held out a jacket to me. It was as dark as the pants, and just as impeccably cut. He forced it onto me before I could utter another word.

"There." He sounded almost satisfied now. "We just need a hat and shoes and you'll be set." He turned, reaching towards a selection of top hats hanging on the wall. I noticed that they all had holes cut in them to accommodate upstanding ears.

"Uh, no thanks, Smith. I think I'll do fine without."

His face fell. "But you'll look so much better in a hat and shoes."

I couldn't even bear the thought of spending an evening walking around in a pair of over designed formal shoes. And, knowing my luck, he'd try to get me into a pair of opera pumps or dancing shoes.

I wiggled my toes at the fox, but did my best to keep my voice firm. "I'm good, Smith, but

thanks for the offer." I let a grin cross my face now. "But I do have a challenge for you though."

His brow lowered suspiciously.

"And what would that be, young wolf?"

I pointed a thumb out towards the front room. "Rebecca said she once bought a dress here. Could you set her up too?"

The fox shook his head. "No. I rarely do woman's fashions. They're too trendy, change too often. I only did it once before as a favour."

"Come on, Smith," I tried to put a whine in my voice, "I remember the dress I saw her in when we first met. She looked spectacular." I couldn't keep my tongue from coming out to lick my lips.

"That she did, son. But I simply don't have the time, your party is in just a few hours."

I let a grin spring to my lips. "Come on, Smith. We don't need much, just a nice little black dress. Just like the one I met her in."

The fox threw his hands up into the air. "Fine, fine, my son. We'd better get started. I'll have to make it from damn near scratch."

I let the fox lean on me as we slowly made our way back out to the front room.

He wasn't kidding either. It took him a good two hours of non stop work to get a dress ready for Rebecca. I was only glad that I wasn't paying for this out of pocket. I had the sinking feeling that this one dress would have made for a good down-payment on a house.

Jon disappeared while we were waiting, leaving us under the watchful eyes of the police dogs who still waited outside. For the first time I felt almost lonely.

English and Renald were AWOL, Jon was off doing whatever, and Rebecca was in the back getting fitted. That just left Amstys and I.

I looked over at the corner where the huge black wolf stood. He'd hardly moved since we'd entered the shop, and he hadn't said a single word.

"You doing okay over there, Amstys?" I asked him. "You can come up here if you want. There's a free stool."

The wolf watched me in silence for a few moments before coming forward.

This was to the point of getting creepy. He hadn't been like this when I'd first met him. Amstys had always been a bit of a mental case, anyone would after having lived under Al-Sedexterous for so long, but he'd been relatively talkative back then.

"What's wrong, buddy?" I reached out a hand to lay on his arm. He didn't flinch back, but nor did he seem to even acknowledge it. "You've been growling at everyone we've met since we got to the city, and I've barely even heard two words out of you."

His eyes stared firmly out into the middle distance. It took him a long time to reply, I almost thought he hadn't heard me.

"I don't like it here, young master. This city... it makes me feel cramped. Cramped and dirty. I wish you'd return to the country side again. I liked hunting, back out on the plains. You were a good hunter. Why can't we go back there again?"

I sighed. "I wish I could, Amstys, I really wish I could, but the people here need me."

He looked over at me, his eyes coming into focus now. "But *you* don't need them. Why does it matter if this city stands or falls? You have me, you have..." He almost said 'mistress', but that word had too many meanings. "Rebecca. Why do you need to stay here?"

"This is my home, Amstys."

"My home was..." The wolf's ears pulled back as he spoke, "Gods, why can't I remember my home, Tommy?" In a matter of seconds the giant had gone from just short of stoic to nearly in tears. "I

had one... I know I did... why can't I remember it? Why can't I remember anything before Mistress?"

His free hand came up to grasp mine, clutching so hard that his claws began to draw blood. The wolf's eyes were wide now, pupils so huge that I could hardly see any blue around them.

"Amstys..." I hadn't the slightest what to say. I hadn't met him until years after he'd been caught in Al-Sedexterous' trap. That she-devil had been able to do things to men's minds... it hurt even for me to think about her.

"Why, Tommy, why can't I remember? I had a family, I know that, I had a wife." His voice was raising now, his words coming faster and faster, "I was happy. I was. Why can't I remember, why did I leave them?"

It took everything I had not to cry out when he squeezed my hand. I could hear drops of blood falling to the counter.

"Amstys... please," I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my voice calm. The wolf was huge, almost as big as English, and he could swat me like a fly if he turned on me. "You were caught in her spell. We both were. It wasn't your fault."

His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I could feel him probing my face. When he spoke his voice was cold. "I was there for years. Why were you able to resist her when I couldn't? Why were you able to save who you cared for? What makes you so special that you can do things I was forbidden to even dream of?" His grip ground into my hand. I could feel his claws against my very bones.

"Amstys, you're hurting me."

"Why, Tommy!" His voice was a whisper now, but loaded with so much venom that I would have pulled back if he hadn't held me so. I realized that this was the first time I'd ever been alone with him since I'd broken the spell.

