

The Diplomats



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Chapter 9: Something Blue

For once, I didn't mind the police presence as they closed in around me. More than once the pack of them tried to shuffle me off, but I wasn't leaving without Jon.

A stretcher arrived eventually, carried by two horses dressed in white. I was just glad they weren't wearing black.

I couldn't even see Jon for the mass of medics that surrounded him. I tried to fight my way closer, to get a look at him before he was taken off, but I was stopped in my tracks when I saw his arm fall limply off the side of the stretcher.

I only caught a glimpse of it for a split second, but it ran my blood cold.

Rebecca clutched tightly to my side as we followed the stretcher up the street. I was expecting them to make a beeline to the nearest hospital, but instead they ran non-stop all the way to the still being rebuilt V-town general.

Into the emergency, I was stopped after a few steps by a rather large orderly.

"Don't care who you are, no one but the doctors and nurses get into the operating room."

We took a seat in a small private waiting room, the dogs standing guard outside.

I hadn't the slightest who designed these rooms, but they seemed to do their best to *not* make you feel any better.

A couple of sofas, an end table, and a few pieces of gods awful art were all that could be found. Well, that and a pamphlet entitled 'How to deal with a loved one's loss'.

I didn't bother with the pamphlet. It got crumpled into a ball and thrown across the room.

There was no window into the operating room, no indication what was going on. There wasn't even a clock.

One of the police dogs did poke his head in, carrying a pitcher of water and two glasses. I wasn't sure if I wanted to rip his whiskers off or hug him.

And still we waited. It must have been two hours by now. I'd been dozing off, Rebecca on my lap, when my ears twitched at a scuffle outside.

"Sir, you can't..."

"... bugger off!"

There was the thunk of someone being pushed up against the wall, then the door opened.

English strode in with a bag in his hands, shouldering the door firmly shut behind him.

"Mate, Lass." He was sitting on the threadbare sofa beside me, almost before I had time to blink. A second later I felt his arm over my shoulder.

"Came as soon as I heard." A grim smile was pinned on his face. "I guess this is your first time, eh?"

"Huh?" I was just waking up, it was an effort to focus on him. Rebecca was still asleep on my lap.

"First time waiting on the ER." He angled his head towards the wall. "You weren't in the bounty hunting biz long enough to have to see many people go in." He paused for a moment, raising a claw to his lip. "But I do distinctly remember you doing something like this to the Lass and I not so long ago." He laughed, a hard and sudden sound in the small room. "And, if I recall correctly, it was for something a touch more serious than having a small hole poked through you."

"It's not the same..." I tried to shake my head, but I could barely move. "He can't regenerate like I can." I paused for a moment, sucking in a long breath. "And I ordered him to do it. Gods, English, I ordered him to go up there alone. We could have run, we could have hid, but I ordered him to go up there alone and fight, unarmed, with someone *I knew* had a gun."

The lion's arm tightened around me. "You did what you thought was best, Tommy." His accent was almost completely gone. "Run and she would have followed you, hide and it would have just been a matter of time. Jon agreed to take the job, we all know what it means to protect someone. Bugger, Tommy, I can't even count the number of partners I've sent to the ER. Most of them for something stupid I did. You don't *try* to hurt people, but it just seems to happen. You did the best you could." He paused for a moment. "You just have to keep telling yourself that. It's the only thing that makes it bearable." He forced up a smile with some effort. "That, and a good waiting spread."

He pulled open the bag he'd brought with him, dumping it on the table. It was loaded with all manner of food and treat. Every kind of sugary confection and sweet tooth aching delight I'd ever seen. It even had a fist sized chunk of chocolate.

"Happy food, mate." He'd affixed his accent firmly back in place. "Just remember that he's the one in there, not you. I'm not worried whats happening to Jon right now, that's the doctor's problem. I'm more worried about whats happening to the two of you."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he simply reached out and shoved a chunk of chocolate in.

"Eat up, mate. You're not getting out of this room until you've gained ten pounds. Jon will do as he will no matter what happens over here. Just be glad I brought my kit dry this time. I normally load up with scotch, but I figured we've both had enough to drink over the last few days."

