

The Diplomats



By: wwwolf

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 7:	Dealing With Dominance.....	80
Chapter 8:	The Open Party.....	93

Chapter 8: The Open Party

"Mate, what?" English hadn't moved from his chair, but his hands came up to rub his temples. "I thought I was the one bankrolling this little dance. Aren't I the one making the decisions here?"

I gently cuffed his ears. "You're money, buddy, my plan. I'm the one spending it for you."

He just sighed. "Since when did we get married?"

"Fine," I gave him another cuff to the head, "Call me your work-wife." I cocked an eyeridge at him. "I'll spend all your money, just don't expect any benefits."

The lion made a slight choking sound at that line.

Max was still standing in front of us. His expression having gone from joy at getting a job to flat out confusion.

I pulled him aside and gave him a quick update. "Long story short, Max, I'm mayor, but it's not going to stay that way for long. I need to get together a party strong enough to actually run the government and take it away from the... people who are currently keeping it going. Feel up to it?"

He shrugged. "It'll be the first time I've gotten back into politics in years. But, Tommy..."

I turned him around and marched him back to the seat where English still sat with a bemused expression.

"Move aside, your majesty," I jacked my thumb at him, "I just freed up your day. Max is going to hire the rest of the crew."

"What?" English was surprised, but I couldn't exactly call him annoyed. He was more than happy to get off the seat without a contest.

"All yours, Max." I led English away to leave the Oni looking confused on his new throne. There was already a candidate fighting for his attention.

"Thanks, mate." English stretched his back as we walked, almost bending over backwards. "I needed that."

I just shook my head. "Consider it repayment for getting me away from Sayer." I grinned, "You up for a hunt with your old partner?"

The lion's tail twitched. "I thought you were out of the game, mate."

I shook my head. "Just a little rusty. I got a lead out of the bobcat who tried to smash my brains

in. Ever heard of Club Bedlam?"

"Nada, mate. What is it?"

I shrugged. "No clue. The most I know is that it's down in the lowlife section of Gastown. That's where our friend got his contract to kill me."

"What ever happened to the cat, anyway?"

I shivered slightly. "Don't ask. Really. Don't ask."

Our first challenge was to get free of the police dogs that were tailing me. They'd stayed back when I'd entered the Storm Front compound, but it was obvious they were keeping an eye on me. Trying to conduct an investigation with them running about like keystone cops would be like trying to light a jellyfish on fire.

Thankfully, English was in control of the whole of Storm Front now. He pulled me aside into a small tent and the two of us were sealed into a packing container. English must have his staff well trained. No one even gave us a funny look.

It was about a twenty minute ride as a horse loaded the crate on a cart and pulled it a half dozen blocks away.

It wasn't like this was my first time alone with the lion, but gah! I really, really, didn't need to get my nose jammed quite so close to his body. The fact that I could smell the last half dozen meals on his breath should have been an indicator that this little box didn't exactly offer enough personal space.

In due course the lid was lifted off and I throw myself out, gasping for breath. English followed along behind me with only the comment that, "Be glad I didn't have Mexican for lunch."

Sticking to the alleys and byways, we were able to make it to Gastown without picking up any police attention. For all they knew I was still in the Storm Front complex.

Club Bedlam was... well, is dive bar too nice a term? It was... downtrodden.

It couldn't have been later than the early afternoon and there were already drunks stumbling from the door at regular intervals. The remains of a half dozen brawls were laid out in the street, no one seeming to care enough to sweep away the glass shards or mop up the blood.

English took the lead. What started off as a nonchalant stroll towards the door of the club devolved with each step. His back hunched, his arms clenched, and his lips rose into something that was almost, but not quite a snarl.

In the space of a dozen strides he'd gone from a captain of industry to a seaside brawler.

He pushed the door open with a sharp shove, the smell of gods know what spewed out at us. Even English had to pause for a moment to collect his breath.

The inside was dark, but my night vision snapped in after only just a few seconds, washing the room in shades of grey. Neon signs, advertising different brands of 'manly' beer seemed to be the only illumination.

That alone was almost enough to make me laugh. This place couldn't afford lighting, but it could put up neon? That should say something about its aesthetic.

The place was three quarters full, and by the look of it most of them were among the unemployed. Not even a single head turned towards us as we walked to the bar.

The bartender was an ursine of some description, but beyond that I couldn't tell in the darkness. All I could see was the glint of his eyes.

"'es?" His voice was a low rumble.

"Two of wha'ver your house is." English's voice had lost its accent... or more to the point morphed. I had no idea of what he was putting on now, but it sounded like a mixture of every street dialect I'd ever heard.

"'ay up." The bar tender tapped a claw on the counter.