"I was..." I had to pant to catch my breath, to force back the pain that was shooting up my arm, "I have regeneration. It helped me fight her. It cleared my mind." I sucked in a deep breath, "And Rebecca. She came for me."

The wolf's hand sprang open like it was spring loaded. For a moment it almost felt like it hurt more to have his claws suddenly gone from my flesh. I had to scramble to pull a bolt of cloth from the counter before I began bleeding over everything.

I could barely hear the wolf when he spoke again. It was hardly more than a whisper. "That's it. She came for you. Annabelle never came for me." Now I did see tears on the wolf's face. They were almost invisible against his dark coat. "I loved her, Tommy. Gods, I loved her and she never came for me. Annabelle never came for me."

Cloth bound tightly around my hand, I slowly approached the wolf. "She never knew were you were, Amstys. I'm sure she loved you just as much, but there was no way she could have found you."

The wolf slowly raised his eyes to me, he almost looked like a puppy.

"Thank you, young master."

Putting a hand to his shoulder, I slowly eased him to the floor, then came to sit beside him.

"You could go there you know, Amstys." I grabbed his chin gently, forcing him to look at me, "You don't have to stay here. You don't owe me anything."

He sighed heavily. "Perhaps someday, but not now. I'm not the same man I was when I last woke up in Brooks. I'm... damaged. She doesn't deserve that. She deserves better. If she and the children are even still alive, they deserve better."

I was about to say more when my ears twitched. A moment later Rebecca and Smith walked into the room. Amstys' face instantly fell back to a bland neutral, as though nothing had happened.

Not that I noticed Amstys much. Rebecca wasn't just in a dress, it was a *dress*.

I didn't really have many words to describe it other than 'wow'. There was nothing there but a

single piece of sheer black silk, and not much of it at that. Strapless, hemless, and pretty much every other 'less' that I could think of, she was one, very classy, step from going nude.

But, oh boy, this was waaay better than nude. I was suddenly hot, and it had nothing to do with the suit that surrounded me.

"So, Wolfy, what do you think?" Her voice was coy and teasing.

"I... whoa... oi!"

She just smiled.

"What are you doing on the floor?!" Smith was in front of me a moment later, spoiling the view. "You're getting my suit all dirty! And what happened to your hand?"

The fox was all over me now, fussing with the suit like it was his baby.

We were out of the store a few moments later. Smith hadn't even asked me to sign anything. I did ask him to relay a message to English if he dropped by. The lion and I needed to talk.

Jon still had yet to return by then, so we simply headed back to the apartment. I certainly hoped the dog knew what he was doing. Jon was the only one who even knew where this 'engagement' was. I'd be lost without him.

We got a few whistles and catcalls on the street, but they quickly cut off once they saw Amstys standing guard.

Coming up to the apartment building, I noticed that most of the protesters were gone. There were only a couple left, and they didn't seem to have their hearts in it. They didn't even bother saying anything as we walked in the front door, police escort and all.

Back in the apartment, I couldn't bring myself to even look at the paperwork that continued to pile up around me. I could, however, stand to leer longingly at Rebecca as she adjusted her dress.

There were a lot of things that dress made me want to do, and paperwork wasn't among them.

I hadn't seen her look anywhere near this good since the night I'd first met her aboard the Diamond Dice, and she'd been working back then, serving drinks to rich gamblers. Heh, I suppose she was on the other side of the table now. We were off to a party where there would be people doing much the same job she'd done.

I had to keep my hands firmly in my pockets just to hold myself from walking up to her and tearing that dress right off her body. The measure of a good dress isn't what it shows, it's what it hides. And Smith had done possibly the best job in the world. There was almost nothing to the little black thing, but it kept you always wanting to see more.

I'd almost forgotten that we weren't alone when Amstys let out a huff of breath. He wasn't crouched in the corner now, but sitting like a man on one of the stools by the kitchen table.

"Uh, Amstys," I walked up beside him, slowly unwrapping the bolt of cloth from my hand to see my wounds had healed. "You want to stay here for the night? I don't even know how many invitations I got."

He gave me a cold glare.

"Last time I left you to yourself, young master, you almost collapsed your own skull." A slight smile worked its way to his lips, "I will not be attending your party, but I will be near by in the event that you should need me."

Okay... that wasn't creepy at all. Now I had my own personal stalker.

I'd only just had enough time to sit down and let my mind wander back to Rebecca and that little dress when I heard a sharp knock at the door.

"Come in, Jon." I didn't even bother to wonder who it was.

The dog entered a moment later. His normally impeccably crisp blue police uniform had been replaced with something almost identical, but in immaculate white. Even down to wearing white gloves.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You look like a ghost, Jon."

His ears fell slightly. "I will grant you, Sir, that it has been some time since I last wore my dress uniform, but I don't think I cut a bad figure."

I laughed again as I stood up. "I didn't say that, Jon. You look great. Are we ready to go?"

He nodded, then turned to see Rebecca. I'll give the dog credit, his jaw didn't fall open, but his eyes did bug out.

