

# 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 7:  | Dealing With Dominance.....                            | 80  |
| Chapter 8:  | The Open Party.....                                    | 93  |
| Chapter 9:  | Something Blue.....                                    | 107 |
| Chapter 10: | Bent Knee and a Bruised Head.....                      | 119 |

## Chapter 10: Bent Knee and a Bruised Head

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My cursing was cut short as the rabbit walked back towards our table. In one hand she hefted a massive plate piled high with every type of food I could imagine, in the other she held a couple of mugs and a pot of steaming tea.

"All for you, E." She laughed and winked as she set the plate down.

Conversation was just short of impossible after that. I hadn't realized just how hungry I was until the scent of food hit me flat in the face.

I'd seen English eat before, and was smart enough to keep my hands back until he'd filled his maw. The lion tore into the food like there was no tomorrow. He was already in the three-hundred pound range, and likely would be double that if he didn't chase down criminals for a living.

I made a fairly good dent in the meal myself. Unlike before the Cataclysm, we don't have much use for preserved or processed food anymore -- folks only eat that kind of junk when they haven't any other choice. I did notice that English had called the platter with some bread and vegetables, for my benefit no doubt. I'd never seen him down anything but meat, tea, and alcohol.

Being canine, I do have a touch wider palate than the cat, but I was in no mood to exercise it. I dug into the meat before me and ripped it to shreds. Fresh and raw, it had likely been between the teeth of one of my father's hunters not forty-eight hours previous.

The towering plate of food had been an imposing sight not moments before, but between us we decimated it in no time flat. I had to give it to the dogs that surrounded me, I'd be drowning in my helmet from drool if I were them, but yet not a single one twitched.

Sitting back with a full belly, I was unfortunately forced to think of the matters at hand.

"You're serious, English? The humans want me to marry Rebecca before they'll even think about supporting me?"

The lion belched loudly before speaking, leaning back in his chair, sleepy and content. "You got it, mate. Blame me for dragging you out of the apartment now? Bad news is always better with a good meal anyway."

"It's not *bad* news, English." I tried to grasp for the right words, "We're already bonded. It's not like we're far off..."

Wolves tended not to look at relationships quite the same way that humans do. We tend to be...

well, one partner type people. That wasn't to say that's how it always was, but just... that was the tendency. Wolves don't generally to marry as such, it was just accepted that once a wolf picked someone, that was who they stayed with for better or worse. Not always to the agreement of that other person.

English laughed, sparing a glance in my direction before returning his eyes to the cloudy sky. "You're telling me, mate. I was the one who was with you on the whole trek across the prairies." He laughed again. "Not quite the way I'd handle my life, but to each their own I guess."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess." I was just about to start wondering how, in all the gods' names, I was going to broach this to Rebecca when it hit me. "English?" I looked over at him, my tone falling. He was alert in seconds, leaning in towards me as I spoke, "Wasn't it three humans who tried to take me down yesterday?"

He shrugged. "You'd know more than I, mate. News only reported the one, the woman who shot Jon."

I shook my head. "Amstys and Renald said they both took down one a piece. They were all human."

His eyes narrowed. "Well, isn't that a coincidence. So soon after you got back from the 'Bay?"

I felt my ears pull back. "Something more is going on here. The humans out in Horseshoe Bay had more than they did last time I was there. They were obviously trading with V-town, but I couldn't imagine what they might have of value. Someone was out there recently, stocking them with supplies."

English rose ponderously to his feet, gut sagging before him. "You know, mate. I just happen to have some info on where the human elders took up residence upon returning. Think it's time we paid one a housewarming visit?"

The walk wasn't a long one, but my guard dogs got jumpier and jumpier with every step we took. The neighbourhood we found ourselves in now was strictly middle class, not all that different from where my own apartment could be found.

I noticed English nod slightly to a hyena in a red blazer as we passed. The other acted in kind but didn't follow us.

"This would be it, mate. My fellas say we can find at least one of them on the second floor."

I wasn't sure where I'd expected to find the human elders moved into, but this wasn't it. They'd just spent a year living out on the edges of civilization, fighting for their own survival after running for their lives from V-town. This was... it was too clean, too proletariat, too middle-class for someone who had just walked in from the wilds.

The building had weathered the riots and quake fairly well. It had its share of scars, but was about as well off as my own place. The inside was the same.

It was almost funny to see the dogs scamper around us. They ran here and there, trying to secure the area without even knowing where I was going.

Up on the second floor, I forced them to back off and away from the door before I knocked. I didn't need a pack of combat ready rabid dogs to scare off a human just hours after he'd come back to the city.

There was a long wait before I heard anything from the other side of the door. And almost five full minutes before a voice came from the other side.

I recognized it. English's sources were good. It was the lead man from the counsel I'd spoken to yesterday.

"Who is it?"

I cleared my throat and tried to sound official. Whatever 'official' was. "It's Tommy Taggart,

Mayor of V-town. I'd like to speak with you."

English leaned in, voice low and mischievous, "You *are* speaking with him, mate. Just might be easier without that door in the way."

I gave him a quick swat.

I could almost hear the human's mind turning as he decided whether or not to open the door.

"I just want to talk. That's all." I tried to sound reassuring as I spoke to the door.

A moment later the door swung open. The human behind it was smaller than I remembered. He was dressed in a bathrobe and had shaved himself almost completely hairless.

"Get in." He tried to peer around us as he spoke, stretching to see if there was anyone else in the hall. Both English and I made a point of blocking him from seeing the guard dogs.

Stepping in, the apartment was decent, but near completely unfurnished, and painted a plain and impersonal beige.

I made sure to snap the door firmly closed behind me with a foot before any of my guards could follow us in. At the edge of my perception I could just hear them snuffing around the door, trying to decide if they should break it down to get to me. I really hoped they wouldn't.

"What do you want?" The human had sounded nervous before, frightened and flighty. Now he was just annoyed. He was sitting on a cardboard box in the middle of the floor, looking skinny and pale, almost like a grub as he pulled a towel across his face to wipe away the last traces of a shower.

"We wanted to consult with you as an elder, Mr. ..."

He sighed as he tossed the towel on the floor. "Richard. I'm not an elder. There aren't any elders anymore. We're all just citizens again." He eyed me, "Isn't that right? We've come back to the city, we're all just normal people again. Just like you."

I had to laugh. Yeah, like *my* life had been normal since I'd gotten back.

"Yes, of course." I fell back on my haunches before him, bringing my face down to his level. "I'm just here to speak to you, to seek your consul."

"And what about him?" Richard jerked his head towards English, speaking about the lion like he was nothing more than dumb meat. For anything in the world English didn't seem to react.

"He's a trusted friend. I'm sure you remember him from your time at Horseshoe Bay. He's here as my friend. Nothing more."

Richard laughed. "So not only do you come in here with your fangs and claws to have *a nice little conversation*, but you bring along the biggest, most monstrous beast you could find?"

I could just see English's eyes narrow at that one.

"Richard." My voice grew hard. The human was drawing at what little patience I had left and I hadn't even gotten to ask him a single question yet. "I can't help what I am. Neither can English. We are as we were born, just the same as you."

The human sighed and slouched back on his box.

"Fine, what do you want, *mayor*? It wouldn't do me well to annoy the owner of town not a day after I move back into it."

I couldn't help but ask, "What happened to your head?" English laughed from beside me.

"What?" His hands went to his face, then up to his naked scalp. "Oh, that." He brushed himself, "I shaved it all off. The first thing I did after I got back to the city." A slight chuckle escaped him. "It grew long while we were out in the wilderness, but I just couldn't stand it the moment I got back to proper civilization."

"Sure." I tried to focus on his eyes and ignore his hairless body. I wasn't even going to think about asking just how far the whole shaving thing had gone. "How is Horseshoe Bay? How many people are left?"

He shrugged. "Not a lot. Most of us jumped at the chance to get back into the city. Our biggest problem was holding folks back once the news spread. There can't be more than a hundred people who didn't want to leave."

I looked over at English. He shrugged. Oh well, now on to the real meat of the questions.

I had to compose my face to keep calm as I spoke. Thankfully, most human's aren't all that good at reading canine expressions.

"I was attacked as I returned from our meeting yesterday. Almost killed."

The blood drained from the human's face. "Gods, is everyone alright?"

I shook my head. "No. My personal aid, and good friend, was wounded. Shot."

"Shot?" His face fell from shock to confusion. "Shot with what?"

I held his eyes now, refusing to allow him to look away. "A gun, what else? Human make."

If he'd been pale before, now we could just as well use his skin for chalk. "But..."