A handful of coins should have covered the cost of anything this place carried, but English slid four bills. He kept them hidden under his palm so I couldn't make out their denomination.

They must have been impressive. The bartender's eyes widened slightly. His hand shot out to grab the bills, but English's claws only let two of them slip away.

"What else c'n you give me but beer?" The lion's voice was just above a whisper now. His demeanor hadn't changed, he still lounged at the bar as if only waiting for his drink, but his eyes glinted in the darkness.

The bartender waited a long moment before answering. "Name's Ted. For that amount of cash, pal, I can get you a lot of things." He laughed. "That can get you and your friend a night with as many of my ladies as you want, and I'll keep the candy box full as you like."

A growl grew in the lion's throat. "Not what I'm looking for. I want information."

Ted's grin grew wider. "I'm an open book, pal. Information don't cost me anything."

"There was a bobcat in here a couple weeks ago, ginger, down on his luck and..."

Ted laughed, a little too loud for my taste, it attracted the attention of a few of the nearest patrons.

"A bobcat, pal? Couple weeks ago? You don't have any clue how many people we push through this place in a single day. Keep ya bills, pal, you ain't going to find what you're looking for from me." He snorted. "Finding a single cat in this place would be like trying to find a snowflake on Mt. Logan." He reached under the bar, making English bristle. "Take ya drinks and get out of my face."

He turned and walked to the other end of the bar.

"That, mate," English grumbled as he grabbed his glass and walked off to a nearby booth, "Is the most I've ever paid for a couple of beers."

The booth was nothing more than a couple of hard plank seats with high backs to separate us from the people on either side, but it did a good job of keeping our conversation private.

There was a single, almost burnt out bulb dangling from the ceiling above us. It cast just enough light that I could make out the outline of English's face. His eyes were completely in shadow except for the occasional glint.

"Well, mate," His voice was low, "You're the smart one. What's the plan now?"

I shook my head as I gently pushed my glass forward to sit next to his. "I haven't the slightest. This was all we got out of Quin. This bar, and the contact was a cat. It's not like I can go back and pump him for more information."

English huffed and tossed back his drink in a single gulp. It was followed soon after by mine. I was more than happy to let him have it. It hadn't exactly gone over well last time I'd had a drink.

We sat in silence for a while, our ears swivelling to try and pick up the conversation from the other patrons. Nothing more than bar gossip.

Eventually English slowly got to his feet. "Back in a sec, mate. I've got to recycle the booze."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the sounds around me. It seemed like only seconds later I heard the seat across from me creak.

"Back so soon, buddy?"

Her scent hit me an instant later.

"Hello, Doggie."

Molly.

My eyes snapped open. I couldn't make out her face any more than I'd been able to see English's, but she was leaned forward over the table towards me. Our noses almost touched.

"What are you doing here, Molly?"

I will give myself at least enough credit that I was able to keep my dick under control this time. It helped that my head wasn't spinning this round.

She kept just a hair's space between us as she bent over the table, waiting for me to make that final move.

"I heard you were in the neighbourhood, Doggie, and decided that I needed to come and say hello. Is that such a crime?"

It took everything I had to keep the growl out of my throat. "You've said it. I don't have time for you, Molly. As I recall, the last time we dated it was you who broke up with me. I think it ended with you throwing a glass of red wine in my face in the middle of a party. I've got a girlfriend now, you're too late."

Her large eyes blinked slowly at me in the darkness. "But that was so long ago, Doggie. We were young then, I was foolish. How was I ever to know you'd grow up to be such an important, powerful person."

It looked like she'd gotten tiered of waiting for me to make my move. Her hands came up to rest on my shoulders. I tried to shrug them off, but she pulled me forward. Too fast to even realize what was going on she'd pulled me in.

Canines don't really kiss. We just don't have the jaws for it. Even Rebecca and I had a hard enough time. Molly pulled me forward while she raised her head, exposing her throat to me.

It may seem odd to a non-canine, but the throat is a truly erogenous zone for people like us. It's... well, it's a vulnerable area. To offer it to another is to submit to them. Plus, it didn't hurt that it just tended to smell *divine*.

My tongue was already out by the time she'd pulled me in. I couldn't help it. Before I even knew what I was doing I was nuzzling her, lapping at her throat, feeling her pulse against my tongue.

But there was something in the scent... something that reminded me of Rebecca.

With a snarl, I pushed back. A flame of anger had grown in my mind when I thought of Rebecca, anger and shame of what I was doing. Rebecca was mine. That was it. The flame burnt away whatever fog had grown in my mind.

"Tommy!" Molly's voice had risen to a pained whisper. Only too late had I realized that I had pulled away so quickly that I still had a small tuft of her fur between my teeth.