I had no idea how long we spent in there. The next thing I knew I was being gently shaken awake by a police dog. Both Rebecca and English were sprawled out asleep on the couch to either side of me.

It took me a moment to realize it was Able.

"Sir." His face was unreadable. "I assumed you wanted to be notified as soon as Constable Oaks was out of surgery."

I felt my fut tighten.

"How is he?"

The dog's face softened slightly. "Stable. He's under heavy sedation, but he's asking for you."

I slowly got to my feet, doing my best not to wake either English or Rebecca. I did notice the lion's eyes flutter as I stepped away. He didn't make any motion to stop me.

The ICU was located right next to the Emergency suite. The number of beeping machines in

here set my teeth on edge the moment I stepped through the door.

They had Jon down at the far end. I wasn't surprised to see two uniformed police dogs standing at attention on either side of his bed. They stepped away as I approached.

"Hey, Jon." I opened my mouth to speak, but almost couldn't get the words out. The smell of drugs, along with omnipresent sickness and decay, was so strong that I could barely breathe.

I wasn't sure what to expect from Jon. He was laying still in the bed, a bleached white sheet pulled up to his chin.

I'd only just stepped up beside the bed when one of his hands shot out, faster than I ever would have expected. It was enough to make the dogs around me jump.

"Tommy," His voice was rough and cracked, like he'd be gargling on razor blades, "Are you alright? I was afraid she'd gotten you. I was..." He paused for breath before a cough wracked through his body. A small device mounted on the wall began beeping.

I laid my free hand over Jon's, his flesh was frighteningly cool to the touch.

"I'm alright, Jon. It's you we're concerned for. Just take it easy, you did a good job."

"I failed." A grimace pulled at his face, exposing his teeth. "I can't protect you while I'm in here."

I clenched his hand tighter. "That's alright, Jon. Perhaps it's my turn to protect you for a change."

"You?" His lips pulled up in a weak smile. "Tommy... Sir, I mean this with all due respect, but you won't last a day trying to run the government without me."

I smiled back. "I kind of expected that. We're already pulling together a party to try and get things going. It won't be the same as having you, Jon, but we'll make due. Don't worry about me. Just focus on getting back on your feet."

The machine above him beeped a few more times and a nurse ran over. When next I looked Jon's eyes were closed. He was breathing peacefully.

I gave English a shove when I got back to the waiting room. He opened his eyes without complaint.

"All go well, mate?"

I shrugged. "As well as could be expected." I turned back to Able. "What time is it?"

He answered without hesitation. "Four fifteen in the morning, Sir."

"Fine." I slipped my arms under the still sleeping Rebecca. "I'm heading back to my place, English. Do you want to crash there?"

"I thought you'd never ask, mate."

I couldn't help but notice how close the lion kept to me as we walked down the street. The dogs had a duty to protect me. English, he did it because he chose to.

Shouldering open the door to my apartment, I didn't get more than two steps before my nose began twitching at the scent of blood.

Both Amstys and Renald stood waiting for me, their chests soaked.

"I don't think I even want to ask." I pushed past them to set Rebecca down on the bed before returning to the main room to take a seat on my stool. It was rapidly becoming crowded in here. Not only was it Rebecca and I, but Amstys, Renald, English, and Able had followed me back from the hospital.

"Alright," I set my elbows down on the counter, "Anyone want to tell me what's going on *this time*?"

Not even English cracked a smile.

I had to level a glare at Amstys before he began to speak.

"I... uh, young master... I was contacted by the hunter's alpha and requested to help keep you alive." I rolled my eyes. Everyone seemed to want me either 'alive' or 'dead'. No one seemed to be interested in the 'left alone' option. "Renald and I followed you on your trip. We were about to... leave you after you'd returned to the city, when we realized you were being followed."

I cocked an eye ridge at him, "Followed?"

Renald butted in, "Yeah boss, by a couple of humans. We didn't think much of them at first. They weren't exactly scary looking. They kept their distance until the commotion began, then they pulled some tools from their clothing and began running towards you."

Three guesses on what the 'tools' were.

I let my head sink to the counter top.

"So I am right," I didn't bother to look up, "The whole of the world does want be dead."

I wasn't even looking his way, but I could still hear Amstys gasp. "No, young master, not me."

I waved a hand. "Out. Everyone out. You too, lion-boy. Able, deal with the extra two bodies and see what you can find out." I raised my head. It took everything I had to keep my teeth covered. "Now everyone out."

It was probably six o'clock by the time I slipped into bed beside Rebecca. I could have cursed the sun that was just beginning to peek over the horizon.

Rebecca was still in my arms when I woke, her face pressed against my chest.

"We're back home, Wolfy. Does that mean Jon will be alright?"

"Don't know." My lips were heavy with sleep. "He woke up for a few moments. All I know is he's not dead."

"Gods, Tommy." She pulled into me a hair closer. "What's going on? It feels like it's the genocide all over again." Her grip on my fur was so tight it was becoming painful. "That could have been you. I don't want to lose you... I've already lost too many."

I raised one hand to sooth back her hair. "I don't plan on going anywhere, babe."

I could hear shouting from out in the hallway, raised voices. One was definitely the police dog stationed out there... the other was harder to identify.

A moment later the front door to the apartment boomed open.

"Tommy! My friend, where are you?" Allen West.

I could feel Rebecca stiffen beside me as he invaded our home. It was no more than a heartbeat before I was on my feet and prowling out of the bedroom. I made no effort to make my coat lie flat or keep my lips down.

"What are you doing in here!" It wasn't even a question as the words snapped from my mouth.

The skinny raccoon was dressed in an immaculate suit, looking every bit as perfect as he had the evening I'd met him. I'd caught him rustling through some of the papers that the police dogs still brought every day. He didn't even have the decency to look ashamed, he just kept on flipping through them as he turned to greet me. He almost acted as though this was his own home, and that he hadn't just barged in on Rebecca and I.

"Tommy, Tommy," He was grinning ear to ear now, "I heard about what happened last night, and I just had to come and see you with my own eyes, to make sure you were safe."

I stepped up beside him and snatched the papers from his grasp. "You've seen me. Now, *get out*." My voice rose to a snarl.

The grin stayed plastered on his face like I'd met him with a handshake and a back slap. "But,

Tommy, my friend, I've come all the way to see you, I can't leave now when we have so much business to discuss." He sat himself down at the counter, in *my* chair. "We'll be having the election so soon, and by all means it looks like you might very well win. We have so much to discuss."

I turned my back to him. From the corner of my eye I could just see Rebecca, still in the bedroom. She was naked, and there was no way she could get to her clothes without exposing herself to West.

"Then you can make an appointment like everyone else." My voice was still rough, but I'd forced some small measure of civility into it.

"I did, my friend, but that blasted valet of yours just seemed to always be unable to book me. Tommy, I know you're a busy, busy man being mayor and all that, but can't you just make a little time for me?" He smiled broadly and winked. "I could be useful to you, my friend. I'm not all good looks, you know."

My urge right then and there was to turn around and rip the smile right off his smug face.

"My friend," he continued, "I'm willing to put an awful lot of money behind you." He rubbed his fingers together. "You and your pet dog Sayer have been doing a wonderful job of putting the city back together for me. It's been very... lucrative. I'd be willing to help make sure you win if you'd be interested the keeping the job."

Even if he'd been standing I would have had a good foot and a half on the raccoon. Sitting as he was I towered over him.

"I've already had *offers*, West." My hands were firmly at my side. I was afraid anywhere else and they'd be wringing his scrawny neck. "I didn't want their help, and I don't want yours. I don't even want this bloody job. Look what it's done to me! It's hurting everyone I love, driving me ragged, and not even getting me a shred in return."

The raccoon grew serious for a moment, the smile disappearing from his face. "You know, Tommy, that's only because you choose not to be rewarded for your efforts. Anyone working as hard as you deserves to get something back." The mischievous grin returned. "I have more money than I know what to do with, and yet," He waved a hand to the room around us, "You live in this near hovel. There is no need for someone of your talents to subsist on such base fare. I can provide you with everything you need." He cocked his head, "Your lion friend seems to do well enough, he's been quite a thorn in my side on more than a few occasions. I can offer you more wealth than he's ever seen."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sure you could try, but knowing English he's likely seen a lot. Take off, West. I don't grovel to people like you."

The smile hardly seemed to move on his face. "I don't want you to grovel, Tommy. I recognize talent when I see it. You'll work with me, not for me. I don't treat my partners as anything less. And you're a partner, Tommy. Someone as dangerous as you could never be anything but." He cocked an eye at me. "Take it from someone who's been the target of more than his fair share of assassinations, friend, I know what you're feeling. The fact you've survived so much alone speaks for you."

"I said take off, West."

He shrugged, still smiling, seeming unconcerned with my dismissal. "As you wish, friend. But I only ask you to keep an open mind. You've done so much for me already, I'd hate to lose such a valuable tool as you."

Peering out the door as West left, I could see a pair of large bears backing my police dog into a corner. They fell into line behind the raccoon as he walked down the hallway.

Sayer was the next to arrive. He, however, came at a more godly hour, and had to good sense to knock first.

I was quickly getting sick of all these comings and goings. It felt like I was back in the conga line again, shaking hands and kissing babies.

"What?" I didn't even bother to look up from the leftover leg of chicken I was gnawing my way through. There were hardly more than scraps left, but it was my breakfast.

"Commissioner Sayer here to see you, Sir," announced the dog in the hallway.

I just rolled my eyes. "Fine."

It took the old Dane a good five minutes to cross the few strides from the doorway to me. I used it to finish my meal.

With deliberate carefulness, the old dog slowly slid onto the stool across from me.

"I hear, Tommy, that even my best guard cannot seem to keep you safe."

I just shook my head. "From what, Sayer? The renegades out to kill me, or the mavericks out to recruit me?"

He ignored me as if I hadn't said a word. "So I'm sure you can now see why I take such precautions."

"Fine." I lowered my bone. "If you're putting so much effort into this, what do we know about the trouble makers?"

The dog avoided my gaze. "I'm not in the habit of discussing the particulars of ongoing cases..."

I slammed the bone down on the counter with enough force to make the dog jump. "Spill it, Sayer. We had a deal. I told you what we got from Quin, you tell me what you know."

"Very well..." He whetted his lips, "We took everyone from Club Bedlam in for questioning. There were... a large number of people we unavoidably ended up prosecuting for unrelated charges."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You can't tell me your dogs didn't know that place was there. It was as plain as the wet black nose on my face what they were up to. They even tried to offer to English and I while we were buying a drink."

The old dog huffed. "We are aware of certain spots of... contention. It is not possible to eliminate vice. We can only contain and control it, shape it."

"Shape it to your needs, Sayer? Gods, that sounds positively Machiavellian."

The dog wouldn't look up. "We do what we can, mayor. But may we return to the matter at hand, that of your safety."

"Yeah, yeah." I waved a hand. "Did you happen to bring in a woman named Molly?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "No. Should we have?"

I shook my head with a grim smile. "No. I'm sure it's nothing."

I could see the dog noting her name. That would make for a good time if Molly ever came my way again.

"What we did find, Sir..." He cleared his throat. "Was a cache of weapons. Unlike what has been seen in V-town for quite some time. I'm sure you're aware of their type."

"Guns." I nodded my head. "Human weapons." I'd never even seen a gun until I'd encountered Renfrew in the mountains. No one used guns when they had fangs and claws. Guns were too bulky, too obvious, too... artificial.

"Yes. It appears that there was an effort to stockpile them. They hadn't gotten far. The entire collection numbered less than a dozen, and it appeared that they were having difficulty acquiring more."

"Where are they now?"

He shrugged offhandedly, unconcerned. "They are under our control."

"And by 'ours', I assume you mean 'yours'."

He shrugged again. "I am a servant of the government. There is no difference."

"Right." I threw my head back and yawned. "And as for my latest encounter?" I paused for a moment. "No, first tell me how Jon is doing."

Sayer's eyes cast down for a moment. "He is better. My reports state that Constable Oaks was awake again this morning. His stay at the hospital will be extensive, but he is expected to be able to return to duty."

"A full recovery?" I couldn't help but hold my breath.

"My report would suggest it is a likely."

"Your report?" It just clicked in. "You mean you haven't gone down to see him?"

He didn't bother to look up. "It is not standard procedure for the police commissioner to go to the bedside of a mere constable."

"Mere constable?" The dog studiously avoided my eyes as I spoke. "Since when was Jon a *mere constable*? He's your nephew, isn't he? Throw it to the gods, I've never even heard him talk about his parents. As far as I know you're the only family he has, and you're not going to see him?"

The dog cleared his throat. "I'd prefer you didn't discuss his parents. You are not familiar with their lives. They were an... embarrassment. Young Jon developed his undercover persona from a childhood that I would prefer not to review. It would be inappropriate for me to bring up our relationship. I am the Commissioner of the V-town police force, and Constable Oaks is just that, a constable under my command. Nothing more."

"Listen, you sheet faced mongrel," Reaching out I grabbed the pale dog's mussel, dragging it up until he was forced to confront me. "I don't care who you think you are, but you're his only family. Either you go down there under your own power or I'll drag you there in front of your force."

The dog hardly even blinked. His composure didn't even slip a notch. "Mr. Taggert, I have done my best to ensure that I remain out of your personal life. I would be grateful if you were to do the same."

"Out of my personal life!" I nearly raked my claws down his face. "I don't even have a personal life any more thanks to you. You dragged me into this knowing full well what was going to fall on me. You didn't warn me, you didn't even give me the slightest choice. You pitted me against everyone I love to further your own ends. You can't even leave me well enough alone with the hunter's alpha, my very own father. To the renderers with your dirty little family life. Either you go down there or I'll drag you by your tail like a delinquent pup!"

I finally let go of him. He hung there for a moment longer, like time wasn't moving.

"Very well, Mr. Taggert." He slowly pulled back. "I will visit my nephew. But I do so as my own choice." He raised his eyes to me now. His body was so frail that I almost couldn't believe the steel in his gaze. "Not because the mayor of V-town has ordered me. I will serve you in every capacity I am able, Mr. Taggert, as I do each and every citizen, but you will not presume upon my personal life."

I laughed. "If you'll do the same for me, Sayer, then we have a deal."

For the first in a long time, I had a few moments to myself. Rebecca had disappeared across the hall to her old apartment, and no one else seemed to want to bother me just yet. I didn't even have any mountains of paperwork to distract me.

I wanted to be out, away, anywhere but here, but not even I was stupid enough to try that after yesterday.

Looking out the window of the bedroom, I could still taste Rebecca's scent on the air. Heh, I guess that was about the only thing going well these days.

Behind me, out in the main room, I heard a loud knock on the front door. The perfect measured

rap of a police dog.

"Yes?" I called.

"Sir," his voice was muffled by the door, "I have a collection of people down in the lobby who claim to have reason to meet with you. Their spokesperson is an oni named Max..."

I opened the door before he'd even the chance to finish. "Send them in."

If nothing else, I had to give Max credit. He certainly knew how to spend English's money. I hadn't given him any real directions on what he was supposed to do other than 'make me a party'. He seemed to have taken the cause to heart.

A dozen people were pressed into my small room now. Max had introduced them all one at a time as they'd entered, extolling their virtues. I wasn't sure if he was expecting me to reject any of them, but just about everything he was saying about 'campaign adviser' and 'five years experience with the Conservative party' went over my head like a paper airplane.

I almost felt like I was back on the conga line, I shook hands and exchanged pleasantries until everyone was either seated or at least fighting for a place to stand.

"So, uh, Tommy. What do you think?" Max was shifting nervously from one foot to the other in front of me. I was on my stool again. There were few places to sit, but I made use of the 'this is my apartment' rule for getting a seat.

I shrugged. "Can you guys win me the election?" There was a round of murmurs and a few nervous smiles from the men and women around me. My only response back was to nod at Max and to say, "Works for me. Get to it."

His jaw dropped open. "But don't you want to interview people first? Get to know them, craft a platform?"

I shook my head. "Not in this lifetime. You picked them, Max. That's good enough for me. You know who I am, you know how I think, *you* make the platform. I've had gods know how many people try to kill me in the last few days. I'm going to worry about staying alive and keeping the city from crumbling. You guys figure out how to keep the real monsters from getting the office while I keep *this* monster from doing anything stupid."

"But... but..."

I held my hand up to Max.

"English is paying you guys, right?" Everyone nodded. "Then consider yourselves Storm Front, political division. Everyone else just has to worry about blood and guts, you guys need to deal with the truly dirty stuff -- politics." A couple of folks grinned, but most of them looked at me like I was speaking martian. "Everyone here does what Max says. Any questions, go to Max. Any concerns, go to Max. Any problems, go to Max. Any death threats, come to me. Get the picture? Good. Now go off and do whatever it is you need to do to win a clean election. Except you." I pointed at the oni.

Everyone else filed out of the room while Max took a seat at the table across from me.

"Are you serious about this, Tommy? No one can win an election this way."

I shook my head. "I don't want to win, Max. I just want to make sure none of the real monsters do. Any idea who's running against me?"

He rolled his eyes. "That was the first thing I checked when I walked downtown to make sure you were registered to run. Gods, Tommy. You hadn't even registered to formally run as a candidate in the election." I didn't even bother to respond. "Anyway, you have four other major parties. The two three shouldn't be a problem. The first is the V-town Conservative party lead by Jim Clark. The next is the V-Town Liberals with Paul Khrétien. Neither of them are organized enough anymore to be a major problem. The real issue is going to be the Progress party."

I rolled my eyes. "And who do they have running."

Max paused for a moment. "They presented their candidates yesterday. Jameswell, with Hayfair as his vice."

I just about choked on my own tongue. "You've got to be kidding me! I just can't get away from those two. I told them off back at KDP and now they want to run the city? What's their platform, 'vote for us, we'll ruin the place'?"

Max struggled to hold back a grin. "No one knows yet. None of the parties have released much. Especially us. All I know for sure is that one of the major backers for the Progress party is KDP."

"Figures." Wait a second... isn't KDP owned by West? Gods. I sunk to the counter before me, letting my forehead rest on the cool surface.

"What is it, Tommy?"

I let out a groan. "I snubbed West, the owner of KDP, this morning. He must have heeled those two in an effort against me. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I really need to learn not to piss off people with wads of money larger than my head."

I felt Max's hand on my shoulder. "That can't be it. They announced Jameswell and Hayfair yesterday."

I lifted my head. "Then why would West come to me this morning and offer to back me when he's already got the Progress party in his pocket?"

Max shrugged. "Don't look at me. You're supposed to be the boss here."

I levelled a finger at him. "I'm formally giving that title to you, Max. You're the one with at least *some* political experience, this is your game now. Do what you think is right. I'll go in public and read whatever speeches you want me to, do whatever you think is best. This is your game. I need to worry about staying alive."

Max grinned, though the smile looked haunted. "That might be a good idea. I can't sell a dead candidate, even if he is the sitting mayor." He paused for a moment, eyeing me critically. "But how did you do it, Tommy? The city truly is doing better than anyone ever expected."

I shook my head. "It really wasn't me. Sayer did everything. I'd let him keep it, but I doubt he'll live to see it through."

Max was gone soon after. I sat at the kitchen counter for a few moments longer, gently twisting my claws back and forth over its hard surface. I didn't really want to be mayor anymore, but I couldn't give it up to someone who would do something like what Jackson the Cat did. I shuttered at the thought of another genocide.

The door whispered open behind me again. It had to be Rebecca returning.

"Hey, babe," I said as I continued to drag my claws back and forth on the counter.

"I know we're close, mate, but doesn't calling me 'babe' break just a few too many boundaries?"

English whispered it in my ear as he wrapped his arms around me. It wasn't a totally bad thing, it kept me from falling off my stool as I yipped and leapt into the air.

"Gods, English..." He poked me in the nose until I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Gods, English, what are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?"

He grinned for a moment. "Nah, mate. You're harder to kill than that. I know. I've tried." His eyes darted back to the front door. "We need to talk."

I rolled my eyes. "Then lets stop whispering and start talking."

He gave me a quick glare. "Not here." His face pulled into a grimace. "Not near the Lass."

"What?" I nearly shouted that one. "Anything you can say..."

He clamped his hand around my mussel.

"Trust me on this one, mate, you're going to want to hear about this without needing to worry about the little lady walking in."

He was pulling me out of the room before I even had the chance to think twice. I only just got two words in edgewise with the dog guarding the door to let Rebecca know I'd be back.

Out on the street, the police honour guard closed ranks around me. There were more of them now, and they were... armoured.

Even during the riots I'd never seen the police in anything other than their simple blue uniforms. Now they were dressed in all black, the word 'POLICE' written across their chests in bold white type. The uniforms themselves were padded and fitted with sheets of metal. They looked like walking tanks. Though, I noted, only a single dog carried a riffle, and he looked uneasy about it.

It looked like there were starting to hand out training in how to use firearms.

The riots in front of the building had grown, there must be fifty people now, though they hardly looked anymore enthused than before. They tried to surge in our direction when they saw the mob of police dogs, but they were pushed away. Honestly, the cops didn't seem to be holding back. There were no claws, but I had a feeling that no too few people got elbows to their guts.

I pushed on, following English. The faster we walked the sooner we'd be away from the protesters. I was just short of sprinting.

Around a couple of corners and the protesters were left behind. The dogs fanned out around me, checking every alley and scanning each roof.

"English," I whispered, shoving the lion beside me, "You going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

He laughed. "I don't think you could, mate." He reached over and poked my shoulder. It was still a bit tender from the thwacking I'd received yesterday.

"This hasn't been a good week, English." I let out a huff. "And even if I can't, I seem to have a personal army who'd be more than happy to grind you into the ground if you even look at me funny."

"That they would, mate." The lion laughed again, but there was no humour in it. "Just come down to the café. I need a good breakfast, and I've a feeling you do too."

I couldn't argue with that. I'd hardly eaten anything since the goody bag English had brought with him yesterday. I'd pulled down enough sweets then to sate me for a month, but my body needed something more substantive for building my shoulder back up. I could heal from bloody well near anything, but it wasn't magic -- I needed the energy, and even just plain bulk, to put myself back together.

The lion didn't say a word as we walked down the street. Slowly, the roads became wider, tree lined boulevards replacing apartment blocks. Around here the signs of the quake were just about completely gone.

I took a moment to relax and enjoy the walk. A cool breeze was blowing in off the ocean, and the fall colours were just starting to show in the trees. Had it been that long? A year ago Rebecca and I were fighting for our lives. She'd been struck down just before winter had reared it's head for the first time that season. It was hard to think it hadn't been so long, yet in many ways it felt like it had been forever.

A few moments later the wrought iron gate of Café Bristol came into view. There wasn't a single person out on the patio at this time of day.

One of the guard dogs stepped in front of me just as I was about to pass through the gate.

"Please wait, Sir." His voice was low and muffled under his helmet. I was surprised he could even breathe in the thing.

Almost a dozen of the dogs ran into the café, spreading out and scouring every inch. They leapt into the small building like they expected to be pushed back by an army. A few moments later they came back out again with a handful of staff, a cook, a couple of waitresses, and a kitchen boy.

"You are the owner of this establishment, Mr. English?" One of the dogs had turned to him. His voice was flat and I couldn't see his eyes beneath his visor.

"Yes." English was taking this surprisingly calmly. "I purchased it after the quake."

"Are these your staff? No one is missing? There is no one here you do not recognize?"

"Yes. They're mine. All of them are mine." He nodded, voice slow and clear.

"Very well." The dog turned to the people that had been rounded up. "You may go about your business."

The other guard dogs had finished ransacking the building by now. They gave a thumbs up in our direction. All of the police fell back to positions around the edge of the café. I noticed that there were teams patrolling the streets around us.

One little attempt on my life... okay, two, and you'd think the whole city was at civil war again.

English selected a table in the middle of the patio, we had our choice as there was no one else here. A few seconds later a young rabbit waitress was out by our side.

"Morning, E." She winked at him. "Is this that little surprise you warned us about?"

He nodded. "And aren't you glad I gave you a heads up?"

She snorted.

"We gotten to expect stuff like this every time you come around. Shall I just get you the usual?" She grinned when English winked. "And what about your friend?"

"I'll just have a--"

"He'll have the same," English said, cutting me off. He poked a finger at my chest a moment later as the rabbit scampered away. "No friend of my is going to go hungry in my very own restaurant." He laughed, "Even if he is the good for nothing mayor."

I leaned back against the hard iron of the seat, closing my eyes for just a second as I spoke, taking in the moment of peace. "So, are you going to tell me what the big deal is?" I opened one eye, glaring at him. "And what you couldn't say around Rebecca?"

He steadfastly ignored me, sitting back himself and letting his mane ruffle in the cool breeze.

"You know I picked this place up for a song, mate? After the quake the owner was dead and there was no one left to run it. I picked it up for a song, really, I told them a grand tale about how I wanted to keep the place open and the staff jumped to follow me. I hardly had to spend a dime to get ownership of the land and everything on it. A good replacement chef, that, mate, that was a whole different problem. You should have seen some of the hacks..."

He was rambling on when I reached across the table to give him a good jab in his flat, upturned nose.

"Get to it, pussy-cat. You didn't drag me out here to show off your burgeoning culinary empire. What's going on?"

He huffed out a breath. "You know how to ruin a good lead up, don't you, mate? I was going to loop around with a story of how I found this place, the way they'd originally been serving Indian food..."

I jabbed him again. "Last chance, feather-duster-for-a-tail, before I start carving it out of you."

That got him to stick out his tongue at me for just a moment.

"All right, all right. I had some of my bounty hunters doing extra duty ever since I heard about your last little encounter. Seeing how it was humans who attacked you, I decided to put my men around the edge of the city -- a little ways further out than the police like to go. They caught and talked

up every human who came by."

"And by 'talked up' you mean?"

"Just that, mate." He let a slight smile creep to his lips. "I'm no monster. They were under strict orders just to talk, to chat up a conversation with any human who came by, and fish out whatever information they could. And, mate, did we get something juicy."

I let my head sink to the table. I still couldn't get English to the point. A moment ago he wouldn't talk about it, now he wouldn't stop. He knew he had something good, and he was going to draw it out for all it was worth.

"First off, mate, whatever you said out at the 'Bay, it must have worked. There are what, a thousand humans at most out there? At least six hundred are back in town. They've been trickling in at all hours, slowly filtering back into the city like they'd never left. It's scary, mate. We could all feel it when the humans were gone, but now they're back and you couldn't tell it for any other day."

"Anyway," He cleared his throat, "Not the least of the people we found coming on back was that group of elders. They caught on real quick that you were the new mayor, and even quicker that there's an election coming up. You'd almost think they were sharks, mate, the way they moved. They knew there was a shift in power coming up, and they were going to do their darnedest to be right in the middle of it."

"The key point, mate, is they want to see some commitment from you before they'll vote your way. They're just as likely to field their own candidate if they could, but we all know that's not going to happen. Gods, mate," He shook his head, "We saved their hairless little hides and they still won't vote for you unless you show them some commitment to their grand human design."

My head was still resting on the cool metal of the table. I didn't bother to look up as I spoke. "*Commitment?* What do they want from me, English? Shave myself bald in solidarity? I saved them, kept them alive through the winter, then welcomed them back with open arms. What more do they want?"

I could hear him chuckle. "You weren't listening, mate. I told you exactly what they want. *Commitment.* They think that little fling you're having with the Lass is the only reason you care about them. They think it could end at any time as soon as your little romantic interlude sours."

I just put my hands over my head. "That's not the way it works, English. I'm looking out for the humans because..." It dawned on me. I raised my head to stare into his wide grin. "Oh gods, you're not telling me they won't support me unless I..."

He nodded. His grin was so wide now that I could have fit a building into it.

"You got it, mate. They want a physical sign of your position. They want something you can't just drop and walk away from."

"But..." My mind was spinning, I could hardly think. "But I'm a wolf... we mate for..."

"Yep." He leaned back again, kicking his feet up on the table. "You already made the decision from your kind's point of view. Humans are funny people. They don't seem to think it's real without a ring."

"Gods..."