"And the shooter was human. A woman, with blond hair. She's dead."

"What?" He wavered, almost falling backward off his box. "You can't be serious. We couldn't have killed anyone. And not with firearms! We'd traded them all for..."

I just about leapt on his words. "What, Richard, you had guns and you traded them for what?"

He fell still now, voice lowering. "We were running low on supplies after you left, back a month ago. A group came from the city. No one knew for sure, but we'd assumed you'd sent them. They offered us food and supplies if we traded with them."

"You just let them into the town?" English broke in, leaning as near to the human as I was.

The human shrugged. "Why not? They didn't come into the town proper, just stayed at the edges like you did and offered to trade. They gave us almost anything we wanted in exchange for the guns. And after we ran out of them, information."

"You morons handed out killing machines to whoever asked in exchange for blankets?" English was a heartbeat away from throttling the man, his voice a low snarl.

I will give it to Richard, he held his ground against the lion.

"And what would you have done? We were cold and hungry, abandoned by the only people who had come to care for us. The guns were useless anyway. Hardly anyone knew how to shoot them, and we didn't have enough ammunition to hunt. We were happy to trade them and get them off our backs."

I took a deep breath before I spoke. "Okay, first thing, we didn't abandon you. We were all but run out of town during your little civil war at the 'Bay. Second thing, you said you also traded information?"

His face turned red now, more embarrassed about this than he had been about the weapons.

"Yeah," He averted his eyes, "After we ran out of guns they began asking questions. Once we'd had a taste of civilization again it wasn't like we could just stop. The questions weren't much anyway. They asked about the humans who were out here, how we'd escaped. They asked about how we survived out in the wilderness by ourselves. They asked out you."

"Define 'you'." I closed my eyes.

He shrugged. "All three of you. They were just as interested in your girlfriend as they were you, Tommy. It wasn't like they were asking anything sensitive. We didn't know anything important anyway. They just wanted to know everything they could. We dolled out little tidbits and stories about how you'd spent the winter with us. Everything we told them earned us another blanket or a tin of food. I can't even remember half the stuff we said. All I can tell you for sure is that we didn't make anything up. One of the men tried that once, the traders returned the next day and took everything they had given him. They also pounded him into a bloody pulp."

"And what exactly did you say about Rebecca? I've heard... rumours about some of the human's opinions on us." I had to tread carefully, I wasn't even sure what it was I wanted to say.

A grin touched his lips. "And I'll bet I've heard every one. You're not one of us, *Mr. Taggart*." He stressed my name, like it didn't belong to one such as I. "You saved us, sure, but why? It seems like an awful lot to go through for a little noggie."

I felt a growl clawing its way up my throat. "That's not what it--"

He laughed. "Sure, right. And you show me one politico who would ever admit to it. You've done us some good, and I'm sure we're all real thankful for it, but that was a year ago. What have you done for us recently?"

"Why you ungrateful little rat fu--" English's voice devolved into a snarl as he reached for the human. My intervention was the only thing that kept Richard's head attached to his body. It was like he hadn't even noticed. He kept lecturing on like nothing had happened.

"We all know how these things go. The two of you could break up at anytime. Then what would there be to endear us to you?"

Okay, I wasn't so sure that he was exactly *endearing* himself to me right now.

"And you want what?" I couldn't keep the exasperation from my voice. "You want me to get married just to prove a point?"

"No, Tommy." He shook his head, smile still firmly in place. "We want commitment. You walked away from us back at Horseshoe Bay. We want to make sure you won't do it again. We're not a big block of people, Tommy, but after all those who died in the quake we're a greater percentage of the population of V-town than we've been in a long time. We're what, five percent now? It's enough to sway an election."

I rubbed one of my hands to my forehead. I could feel a headache coming on.

"I'll *think* about it. Alright?"

"All we want is commitment, Mr. Taggart. Is that so much to ask?"

"Fine." I had to take a deep breath and force my mind onto other questions. "How did you manage to score yourself this apartment, having just wandered your way in from the wilds?"

His body went stiff. "That was... more of the same. Some of us who had shared the most information managed to make a deal with the traders. We'd get a month's rent on a place like this if we promised to report any news to them."

Wonderful.

"This, Richard, is strictly off the record. Understand? We were never here."

He nodded. "Sure. We're back in civilization now, I don't have any loyalties to them."