I spat it out, it fell to land on the table between us. Her scent still weaved through my mind, but I did my best to push it away.

"What the hell was that?" Her dulcet tones had failed, a shrill coming to her voice.

"I have a girlfriend. Rebecca. Go away, Molly. I'm not interested."

"But, Doggie," Her voice had fallen again to a seductive moan, "I just want to..."

I pushed her away and got to my feet.

Where in all the god's names was English?

Walking away before Molly had the chance to follow me, I tracked down the toilets. They weren't hard to find -- all I had to do was follow the reek.

"English?" I pushed on the men's room door. It swung a foot or so before coming to a halt with a solid thunk. I heard a moan from the other side.

"English!" I shoved my way around the door until I could get in.

There was even less light in the bathroom than there was out in the bar, but I could see English's golden body well enough. He was sprawled on the filth covered floor.

And he'd vomited all over the place.

"Are you alright, buddy?" I was by his side, pulling his massive head from the tiles and trying to wipe some of the yule from his mane.

"Mate," His voice was rough, "Did you get the number of that mountain that sideswiped me?"

I opened the tap on the least disgusting of the sinks and dunked the lion's head under the stream. It washed away most of the vomit and gave him a chance to drink some water.

He threw up twice more in the next ten minutes, but each time his eyes cleared a measure.

"Gods, mate, what was that stuff? I haven't been on a bender like that since I was a kid."

When he was finally able to stand I threw his arm over my shoulder and dragged him out of the bar as quickly as I could manage. Gods, he was even heavier than my father.

Out in the street, I hailed a passing horse. He'd been drawing an empty cart behind him, and it hadn't taken much cash to convince him to pull us back to the Storm Front complex.

English was almost back to the land of the living by the time we got there. I didn't even need to support him when he stepped from the cart.

"New plan, mate." He still leaned on me slightly as he walked. "I don't ever want to get into a drinking contest with you. I think we now know how they got you hammered last night. How many glasses did you say you had back at the party."

"At least half a dozen."

The lion laughed. "A half dozen of those and I'd be dead."

My police guard closed in on me as we returned to Storm Front. They were less panicky than I'd expected. I guess my escape hadn't been a complete surprise to them.

I grabbed one by the collar, "Get Able or Sayer or whoever's handling my assault case and tell them to lock down Club Bedlam. Question everyone there, especially the bartender Ted." I decided not to mention Molly. I didn't even want to *think* about Molly.

Dropping English safely back among his staff, I checked in briefly on Max before I headed out. The oni cast me a slightly desperate look when I waved at him, but I was pleased to note that it appeared that he'd already found a half dozen candidates.

Clicking the door open on the apartment, I was more than happy to see Rebecca sitting on a stool by the counter.

"Hey, Wolfy." She stood up, by my side in seconds. "I see you found the vest I bought... gods," She backed away, holding her nose, "What did you roll in? You smell foul."

Huh? I had a far more sensitive nose than her and I hadn't smelt a thing.

"Uhh... English and I had a bit of a run in at a club and he wasn't able to hold his liquor."

She took a step back towards me and sniffed again before pulling away and waving a hand in front of her nose. "Nnrg!" I don't think I'd ever seen her face pull up quite that violently. It looked like someone was trying to force a bristle brush up her nose.

"That's not it, Tommy. I've smelt English, and nothing *he* can't make anything that foul." She laughed. "Even his musk doesn't smell that bad." She paused, almost in mid word before grabbing me by the hand and forcing me into the bathroom. "Go, go, go."

"Hey!" I hardly got the word out before she shoved me into the shower stall, vest and all. "I don't think I smell *that* bad!"

She snapped the water on full the moment I stepped in. She didn't seem to care much that it was just short of ice cold.

She didn't even bother waiting for my fur to wet down before upending an entire bottle of soap on my head. Her own clothing was getting soaked as she began scrubbing my face, focusing on my nose.

"Hey!" I couldn't speak without getting suds in my mouth. It was getting hard to breathe, but every time I tried to protest she just worked harder.

It felt like an hour before she finally let me move again. We'd worked our way through two whole bottles of soap, a month's supply, and she still wouldn't let me step from the stream of water.

It was getting a little annoying as I'd begun shivering a long time ago.

"Uh, care to tell me what's going on, Babe? I don't mind a nice shower with just the two of us, but this isn't quite what I was envisioning."

She'd backed up a step, but never took her eyes off me.

"Where were you, Tommy? Who did you talk to?"

Okay... this was getting a little odd.

"English and I were tracking down the people who tried to kill me. We got as far as a club in Gastown before the trail went cold."

"What else, Tommy, who did you talk to?" Her voice had softened a half measure, but she still made sure to stand out of arm's reach.

I blushed slightly under my coat. "I... uh, ran into my old girlfriend from collage, Molly. I saw her last night at the party, too." I'm not ashamed to say that I was... well, a little ashamed. That was just one of those facts about wolves, we do the whole 'mate for life' thing. It's not something we *try* to do, it's just natural.

"Did you do anything, Tommy? What happened?"

I expected her voice to be accusing, angry, typical 'mad girlfriend', but it was... it was more than that. It was cold. Scary.

"Nothing, I swear, babe." I held up my hands as the water continued to fall down around me. The cold had soaked into my fur now, it was making my teeth chatter. "Last night she tried to hit on me after I'd gotten... well, drunk. It didn't go anywhere. Ask Jon, he was there." She dismissed it with the wave of a hand, unconcerned. "Today, well, she appeared out of nowhere after English had tossed back the two drinks we'd been given. He hit the can and Molly was there a second later. She... uh..." I had to avert my eyes from Rebecca, "She offered herself. Her neck." Rebecca and I had been together long enough that she knew what that meant. She might be human, and not into such things, but she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"I was tempted," It was hard to get the words out, but I had a feeling it was better to do it now than let Rebecca find out on her own. And I *knew* she'd have some way to find out. "But I walked away. That's when I found English passed out. Now," I held my hands to her, soaking wet and dripping, "Can I get out of the shower? It would also be nice if you'd tell me what's going on."

She finally took a step towards me, snapping off the water, but keeping me in the shower to drip dry. I didn't bother mentioning that most of her clothing was soaked as well.

"Last time I smelt anything like that, Wolfy, I almost lost you." She was up against me now, pressing her face into my fur. I noticed she took a not so subtle deep breath, smiling when she didn't wince. "It reminded me of the scent of the she-devil in Calgary."

Al-Sedexterous. She had used pheromones to entrap men, control them. She'd been the one to mess with Amstys' mind.

"You can't be serious, babe..." My blood ran cold, and not just because of the ice water that dripped from me. "If a creature like Al-Sedexterous is loose in the city..."

"No," Her arms wrapped around me. I could feel the warmth of her body now, "It wasn't the same. It was just *kind* of like that... like my own perfume that I use to disguise myself as a cat."

"Oh... okay..."

I wanted to finish the conversation, but frankly I had better things to worry about. Rebecca was still pressed up against me, but she'd stripped off her wet top now. Her pants were following a close second.

To bugger all with how Molly had smelt, I'd take this every time.

It was another twenty minutes until there was any hot water to shower with, I didn't much mind the wait.

As my grand right as mayor, I locked the door and took the rest of the afternoon off. Gods, this was the first time I'd actually been able to lay next to Rebecca and not be as dead as a log in thirty seconds.

"So what have you been up to, babe?" My voice was slurred as I pressed my mussel into her hair while she lay beside me on the bed.

"You know, Wolfy..." She wiggled slightly, trying to roll over and face me, but I held her tight, "Hitting the streets, seeing how the city's doing. Checking up on my old contacts and friends."

"Bugger." I rolled my eyes. "We still need to get out to Horseshoe Bay." I forced myself up on one elbow to peer out the window. "Do you think there's time to get out there and back before it gets too late?"

She laughed. "Remember, last time I was out there you carried me back." She shrugged. "We could make it if we want to."

I looked over at her, the light streaming in though the window set her pale, hairless skin almost shimmering. She was likely the only human in the entire city.

Reaching forward, I pulled her into a kiss. "We'd better."

I made sure to grab Jon as we walked out the door. I wasn't sure where Renald was, but he likely wasn't far away.

I was slightly surprised when I finally saw the room the Jon had set up as his office. The dog was always incredibly neat, hyper-efficient, but his office looked more like what I'd expect from English.

The space was small, tucked into a back corner maintenance room of the main floor. There were papers spread across the desk and maps and charts pinned to the walls. The cramped room was in total disarray.

The German Shepard was laying fast asleep, sprawled out across his paperwork.

I was just backing away, leaving him to rest when his head popped up off the desk.

"Sir!" He was on his feet an instant later, hands brushing down his chest to smooth away the wrinkles in his uniform.

"It's okay, Jon." I waved a hand as I stepped back. "We're just off to Horseshoe Bay, you can stay here."

The dog glanced down at his desk, then back up to me. "Are you sure, Sir? I, uh, wouldn't mind coming with you."

I took a quick glance at the papers that were spread out before him. Frankly, not a single one made any sense to me.

"I'm sure you would, Jon." I reached out to pat him on the shoulder. "Come along if you want," I gave his rumpled uniform a critical eye, "But you might want to get changed. I doubt that the human's have many fond memories of the V-town police."

The walk out to Horseshoe bay took a couple of hours. It was easier than last time we'd made the journey. It had been winter then, and progress was faster when I didn't need to slog through snowdrifts.

The police escort that had tailed us shyed back once we left V-town. The forests were the

domain of the hunters, not the police. The dogs wouldn't dare to tread here.

The signs of civilization around the human encampment had grown in the last few months. At first there had been little here but a collection of almost collapsed buildings, now there were fields and fences.

And they still had sentries.

They, thankfully, didn't try to smack me with a rock first and ask questions later this time. A half dozen humans armed with spears stood on the road before us. They'd been sitting in a small watch station.

They didn't look overly hostile, once you got past the knives and spears they were holding. I couldn't help but notice they were all male.

We were still a fair ways off when they began shouting at us.

"Take off! We don't need your kind here." It wasn't until we'd gotten closer that their tone changed. "Hey... don't I know you?"

Frankly, I wasn't sure if they were referring to Rebecca or I. She didn't have her cat costume on anymore.

One of the humans waved a finger at me. "Yeah, you're the wolf who was camped nearby last winter. What ever happened to you, furball? We almost starved when you stopped bringing in food." His voice wasn't quite accusatory, but he didn't sound happy with me either.

"I had to leave." I shrugged. "There was a problem back in V-town and I had to go."

"And leave us?" One of the other humans laughed. "Darn good thing too. The morons running this place had to start getting along once they didn't have you to fight over any more." He grinned, "Though I wouldn't mind you bringing in some meat again. I never expected to become a vegetarian when I came out here." He pointed a thumb towards a field off to one side of the road. It hadn't existed a year ago. "Farming is hard work. I'd almost rather be back in V-town, even if they were trying to kill me. Being a banker was a cushier living."

All the men laughed along with him.

I waited until they died down before speaking again. "I may have an offer to interest you then." I had their attention now. "There has been a... policy change in V-town. Things didn't go well after the quake, and we might be ready to start taking humans back in." I paused for a moment, a slight grin creeping to my face. "Those of you who want to come, of course."

One of the human's rolled his eyes. "Bugger it all, man. Do you know what we've had to go through to survive out here? I'd take my apartment any day over the hole in the ground I'm sleeping in now."

I held up one hand. "Sounds good to me, but let's not all run back just yet. Who's in charge now? I need to get the lines of communication open."

One of the guards just flicked his head back towards the village. "The elders. Same as always. We've got a few new ones since you were last here, but you should be able to find them no problem."

Some guards these were. They let the three of us pass without so much as a 'by your leave', not even bothering to escort us.

Walking into town, I noticed that *someone* had definitely been here before us. It wasn't that the place was exactly built up now, but there were things that could only have come from V-town.

Cloth and fabric, small pieces of furniture. Someone had been trading here, though for what I couldn't imagine.

Jon and I got no shortage of nervous glances as we walked down the streets, being the only non-humans here, but no one screamed and ran away.

It took me a moment to remember where I was going. The place wasn't large, but it had been a

while since I'd last walked its dirt streets.

One of the larger and better kept up structures had been designated the 'town hall'. It was more of a catchall building, but the folks who ran the town seemed to be there more often than not.

Stepping into the shadows, my eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light. I could make out a dozen men and women seated in the room. All conversation stopped the moment we entered.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything." My voice was weak as I searched around the room for the old woman I'd seen every other time I'd spoken to the consul. She was conspicuously absent.

"You're the wolf," one of them said.

Well, I guess I was going up in the world. I wasn't just *a* wolf anymore, I was *the* wolf. At least according to the humans of Horseshoe Bay.

I shuffled nervously on the dirt floor. "Yeah. I am,"

One of the men in the back stood up, levelling a finger at me. "You abandoned us when we needed you! You were supposed to teach us how to hunt, help us drive these other morons from the consul. I lost my son because of you!"

"Shut up, Dave!" the man beside him hissed as he pulled him back into his seat.

A man at the front stood up, more calmly than the other. His hair was grey and thinning, but he'd grown out a formidable beard. He took a few steps towards me. It was only then that I noticed Rebecca and Jon were still hanging back by the door, leaving me alone in the centre of the room.

"You've returned, wolf. Why did you come back after all this time?"

I let out a huff. "I have a name. It's Tommy."

The human rose his gaze to look me in the eyes. "Right now you're *wolf*. You're not one of us. You have to prove that we can trust you."

I felt a growl claw at the back of my throat. "Trust me? I was the one who saved you lot and got you here in the first place! I was the one who helped hunt to keep you alive in the winter! *I'm* not the one who has to earn anyone's trust around here. You'd all be dead if not for me."

"That is true." The man held my gaze, "But were you not the one tasked in killing us? Did you not lead at least two of our kind to death before your... change of heart?" He eyed Rebecca wearily.

I let out a sigh and forced myself to calm. "I'm here on official business anyway." I extended a hand to the man, slowly, palm up. "I'm here to invite all the humans of Horseshoe Bay back to V-town. I can't completely guaranty your safety from any and all, but I can promise you that it is now the government's official stance that you are full citizens again and you won't be hunted for what you are."

"That's a charming offer," came the man from the back, "But why should we believe you? For all we know it could just be a trick to get us back in the city where you'll kill us all."

I couldn't keep my fur from bristling out now. "This is no trick. Do you really think that we'd need to get you back into the city to kill you? The hunters could pick you off without a thought out here if the order had been given. The government wanted you dead, but that's changed now."

"Changed?" The man who stood in front of me fought for attention. "How?"

I stepped back slightly, lowering my head, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"I'm mayor now."

A murmur quickly broke out among the humans. There was no attempt to silence it.

"You'll have to excuse us." He gave me a push back towards the door. "But we are on a busy schedule and have much to discuss."

I was back out of the building with Jon and Rebecca, standing on the street before I even had a chance to utter a word. The door slammed behind us.

"Well, that went... not quite as expected," was all I could say.

Rebecca took my arm, pulling me gently down the street. "You've given them a lot to think

about, Wolfy. We're confused enough, and we've had a couple of weeks to deal with this. They've had all of two minutes."

I smiled, pulling her closer. "Well, as long as everything goes well and they come back to V-town. I Don't like the feeling of having them out here all alone."

Rebecca shook her head. "We're not defenceless, Tommy. Just look what's been done here in only a year. The place may not be thriving, but everyone is getting by."

I huffed out a breath. "It's not Horseshoe Bay I'm worried about, babe. It's V-town. Things haven't been the same. We're all human, Babe, in at least some small way. I'm afraid that without the real humans folks will start to forget that."

We rounded a corner, there was a group of children here, rolling pine-cones in the dirt. They could have been kits or cubs from any street in V-town, but they were all human. The only difference was that those back in town would more than likely be playing with bones.

"What do we do now, Sir?" Jon asked from behind me.

I shrugged. "Who knows. I guess we hang around and see if any good comes from this, then we scamper on home."

It wasn't that I was expecting much, but *something* would have been nice. We stayed until the sun kissed the horizon, but the elders never came out of their hall. I almost got the feeling the they were waiting for me to leave.

The walk back to V-town wasn't quite as exciting as the journey out had been. On the way north I'd been excited, happy to stretch my legs and see the humans again. Now it just felt like I was weighed down with infighting.

Not to be confused with the weight of Rebecca on my arm -- that I was more than happy to bear.

My stomach was growling by the time the weathered spires of V-town were poking over the trees. Gods, the last thing I'd had to eat was... I wasn't even sure, I hadn't even had my beer back at the bar.

The police didn't seem to be around when we stepped back into town. No real surprise, we'd come back a different way then we'd left.

Ducking and diving through the streets, I realized that we were getting close to my old place. And the street full of food venders near by.

"Hey, babe, feel like a bite to eat?"

She eyed me wearily. "You tend to go for the *odder* fair, Wolfy. I'm not sure I quite trust you."

"Aw, babe," I pulled her closer to me, feeling her press into my coat, "We've together this long and you still don't trust me? I'm hurt! Besides," I couldn't help the laugh the sneaked into my voice, "A little raw meat is good for you, it'll put some fur on that pale skin of yours."

She made a slight 'eek' sound and tried to pull away. I didn't let her escape.

"I thought you liked me just the way I was, *Wolfy*." She reached up to poke my nose.

I just chuckled. "I do, babe. Just the way you are. But, hey, a guy can dream, can't he?"

It was well after supper hour by the time we made it to the food district. Most of the venders were still open, but they were in the process of cleaning up.

"Grab what you want, babe. Meet you back here?"

She nodded and headed off towards one of those odd places that sold cooked food. Even with my brief time as a human I still didn't care for the stuff.

I was just about to head off to my old standard, Cub-caf, when I began patting down the pockets of my vest. Oops. A half dozen pockets in this thing and I hadn't a dollar on me.

I didn't even have a chance to turn around before I felt Jon discreetly press a small wad of bills

into my palm.

"Thanks, Jon. You're a lifesaver." I grinned at him. "Do you want me to pick you up anything?"

He shook his head. "We may look similar, Sir, but we have... different tastes. I don't care for raw meat as my only meal."

He headed off towards another stall as I bellied up to Cub-caf and ordered a slab of moose and a side of mice.