"You, ah... you look spectacular, Ma'am," was all he could get out.

I suppose I should feel good for Rebecca. That was, after all, what the dress was for. But I couldn't suppress the urge to want to growl. A moment later I was by her side, taking one of her arms possessively in mine as I gently rubbed my face into hers.

"Yeah, babe. Amazing." The growl that worked its way into my voice now wasn't threatening.

We departed soon after. I noticed that this time my police guard stayed further back, more discrete.

I hadn't even the slightest where we were going or what I was supposed to be doing, all I could do was follow Jon.

"Hey, Jon," I tapped him on the shoulder as we walked, "I've never been to a *formal* party. I'm assuming that it's not exactly a good idea to get drunk and trash the place?" His face was steady as I spoke, but his eyes widened. "So, what am I supposed to be doing?"

He calmed slightly. "Well, Sir, this is a formal engagement. The primary purpose of the party is to see who survived the upheaval,"

"Upheaval?" I cocked my head, "Is that what they're calling it now?"

He ignored me as he continued on, "And assess the new power structures. This is likely to be a first time for a fair number of the attendees, you are not the only one to have a change of position as a result of the last year." His voice softened as he lowered it, "All you really need to do, Tommy, is shake hands and let people see your face. Make vague promises to meet with them in the future and ensure that they all come away with a positive impression of you. The police service can not directly help you with your election strategy, but we *can* aid you as the incumbent."

"What? Election strategy?"

The dog continued as if I hadn't said anything. "You'll see more than a few familiar faces there. It seems that there has been no shortage in shakeups. Although," His face fell for a moment as he lowered his eyes to the cracked asphalt beneath our feet, "I won't be able to help you. Uncle... Commissioner Sayer has explicitly requested my presence with him." The dog shook his head slightly, "My uncle is... grooming me as his successor and wishes that I use this opportunity to introduce myself as much as you do."

I was just about to grab the dog by his neck and see if I could choke an explanation out of him when we turned a corner.

Now, I've been in some pretty ritzy parts of V-town, heck, I'd even done some bounty hunting in them with English, but nothing like this.

The estate -- there was no other word for it -- that sat before us had to take up the whole block if not more.

"Wow." Was the only word that escaped my lips.

Merely the walk up the front lawn took a good ten minutes. The house was huge and pure

white, looking like a roman fortress. There were pillars on either side of the entrance door.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Jon said, making a slight bow towards Rebecca and I, "But this is where we'll have to part ways. I may work for you," He grinned, "But I was invited as the guest of police commissioner Sayer, and I should arrive with him."

"But..." I pulled Rebecca more tightly to me as the dog turned to walk away.

"Don't worry, Sir," he said over his shoulder, "I'll see you inside." And he was gone.

"Looks like it's time to sink or swim, Wolfy," Rebecca whispered in my ear.

"Easy for you to say, Babe." I forced a smile. "With a dress like that, people would cross the Pacific to come to your aid."

The large, stained wooden door in front of us had a simple brass knocker in the centre of it. The thing was polished to a mirror shine.

A couple quick knocks and we stood there. We didn't have long to wait.

I had no idea what to expect on the other side of the door, and, I'm not ashamed to say, I was frightened. This was the first time I was going to be in public not as Tommy Taggert, but as the mayor of V-town.

My arm was already snaked around Rebecca's waist, I pulled her so close now that it almost hurt.

The man who opened the door had a studied mask of indifference on his face. I almost laughed. It was an ape, and he was wearing a black tie monkey suit.

"Yes?" His voice held what I was sure was a completely fake accent. He sounded like the east coast equivalent of English.

"Tommy Taggert and guest, Rebecca." The words came from me smoothly, far more calm than I felt.

"Yes?" He repeated again. He didn't step aside or invite us in. He didn't even make a single motion.

I took a deep breath. "Tommy Taggert. The mayor of V-town."

"Ah, yes." His face finally showed a hint of life. "You're on the list. Please," He stepped back with a slight bow to usher us in, "Come inside."

The inside of the home was as imposing as the outside had been. It was huge, spacious, and uniform white. There were pillars here and there to hold up the ceiling far above, and objects-de-art in alcoves scattered across the room.

It was only a few steps before we began to meet other guests. I hadn't a clue who any of them were, but we got more than a few glances. Well, I'm not so sure if it was me as much as Rebecca.

There was a short staircase, no more than a half dozen steps, to the main floor. Our greeter scurried up to stand beside it and waited for us to catch up to him.

He didn't speak until we'd reached the top step of the little staircase. It seemed like the only purpose for the thing was to elevate us enough so that everyone on the floor could get a clear view.

The ape's voice was a booming baritone when he spoke. I had no doubt that everyone in the room could hear him.

"Mr. Tommy Taggert, mayor of V-town, and his guest for the evening, Rebecca."

I'm not ashamed to say that I felt the blood drain from my face as every single face in the room turned to watch us. And there were a lot of them. There were at least a hundred people here.

I would have frozen solid right there if not for Rebecca slowly pulling me forward.

"Come on, Wolfy. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression."