

# The Diplomats



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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A Growl in the Darkness.....1

Chapter 2: A Day in Jail (But I didn't do anything, honest!).....14

Chapter 3: The Boys are Back in Town.....27

Chapter 4: Brown Fur and a White Tie.....45

Chapter 5: In The Mix.....59

Chapter 6: Shaving His Mane.....68

## Chapter 6: Shaving His Mane

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Alright, who was playing with the jackhammer inside my skull? AND COULD HE PLEASE STOP!

The simple act of opening my eyes took way more effort than I'd ever like to admit. It was like someone had attached two tone steel weights to my eyelids, than welded those weights to the foundations of a skyscraper.

"You're awake, mate." I'm sure the lion was doing little more than whispering, but his voice boomed through my head like he was shouting from a megaphone. "I'm guessing that you don't much care for the whole hangover part of being drunk."

I opened my mouth to say something, but my gut took the opportunity to try and make a run for it.

The lion was faster than I was, thankfully, and had a bucket up to my face as I bent forward.

"And that, mate," I could hear him laughing, "Will make number seven. Gods, what were you drinking last night? It looks like you were run over by an elephant with a bad case of flat foot."

It took me a good few breaths until I could pull my head from the bucket, so much as speak.

"I was drinking water. That... *hurk*... that was it."

"Is that what the trendy people are calling it these days, mate? 'Water'?" He shook his head. "I think you'll want to stay away from this so-called water."

I lifted my head from the rather pungent smelling bucket just long enough to get my bearings. The only clue I had was that I was on a white bed with white sheets in a clean, near empty white-washed room.

English's house, guest room. I'd been here once before.

I noticed a long crack that ran up one wall, neatly splitting the paint. I guess this place hadn't quite been immune to the quake.

The only thing I could remember from last night was something about Molly. Oh gods, Molly. Please tell me I hadn't... No, I was pretty sure I hadn't been *that* far gone.

But speaking of far gone, what in all the gods names was I doing at English's place?

I took another look at English, he was leaning back nonchalantly on a chair, within easy reach of me if I should start heaving again. His golden eyes were watching me. Just watching.

Working the words slowly, I had to ask, "Just how stupid was I last night?"

He gave me a full, toothy grin and threw his head back with a laugh. "You're asking the wrong person, mate. You weren't much interested in talking to me, remember?"

Okay, that, I knew, was wrong. "What do you mean? I've been trying to get a hold of you for the better part of a week. You're the person who buggered off one day and I've hardly heard from since. Except for a demand for money."

I could have just punched myself in the mouth as soon as I said the words.

His expression didn't change as I spoke, but rather froze solid on his face. He'd been calm before, relaxed, but now he was still as stone.

"I didn't demand *any* money from you, Tommy." He nearly spit the words back at me, "You have no idea what's happened to Storm Front. Our building's gone, half of our people are dead, and the police department appropriated everything they could to keep *themselves* going." A slight snarl escaped his lips before he spoke again. "That's what we got for serving the police when the riots started. Every member of Storm Front fell into ranks with the cops, they gave them all they had, and now we're practically beggars on the street."

I lifted one hand to my head. The lion's voice had risen, and it felt like a drill to my brain.

"Since when did that happen, English? I thought things were going well for you. I could have sworn I saw a paper I signed a couple of days ago with a dozen new bounties on it."

He did calm some small measure now, though his tail had begun to lash back and forth.

"We got bounties to track down, that's no problem, mate. We've got lots of bounties with all the chaos from the rebuilding, we just don't have the tools to catch them." He threw his hands out to the cracked building around us. "This is the last thing I've got under my own name, mate. I'm not a poor guy, I had bank accounts full of cash a few months ago, but it's taken every dollar I had to get the company back up and running."

I scratched my head. "Huh? How can it be so bad? You and I went out on the lamb with no problems."

He stuck his tongue out at me, a silly expression that thankfully suggested he was calming.

"That was just the two of us, mate, and we weren't exactly ordinary. It doesn't work that way when you've got a hundred employees to take care of. A little band like our wouldn't have been able to deal with the whole city by itself."

"Fine, fine. I get it, you haven't exactly had a good couple of weeks. Why are you mewing to me?"