Gods but it's been a long time since I'd been down here. I used to practically live off this stuff. The last time I'd been here was... it was with English, just after our first hunt.

Huh. I took my food and began looking for a place to sit down. There was plenty of space now, most of the benches were empty.

I didn't have the willpower to keep from digging into my meal the moment I sat down. Frankly, it didn't taste as good as I remembered. I thought I'd been spoiled before when I'd been growing up with the meat my father had brought home -- it was worse once I'd gotten used to hunting for myself. It just wasn't the same when you didn't chase down your own dinner, there was no sense of *accomplishment*.

I had my head buried in the wax paper, ripping the meat within to shreds when a boom echoed through the street.

My head popped up. Huh? What was that? Looking around, everyone else on the street was as confused as I was. That almost sounded like a--

I didn't even have the time to complete my thought. Another boom and my right shoulder lit up like someone had stabbed me with a hot poker.

A scream escaped my lips as I fell from my seat and rolled under the bench. Okay, now there was no doubt. That was a gun.

The street around me had been curious, but not worried. My cry had sent them over the edge. I still doubted that anyone else truly realized what the sound was, but they were running and screaming now.

"Tommy!" I looked up to see Jon's face inches from mine. "It's not safe to stay here, Sir."

"Really? You think?" I had to speak through gritted teeth. I could feel each and every beat of my heart as my wound throbbed.

"Can you walk?" He was already pulling me towards him, dragging me to my knees.

"I can try." I looked over at him. "The real question is can I run?"

The answer, it seemed, was yes. We set off at a sprint, dashing across the narrow street into one of the shadowed alleyways. Another shot rocked the air as we ran. It kicked up a spray of concrete a foot to my left.

With me safely tucked behind a heavy metal garbage bin, Jon popped his head out to see what was going on. It was almost knocked off when Rebecca came hurtling in. She skidded to a stop and pressed herself in next to me.

"Tommy! You're wounded."

I couldn't help but grin. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

The bleeding had already begun to slow, but the bullet had gone all the way through the meat of my right shoulder. It had only just hit me, leaving a furrow in my flesh. Rebecca had pulled off her jacket and wrapped it around me.

"Thanks, babe." I winced when she pulled the makeshift bandage tight.

"The service should be here in moments, Sir." Jon's voice was calm, but I could hear the slightest note of panic. "This is already an unusually long delay in response time for a major public

disturbance like this."

A couple of minutes passed and there was no sound of dogs running our way. There was however the boom of a half dozen more shots. They were getting closer, forcing the three of us further back into our little safe-haven.

"Jon," I had to clench my teeth as I felt my shoulder start pulling back together, "I don't think they're coming. Do you know where the shooter is?"

The dog's eyes were wide. "I... yesir. The assailant is across the street. On the roof of the third building to the right."

"Okay." I took a deep breath as my shoulder popped. "Can we get to him?"

He shook his head. "Physically possible, Sir, but I can't leave you here."

"Jon," I reached out my good hand to grab his mussel, "How about I make that an order? Either you go up there or I do."

"Yesir." He shot Rebecca a quick glance, than was off down the alleyway, keeping out of sight of the sniper.

"Come out, you worthless wolf!" Much to my surprise our attacker's voice was feminine. And... sounded human.

Voices were funny things, sometimes you could tell a species by them sometimes you couldn't. She didn't have the underlying growl of a canine, nor the rolling purr of a feline. There were a dozen species our attacker could be, but she *sounded* human.

I glanced over at Rebecca, she gave me a puzzled shrug. "Well," she whispered, "I guess that would explain the gun."

I just shook my head.

"We need to keep the shooter occupied long enough to let Jon sneak up on her." I just realized that we could have more than one person trying to kill me this time. Yeah, that would just be great.

I poked my nose around the edge of the garbage bin for a quick peek. I was rewarded with a jolt of pain as my whiskers were shot clean off.

"Gah!" I pulled back in.

Rebecca almost thought I was wounded again before she saw what happened.

She laughed. "You look unbalanced."

I rubbed my lip as I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for the sympathy." Leaning forward, I pressed a finger to her chest. "You stay here. You can't regenerate from a bullet hole, I can." It was true, my shoulder was halfway to healed.

"But..."

I didn't give her a chance to argue as I leapt out from our hiding place, drawing the fire away from her as I sprinted down the street.

Three more shots rang out in quick succession. Oops, I hadn't counted on the shooter being able to do that. What was it, an automatic? Gods, the only other gun I'd ever seen was Renfru's up in the mountains, but of course *this one* has to be military grade.

Flecks of concrete and wood flew into the air around me as I ran. They erupted so fast that I could feel the flying shards slice into me, even through my fur.