His eyes narrowed now. "Because, mate, you seem to be bloody good at avoiding me. You've made real good pals with your cop friends. Enough to forget about me?"

"What!?" I almost threw the bucket at him. "Me? You're the one who never came by! I'm stuck in my apartment, weighed down with a tone of papers, and I'm the one who's being a bugger?"

He dismissed me offhandedly with the wave of a paw. "I've tried, mate. The gods know I've tried. Every time I get within a hundred meters of your apartment some dog jumps out of the wall and barks at me about needing an appointment. I even tried sending some of my bounty hunters, but they don't even get that far."

I let my head sink to my chest now. "Jon knows that you're allowed in whenever you want. You're one of the few people I'd actually *like* to see walk through that door."

"Mate," He leaned forward, putting his hand on my knee, "You know I'd do bloody well anything for you, but this job is killing you. Everyone knows it but you. The dogs are playing you like a bell, Tommy." I looked up, he was closer now, his eyes staring straight at me. "You're not going to survive long if you keep at this, mate. You're just not cut out for it." He grinned now. "Come on back

to Storm Front with me. You got rid of VanderHoom and the company is mine again, you can make a proper living."

I had to laugh at that one, even though it made my head hurt. "Bounty hunting, English? Aren't you the one who told me that most people don't even survive to their fifth contract?"

He looked stricken at my words. "Not you, Tommy. You're better than that, you know it."

I shook my head. "I can't, English. To many people are counting on me. The city is in chaos. It wouldn't take more than a nudge to push us off the cliff right now."

"If you step down, mate, they'll always be someone to take your place. Someone will always want the job."

"That's the problem, English." My voice was stronger now, the headache slowly pulling back, "Anyone who would replace me would do it *because* they want the job. Every single person I've talked to wants a special deal out of me, and they're willing to cut me in to get it. Nobody seems to actually expect me to run a level game, everyone just expects that I'll be corrupt. That's the whole thing, English, that's how people like VanderHoom got into power. I don't want to live in that world again." I shook my head and let out a breath. "Tempt me again when the reconstruction is over, buddy. I'd really, really like to be tempted then, but I just can't walk away until things at least start off square."

He just sighed and settled back into his chair. "You are one stubborn little wolf, you know that? I thought it was supposed to be us cats who were vain."

I shook my head gently. Even then the room still began to spin. "You don't need to tell me, buddy. My father already nearly cut me open for defying him as the hunter's alpha."

"You did *what*?" He was back at my side again, closer now, almost as if he was afraid that people were about to storm the room. "You seriously disobeyed the hunter's alpha? Gods, Tommy, even if he's your father that's still bad mojo."

I just set my head back and closed my eyes. "Don't I know it." I opened one eye to give the lion a glare. "And I'd appreciate it if you kept that under your mane. Dad doesn't *have* to tear me apart as long as no one knows I've disobeyed him, but if it got out it would undermine his whole base of authority."

English's expression was sober, almost carved in stone, "I know a thing or two about dealing with fathers..." With an effort, he forced a grin to his lips, banishing the memory that had been playing across his face, "You already know too much about me, mate." He held a finger up to the side of his flat nose. "It's as safe as in a vault, safer. But anyway," He moved towards me again, "Let's get you some fresh air."

The lion could just have easily carried me out in his arms like a cub, but he gave me the dignity of throwing my arm over his shoulder and letting me at least try to walk. He was so much taller than I that he had to almost kneel down so I could reach over his shoulder.

I couldn't much deny it now, I was hung over. How I'd gotten this way I had no idea.

I recognized all the symptoms, but only in a clinical way. I'd never gotten myself smashed like this before. There had never been any reason too. The amount of alcohol it took to get me drunk was astronomical, and, despite what I'd always claimed, the hangovers never did last *that* long.

I was just short of blinded when English shouldered open his back door to land us on the deck. There were a couple of chairs here, I sunk into one gladly.

"Let me get you a cop 'o tea, mate."

"Isn't it supposed to be coffee that you offer to the recently drunk?" I said as I raised a arm to shield my eyes.

"Urban legend, mate." He laughed and patted my shoulder. "A dietetic is the last thing you'll want after being strung out. Speaking of which," He pointed to a pitcher of water on the table next to

me, "Help yourself. I'll be back presently."

The door clicked closed behind me and I was left alone with the chirping of the birds and the far, far too bright sun light.

It only took a second glance at the pitcher of water before I realized just how dried out I was. My tongue felt like sandpaper.

The lion hadn't seemed to have remembered to include any glasses, but that was fine by me, I just stuck my head straight in and began lapping until I'd done away with half the jug.

Sitting back, I took a deep breath. This really was the first time in almost longer than I could remember that I had a moment to just relax. No one making me sign papers, no one trying to kill me, no one wanting to shake hands and forge a deal.

I'd slipped into it so fast that I'd hardly even realized the change. English had been right about one thing, I was just this side of being burnt out, and it showed.

I'd only just awoken minutes ago, but I yawned and stretched out on the chair, feeling my eyes fall closed.

The next thing I knew, my nose was twitching. Raspberry and lemon. English must be back.

Opening my eyes, I could see him sitting next to me, a pot of tea and two cups on the table between us. They weren't from his good set. The lion was simply staring out into the trees around us.

He didn't even look my way before saying, "Drink up, mate. It'll make you feel better. Take it from a man who's lived through enough hangovers to know."

I grinned and wrapped my hands around one of the steaming cups before taking a tentative lap. It was harsh and bitter, but it made the last of the nausea flee back some.

"Is it really as bad as you say, English?" I asked him, having to force down a lump in my throat after drinking some of the tea. "I've barely been on the streets. Things seemed okay from where I stood. I thought the reconstruction was going better than we had any right to expect."

"It is, mate, it is." A sad chuckle edged into his voice, "The reconstruction is going swimmingly, better than anyone could ever have imagined. It's only been a couple of weeks and the city is already getting back on its feet, shops reopening. It's amazing, mate, I'll give you that. But you're not out there, mate, you're not seeing what's happening first hand. The police and bureaucrats are feeding you reports showing the good work you're doing, and it's all true, but there's always the piper to pay."

"What is it, English?"

"Consolidation, mate. Even I'm guilty of it. V-town has always been built on the backs of small businesses, entrepreneurs, but the big folks are taking this for all it's worth. The big fellas, Tommy, they're the ones who've been able to ride out this wave in style. Folks like Allen West and," he coughed, a strangled sound escaping his lips, "Me. We've got the funds and the backing to build ourselves back up after a catastrophe like this. It's not just sheer money, Mate, it's who you know. None of West's companies had to worry about getting building supplies, or even food. He owns businesses in every sector, and he makes sure his interests are well taken care of. Even I, mate. Do you know how I got Storm Front back on its feet?"

I shook my head.

"I emptied every cent I had into buying half of the other bounty hunting companies in the city. I could afford them, they'd almost gone under anyway. I bought them up, stripped what I wanted from their supplies and personnel then dropped the rest in the street. I never left enough of the original company behind to have to worry about them coming back to compete."

I sighed. "I'm guessing that not everyone is quite so ethical and bothered about this as you are?"

He let out a laugh. "You could say that, mate. Your new best friend, West, he already had his

hands in a quarter of the companies in the city. Now he must own bloody well near half of V-town. Everything from KDP to Cub-caf, he owns almost as much as the government."

I shook my head. "Fine. Why don't I just let him run things? He'd likely be better at it than I, anyway."

"You never know, mate. But I don't think that's his style. He doesn't come out to play with the common man. He's one of those who pulls his strings from the back rooms." The massive lion stuttered for a moment. "I met him when Storm Front first hit the big time, years ago. He wanted to buy us out then, when we were still fairly small. Hoof, antler, and handcuff, he wanted us in his pocket and he was willing to pay for it."

I looked up at him. "What happened?"

The lion let out a huff. "Did I ever tell you what happened to me after I left India, mate?"

I shook my head.

He settled back into his chair, taking a sip of tea and sunning himself in the slight morning breeze. I'd almost thought he'd forgotten about me until he began speaking, accent gone.

"It was a year or so after I'd left India and Jasmine behind me. I hadn't the slightest where I was going, so I headed east." He grinned. "It wasn't exactly the easiest journey of my life. Central Asia isn't flat. I got a fair bit of climbing experience there, travelling with a handful of trading caravans, working as a guard to hold back the bandits on those isolated rural roads."

"Anyway, mate, the end of the line was at Kunming, China. It was a fair size city, and had weathered the Cataclysm not too poorly. I set down there for a while and tried to make a place for myself. I'd picked up a touch of Cantonese while I'd been on the trip, just enough to make myself understood. I couldn't chit-chat much with the locals, but I could order a beer at the bar and throw people around enough to get a stint as a bouncer."

"After about a month or so I ran across a sign that was hawking a company looking for bounty hunters. This was the first time I'd really had the opportunity to ply the trade I'd learned from Jasmine's family. I jumped at the chance. Didn't really know what I was getting into, and, frankly, I didn't much care. I figured that they needed men to hunt, and that's what I wanted to do."

"It was short order before I found the guy in charge. He was a bear with some name that to this day I still can't pronounce. He was more than happy to snap me up, I was a good shade better than the average man he had on staff. I was young then, mate, and hardly had the experience to find my tail with both hands, but I was willing."

"I didn't much care for the papers and oaths I had to sign off on. This was only a job, after all. I just wanted my pay-cheque at the end of the day. All went well for a month or so. They got contracts, handed them to me and... well, you know the rest. I did my job. The company did well, and I got paid."

"Things changed before too long. The city grew, the bounties went up in value, and our little bounty hunting business began getting attention. Keep in mind, mate, that I was good, but I wasn't *that* good just yet. I was in the top five of a roster of thirty, no more."

"We eventually caught the eyes of a larger bounty hunting company. They took us over in a matter of days. Everything, poof, just like that. I hardly noticed, and cared even less. This wasn't *my* town, and as long as I got paid, who cared who handed out the cash?"

"For a while it seemed that it was going to be welcome to the new boss, just the same as the old boss. Would have well just have been. There was one little hitch though, mate. These companies were run a little bit more... *empathetically* than around here. If you were with a company, you were *with the company*, come hurricane or high water. My old crew didn't cause me much trouble, but the new ones did. One specific problem, they all shaved their heads."

"It was a loyalty thing. I never did understand it, but there you have it. You worked for the company, you shaved your head in allegiance. No one else seemed to care much, but I didn't take well to the idea."

He paused for a moment, just long enough to give me a chance to imagine the lion with his mane shaved clean off. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Don't you start, mate." He wagged a finger at me. "Say what you will, but it wasn't my cup of tea. Unfortunately, I didn't have many choices. They hadn't exactly said it in so many words when I'd signed up, but they expected me to stay. Permanently. They could fire me, of course, but quitting just wasn't in their vocabulary."

"I spat and cussed them out in a half dozen languages that I doubt they could even understand, but that didn't stop them. I can still see it, mate, there wasn't a cloud in the sky that day when they held me to the ground, six of them, and shaved me bald."

"They did it, mate. With a pair of rusty scissors, they held me to the dirt and cut my mane off." His hands had risen to his head now, twining with the long brown hair that lay there, as if he were afraid it would happen again. "Gods, mate... it would be like... like someone slicing off your tail. It's not just hair, it's a symbol of who I am." He paused for a moment before taking a deep breath. "My father had the most glorious mane I've ever seen. Mine was just starting to grow in when I killed him."

"Anyway," He gave his head a quick shake like he was throwing water, "I, as you can guess, didn't take to kindly to the haircut. They likely thought it was over as soon as they'd stopped cutting. They let go of my arms and started laughing at me. That was a mistake. I'm not proud of what I did, Tommy, but I didn't kill anyone. Heh. I gave them more than a few scars and a couple of broken bones, but I didn't kill anyone. They'd jumped me the first time, but I didn't give them the opportunity to hold me down again."

"That was about the time I wore out my welcome in Kunming. I hightailed it out of there that very night. Made it to Qianxinan before too long, then joined a caravan heading east to Bose and on to the coast. The bounty hunters sent a couple of people after me, to bring me back, but I dealt with them with few problems."

I just shook my head. "And this applies to me how, English?"

He frowned. "Just watch yourself, Mate. I'm hardly perfect, but you've earned *my* loyalty. I like to think I've done the same in kind. Sayer and the dogs, West, and..." He sighed. "And even the hunters will use you in every way they can. You're a tool now, Tommy. Something to help them achieve their goals. A lot of people died in the riots and quake, and now there's a power vacuum. Just watch who you sign up with, mate. It could come back to bite you."

We spent the rest of the morning out on the back deck, talking. English had more than enough storeys about his adventures trying to pick Storm Front up from the ashes. Then more tales recalling his latest bounties. He was working alone these days.

"You sure you won't come back, mate? I'm risking life and limb going out by myself."

I shot him a glare. "You got the pick of the whole company for partners. Choose one of them."

He huffed, sticking out his tongue. "You've got me spoiled, mate." He grinned, "It's you or nobody."

"What about Brown?"

The smile faltered on his face. "He didn't make it through the quake so well. A ceiling came down on him." I winced in sympathy. "He's still around, but in no condition to be out on the prowl."

I heard a loud knock come through the open door behind us. English startled slightly.

"It's not often I have visitors out here." The lion's home was out on the edge of V-town, tucked

away and hardly easy to find. "You just stay here, mate."

He was gone an moment later, but left the back door open.

"What is it? What do you want?" I could hear the lion shouting as he walked through the house. There was no response other than three more precise raps on the door.

"Go away! I don't want any of what you're selling... Oh. You." English didn't sound pleased.

"Good morning, Mr. English." The clipped voice of Jon was unmistakable.

"Dog." The relationship between the two of them had mellowed while we'd been up in the mountains, but I don't think the lion had ever forgiven Jon for turning us over to the interrogators back when we were hunting down the humans. The lion's voice had turned suspicious when he spoke again. "Where's your pack, dog. One never just sees a single cop."

Even from this distance I could hear Jon's teeth grind together. "I'm am not here on police business, English." This might just be the first time I'd ever heard Jon address him without the 'Mr.' attached. "I'm here as a member of Tommy's staff. And his friend."

"Is that so?" The lion sounded amused.

"Yes." I could feel the dog's nerves from here. "He didn't return to his apartment last night. I'm searching for him."

English laughed. "Try talking to the Lass. She'll tell you everything you need to know."

I could almost hear Jon growl.

"I have spoken to Miss Rebecca. She was... uncooperative. The simply states that Tommy is, and I quote, 'taking the day off'."

English laughed again, louder this time. "That would sound like something Lass would say. Why don't you take the hint, dog, and bugger off."

I could hear a whine Jon's voice now, almost see his tail resting on the ground. "Please, English. Last I saw him was in the home of Mr. West. I don't trust that man."

English paused now, his words coming slow and careful. "Come on in, dog. We'll share a cup of tea and then we'll talk about finding ol' Tommy."

The door to the kitchen was right next to me, leading in from the deck. I could see the two of them plain as day, but Jon had been seated with his back to me.

"I really don't have time for this, English." Jon's voice was meek. "I need to get back to work."

"You are working, dog." English poured two more cups of tea from the same kettle that we'd just used. "You want help finding him, you'll have to play nice with me first."

"Of course... Sir." Jon paused for a moment to lap from his cup. "But you know I can't speak for Tommy. You really should come to meet with him." His voice lowered a touch, as if he were being conspiratorial. "I do get the feeling that he misses having you around."

English set his cup down on the table between them before giving Jon an icy stare.

"I'd be happy to, dog." There was an edge of a growl in his voice, "But you don't seem to like having me around."

Jon pulled back almost as if he'd been slapped. "Pardon? I've never once spoken poorly of you. I can assure you, Mr. English, that I've never stepped between Tommy and his personal relations. All of the police detail supplied to me have specific orders to allow you in with no questions."

"Right." English raised a finger to his lips, claw extended to work something or other from between his teeth. He took the opportunity to show off his arsenal fully. "Those would be the same dogs that Sayer provided to you with no strings attached? Just who do they answer to, these officers, you or Sayer?"

I could see Jon swallow a lump in his throat. "I'm sure I don't understand what you're suggesting, Mr. English. All the dogs are loyal officers of the police service, they all answer,

eventually, to the Commissioner above all else."