I dove behind a tree that was growing in the centre of the street. Well, that wasn't a good idea. Not only was it not large enough to hide behind, but the shooter's gun pierced right through it. She almost gave me an unwanted haircut as one of her bullets flew between my upright ears.

"Would you stop shooting?! What do you want?" I was nearly out of breath as I yelled. I'd only just dived behind a concrete flower box when another round of shots rang out.

"Come out here and face me like a man, you dog! Or is that too much for you?" She was

laughing now. "I'm going to get well paid for this, but killing you is worth it alone."

I poked my head above the box and felt a bullet graze the tip of one of my ears.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now I was laying on the ground, as far in the safe shadow of the box as I could, clutching my ear. When am I going to learn to stop poking my head out for a look *when the other person has a gun?*

Some days I just *feel* dumb, other days it's proven to me.

I heard something from the direction of the shooter. The gun went off again, but it wasn't directed at me.

A scream, and I heard the wet crunch of a body hitting the ground.

"Jon?" I decided to play it safe and stay in my hidy-hole.

There was no answer.

"Jon?" I shouted it again, louder this time. Still no answer.

I snuck a quick peak over the edge of my cover. No one shot at me. A couple dozen meters away I could see the body of a human laying twisted and broken on the ground. The blood had exploded from her when she hit. It reminded me of my first hunt with English.

I shook my head. "Jon," I shouted up to the rooftop, "I would have preferred if we'd taken her alive. You know, for questioning."

There was still no answer.

Oh no.

"Rebecca!" I yelled as I began running. A moment later she was by my side.

We ran to the fire escape up the back of the building -- likely the same way Jon had gone up. Unlike him, we didn't mask our footsteps as we climbed.

I leapt onto the roof, not sure what I'd find, and not sure I really wanted to know.

At first I didn't see anything on the loose gravel roof. It took me a moment to find Jon's brown furred form. He was crumpled on the ground, laying motionless near the edge. Even from this distance I could smell the blood.

"Tell me you're okay, Jon." I reached out my hands tentatively towards him. He lay on his side, back to us. I couldn't even see him breathing.

His body was still warm when I rolled him over. It wasn't until I'd put him on his back that a shuttering breath came from him.

His eyes were clenched shut but his lips were moving. He was saying something, but I couldn't make out the words.

Turning to Rebecca, I pointed back at the stairs. "Go. There should be a police station two blocks east."

She didn't even say a word before she was off, feet kicking up gravel as she sprinted across the roof.

"Just hold on, Jon. We'll get help."

I didn't know much first-aid. I'd never had to learn, as I tended to regenerate, but I had picked up a little while I'd been looking after Rebecca last winter.

Jon was clutching his gut with both hands. Ever so gently I pulled them away to get a look at his wound.

He'd been shot. There was a puncture mark in his abdomen. There was blood leaking from his back. The shot had gone right through him.

Pulling off my vest, I ripped it to shreds with my claws. Jon wasn't wearing anything but his own green vest, I slowly peeled it from his damp fur.

"Just hold on, Jon. Help is on the way."

His voice rose slightly when I said that.

I began binding the shreds of my vest around him. Gods, I didn't even know how tight to make it. Every time I tried to cinch the bindings Jon winced. He even began to whimper. I'd never heard the dog whimper.

It took everything I had to pry Jon's hand from the wound and bandage my fabric in place.

He was muttering louder now. I soothed the fur of his brow back as I waited. I'd done everything I could.

I almost leapt straight into the air when one of his hands wrapped around mine.

"Tommy," His voice had become clearer, more focused, "I'm sorry. I failed."

"What?" I knelt down before him, trying to meet his eyes. They were foggy and unfocused.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I was supposed to protect you. I've failed."

"You've done great, Jon. You've been good."

His body was beginning to tremble now, his muscles convulsing and shuddering.

"Stay with me, Jon." I set my hand on his shoulder. "Help is on the way, stay with me."

It couldn't have been more than a half hour before I heard the sound of feet running up the fire escape, but it felt like days.

Jon had stopped shaking now, and I doubted that was a good sign. His breathing had become shallower and shallower, to the point now that his chest hardly lifted.

"Stand aside." I was roughly pushed out of the way by a... something in a paramedic's uniform. I was too strung out to even see who or what he was.

A moment later I felt a pair of hands on my shoulders, pulling me back. I spun with a snarl only to see Rebecca's pale face.

"It's okay, Tommy. We have help."

I looked behind her to see at least two dozen police officers fanning out over the rooftop, they were followed by another half dozen paramedics.

It was all I could do to pull Rebecca into my arms and sink slowly to the ground, feeling the rough gravel shift beneath me.

It was nothing to fear for my own life, but when those around me began to fall...

I clutched Rebecca tighter.