"And you... Jon?" The lion leaned forward across the table, his nose almost touching the dog's. "Who do *you* answer to?"

He didn't answer for a long moment, just shrunk back into his chair. "You can't ask me to split my loyalties, English. I'm a member of the police. I'd be nothing without them."

"Who do you answer to, Jon?" English's voice had fallen, it was hardly a notch above a snarl now.

The dog swallowed again, trying to divert his gaze from the lion's eyes. "I nearly handed in my resignation to follow you, Tommy, and Miss Rebecca into the mountains. I am a loyal member of the police service, and I'll obey every order I'm given, but I'd resign before betraying Tommy."

"You're a queer one, Jon." The lion had pull back to sit in his seat again, voice swinging back to playful. "Wait here and drink your tea. I'll go see if I can find our wayward friend."

He was just about out of his seat when I walked through the door.

Jon's head had already spun around at the sound of my footsteps. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"Sir!" He was about to get to his feet when I set my hand on his shoulder, gently keeping him in place. "It's, uh, good to see you again, Sir. We were just talking about you."

"I'd gathered as much." I cast about the room for a chair, but it seemed that English had only furnished his house for a maximum of two people. Jon tried to stand again, but I shoved him down as I lowered myself to my knees and rested my elbows on the worn wood of the kitchen table.

"Am I correct in detecting a sign that there may be more to this problem than we first thought?"

Jon was torn. "I can't believe that Commissioner Sayer, my uncle, would ever do such a thing. We had a discussion on your safety, Tommy, and he gave me authority to protect you *carte blanche*."

English raised one hand to rub the bridge of his wide, flat nose. "I think that dog's been howling at the wrong moon for a few months now. He never did seem right after the whole VanderHoom incident."

Jon nodded, a quick abrupt motion of his chin. "He was... troubled with the fact that he had been a part of the disaster. He sees Tommy as a way to absolve himself of the issue, to return things to their proper order."

"So I was right," I lowered my head to the table as I spoke, "He does see me as some kind of messiah. The wind-up kind. Every piece of paper that gets brought to me is filtered through the police bureaucracy, every person I meet is cleared by them. He's making all the decisions and I'm just signing the ink."

"That's not quite true, Sir." Jon cleared his throat, "I also review your paperwork and clear your visitors."

I just lifted one eyebrow. "Not helping."

"Oh... yes. Sorry, Tommy."

"So what's the goal, dog?" English broke in. "Are we looking at a police state? A power grab? I've known Bob for years, and I haven't the slightest what he's up to."

Jon shook his head. The dog's face had taken on a weathered appearance now. "No. I know him too well for that. There has been no, absolutely no, growth in the powers of the police. All in all there have been almost no direct changes to the underlying power structure of the city at all. All he seems to want to do is bring us back to order as quickly as he possibly can."

English snapped his claws together. "And that may just be it. Jon, is old Sayer still as close to the grave as last I saw him?"

Jon huffed out a breath. "Closer. But his mind still functions."

The lion turned to me. "Than I think we've got it, mate. Sayer really does feel he's responsible for this. It was under his watch that so many humans died. Gods, mate, he's trying to get the city rebuilt before he packs it in, and I doubt he cares how many cracks show through."

"The rebuilding?" I cocked my head, "I thought that was my project."

English just raised his eyes to the heavens with a 'why me?' look. "Mate, how many of those papers did you write? How many did you even *read*? It's not your plan, it's his." English paused for a moment, "And I will say that all things being equal, he is doing a rather good job of it."

"So what's the problem?" I asked. "Sayer plays god until he kicks the bucket, we force him to ease off on me, and the city gets the best it can."

"Nice plan, mate, but you're the mayor. Not him. If he messes up or goes senile in his dotage it's you that people will be flocking to for a tail to pull. And don't your forget that this 'reconstruction' is going a bit faster that might strictly be a good idea."

"Still doesn't answer the real question," I let my head sink back to the table, "What do we do? You just said it, I haven't done a thing since I got this title dropped on me. If we piss off Sayer the whole city will be in the bucket. I don't exactly see any options here. The best I can do is just resign and leave it to someone else to hold the bag."

"I don't think that's possible, Sir." The skin around Jon's eyes had gone a shade of white. "My uncle... well, he ascribes to you quite a bit of importance. I'm not sure he'd just let you walk away."

"And what would he do? Put me under house arrest for trying to walk out?"

Jon's ears folded back to his skull. "Tommy, you forget that your apartment is surrounded by police dogs twenty-four hours a day. Not even English with all his skills was able to get in. I'll do everything I can to help you, Tommy, but I know for a fact that there are at least fifty dogs assigned to the detail. I may command them on paper, but I have no doubt that their final loyalty is to my uncle."

I could feel the blood draining from my own face. "Isn't Rebecca back at the apartment?"

Jon set one of his hands over mine in an obvious effort to try and calm me. He wasn't doing a very good job of it. "There is no need to worry. Miss Rebecca is perfectly safe. Commissioner Sayer still has complete confidence in you. He has absolutely no reason to act."

Call me crazy, but 'haven't given him a reason to go nuts' wasn't very high up on the list of assurances in my book.

"Can't go, can't stay... I'm feeling a little trapped here, folks." My voice was weak.

Jon cleared his throat. "As a police officer, I'm forbidden to give you any direct advice on your..."

"Spit. It. Out." Was all I could get out between clenched teeth.

"We need to expand your political base, sir. I've been doing everything I can to cover for you, but even I can only quickly skim your papers. You need to build a base, a party. You need to be able to know every move my uncle makes, and be able to make your own. Plus..." He cleared his throat again, "You'll need to take control of your platform for the next election."

"The what?" Both English and I spoke in unison.

"The election. The law states that an interim mayor can serve for no more than six months. You're close to four."

"Whoohoo!" I nearly howled. "I can just loose the election and get clean away."

Jon shook his head. "Not so simple, Sir. I can't divulge too much about the confidential meetings I've had with the Commissioner, but suffice it to say he does not plan for you to lose."

I nearly choked. "The police department is going to rig the bloody election?"

Jon averted his eyes from me, looking down at the table. "Not as such... he plans to take control of your election platform and guide it to ensure your victory. Anything illegal would only be as a last

resort."

"Got to admit, mate," English's paw came out to cover my other hand, "It's the perfect go. He already controls the government *and* the police force. Even if someone found out, who would they go to?"

The walk back into town was slow. I was still fighting off the last echos of the hangover, and neither English nor Jon would let me out of their sight.

The first police dog we came across took one look at me and turned tail to run in the direction of police HQ. I could see Jon wince.

"What do you figure Sayer is going to do when we get back?" I whispered.

"To you?" replied Jon, "Nothing. He won't touch *you* unless the situation becomes dire. I am the one he charged with protecting you."

"Oh." I felt a shiver run down my spine. I could only hope that discipline in the police force was more lenient than it was among the hunters.

Back at the apartment building, the strike had regrown. There were picketers now with signs that read 'We don't want a drunk dog for a mayor'.

Through the front door, I took a moment to notice the long look that English got from the dog guarding it.

Reaching out, I pulled the dog aside.

"What are your orders regarding English?"

The dog averted his eyes. "Sir. I have a very limited list of people I'm permitted to allow through."

"You didn't answer my question, officer."

He gulped. "Mr. English is not on my list of approved visitors."

I could hear just the slightest growl from Jon. The guard in front of me looked like he was ready to wet himself.

"From now on English is allowed in here any time of the day or night."

"But, Sir, he's not on the list..."

Now it was I who growled. I didn't bother to try and keep my lips from raising. "You will never turn him away. Understand?"

"Yessir." The dog's tail was flat on the ground.

Back up in the apartment, I was surprised we were alone.

"Fine, it's time to start acting like the mayor." I flopped down on the stool I'd used as my makeshift office for the last two weeks. "Jon, find out what other surprises Sayer has in store for me. English, you've got the resources. Think you could start searching me out some people to make a political team without raising too many red flags?"

The lion smiled. "Storm Front is already on a hiring spree. Anything of mine is yours."

"Great." I waved a hand at the two of them. "You'd both best get out of here before Sayer finds out about too much. I've got a ton of papers to sign to keep up appearances."

The two of them disappeared and I picked up the pen that lay on my desk -- the bane of my new existence.

I'd been able to unload much of the paperwork to the two police superintendents, Able and Baker, yet they'd always found ways to keep me so occupied that I never left the apartment. Now I knew why.

An hour or so later I heard the tread of feet in the hall. It wasn't the clink of claws, only boots made that clomping sound. I only knew a single person who wore boots.

"Have a relaxing night, Wolfy?" Rebecca didn't even bother to look surprised that I was back. "I saw Jon on the way up here. I'm guessing his detective skills panned out."

I dropped my mouth open in a grin. "Something like that, babe." Reaching out an arm, I pulled her close. "And thanks for the distraction last night. I really needed that. Gods, I never realized just how deep a hole I'd managed to dig myself in to until I got a chance to look at it from the outside."

She was leaning into me now, I could feel the warmth of her body through my pelt.

"What happened last night, Wolfy? I've never seen you drunk before. I thought it wasn't even possible for someone like you."

I shook my head, long having given up my defence. "Not a clue. A doctor told me once that the only way I could ever get hammered was to drink near pure alcohol. The amount it would take to give me a buzz would kill English."

She snorted. "Don't tell *him* that. From what I've heard, his mangeyness is rather proud of his drinking prowess. You figure West was trying to get you drunk?"

I shrugged. "Guess so. Either that or his staff can't tell the difference between the faucet and a bottle of pure spirits. Wait a sec... weren't the protesters holding a sign about me being drunk this morning?"

Rebecca snuggled up closer against my chest. "I think so."

"How would anyone even know I got hammered? The two of you got me out of there before anything went too wrong, and I didn't think I was *that* bad at shaking hands."

I could feel her brow furrow as her face pressed softly against my neck. "I guess someone could have been out on the streets, spreading rumours..."

"And English mentioned that West owns KDP."

Rebecca pulled back out of my arms, sliding onto the stool next to me. I wanted to talk to her, but I was still sad to have her move away. I had to content myself with keeping an arm over her shoulder.

"He probably does. I did a little asking around about him today while I was out." She shot me a grin. "It took me a while to lose the police dogs that had been sent to tail me, but I did it. West really does seem to have his hands in just about everything. I think he is the majority owner of KDP."

"Okay," I just wanted to slump down over the counter in front of me. "He's big and rich, has his people from KDP out there protesting me, tries his hardest to get me piss drunk, then invites me to his home and tells me what good friends we're going to be?"

"You're asking the wrong woman, Tommy." She tossed a lock of hair over her shoulder. "I just used to serve drinks to rich people. I never moved in these kinds of circles. You need to talk to someone else who was important enough to get invited to that party... and no, English doesn't count." She rolled her eyes. "He'd just as likely suggest you rip the guy apart."

"There's only one other person I know who has that kind of status." I sighed. "And last time I saw him he was just about ready to kill me."

Rebecca didn't even try to hide her confusion. "Who? I thought we'd already dealt with most of the people who wanted you dead."

"My father."

Rebecca had refused to let go of me until I'd filled her in on the events of the party. After that she's did her darnedest to still keep a hold of me.

I had to just short of growl and snap to get away from her. In the end I had to play the 'you're not a wolf' card. That went over about as well as could be expected. I was just glad that she hadn't started throwing anything.

Out and down the stairs, I could just see Jon from the corner of one eye. A group of almost half a dozen police dogs formed up on me the moment I set claw outside the building.

"Take off, you hozers," I snapped at them.

They took a step back, but refused to leave. Eventually one of them came forward.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but we're under strict orders to protect you after..." He cleared his throat, "After what happened at the construction site."

"Fine." I turned and started walking. "But keep out of my way, and don't you dare set foot on my parent's property."

It was a fairly long way to my parent's house, the better part of across town. The first few blocks were interesting, I got to see how the city was coming back together. The next few blocks were tedious, I just wanted to get this over with.

After that I did something that I hadn't done in a long time. I fell to all fours and I ran.

Last time I'd done this was out in the forest, chasing prey. In fact that was the only time I'd ever ran on all fours. I suppose it was symbolic enough. I was running like a hunter to go show my belly to the hunter's alpha.

I snorted off the idea. I was just tired and wanted to get there as fast as possible.