"Alright, who were 'they', Richard?"

"Haven't the slightest." He rolled his eyes. "They sent a different person every time and they never gave their names. Didn't wear any identification, didn't have any branding. I could walk past one of them on the street and never know."

"Fine." I raised, turning to leave. "Anything, anything else you can tell us, Richard?"

I could hear him getting to his feet behind me.

"I don't know anything, Tommy. Really. They just showed up one day with a smile and offered to trade, everything from blankets to fuel, to Club-Caf take-out."

Back out into the hallway, my guard dogs huddled around me like I'd been gone for a year. Not one of them said a word, but I noticed more than a few wagging tails that I was back in one piece.

"So what do we do now, mate?" English was still beside me as we stepped onto the street, pressed close by the mass of police dogs.

"What I'm going to do," I let out a breath, "is go home and talk to Rebecca about this whole *marriage* thing. You're," I poked him in the chest, "Not coming with me."

"Aww." His face fell in mock despair. "But I want to see how she reacts." He mused for a moment, raising one curved and wicked looking claw to his chin with a grin. "She hasn't the teeth or claws to rip you apart too bad... but then again, I've seen her do some pretty..."

I gave him a shove, knocking him into a police dog before he could finish. The dog yipped in surprise, but English just laughed.

I left them behind at the entrance to my apartment building. English wandered off somewhere or other down the street, and the dogs took up position around the building, holding back the ever present protesters. The folks milling out in the street seemed a little more active today, KDP must have upped their wages.

It felt odd to walk through the lobby and not have Jon rush out to meet me. I hadn't realized just how accustomed I'd become to always having him around. In many ways he was the exact opposite of English. The lion was bold, brash, and loud. Jon was quiet, reserved, and, frankly, I knew next to nothing about him. I'd practically pulled English's whole life story from him, but I couldn't even tell you Jon's age.

Up the stairs, I took it slow, trying to decide what I'd tell Rebecca. Gods, I couldn't lie, and I couldn't tell her that the humans weren't pushing for it. Not only would that be the worst way imaginable to start a marriage, but somehow I doubted that I'd get more than five steps before she found out.

I clicked the door open to the apartment and was happy to see her sitting at the kitchen counter, perched on a stool. That was good. It would be a little anti-climatic to worry myself all the way over here only to find the apartment empty.

"Have a good walk, Wolfy?" She set down the book in her hands as I walked up behind her, wrapping her in my arms.

"Mmmm," was about as articulate as I got as I buried my nose in her hair, taking a deep breath. She leaned back into me, straining her neck backwards to look into my eyes.

"What is it, Wolfy? You're nervous."

Count on her to take my nice little moment of distraction and shatter it to pieces.

"It's... uh..."

She swivelled around on the stool to face me. "Want to go for a walk? I found a little garden out back of the building."

A walk, yeah, a walk sounded good.

All the way along the hallway and down to the main floor I held her close to me. I could feel the warmth of her body through my fur.

I knew this was the person I wanted to spend my life with, but did *she*?

The word 'marriage'. It shouldn't mean anything to me, my parents weren't even married. I'd never imagine them breaking up, but they'd never made it an official marriage, they'd never had to. The only times wolves ever married was when there was doubt, when they wanted to prove to the world that they were together forever no matter what it might look like. And those were the relationships that were most likely to fail.

On the main floor, Rebecca lead me down a little side passage that I'd never known existed. It dumped us out in a small open air concrete space, no more than a dozen meters to a side. There were flowerbeds and potted plants scattered about. For a moment it almost smelt like the forest.

She leaned on one of the concrete flower boxes. Her dark red shirt and black pants set off her

green eyes and auburn hair.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Wolfy?" She was relaxed, laid back, not a care in the world as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sun.

I leaned on the flower box beside her, looping my arm around the small of her back.

"How long has it been since we met, babe?"

She laughed. "Gods, Tommy. It must be a year now. It's hard to believe I was still working on the Dice back then."

I had to blink to notice that she wasn't wearing her cat ears. A quick sniff of her scent and it was obvious she wasn't wearing the perfume either. She was all that stood beside me, no fakery or deception.

"Yeah, babe, a lot's changed since then."

Another giggle. "That's a mild way of putting it. But, hey, we're still here. You still have the same apartment you did when I met you, and I'm still, technically, across the hall."

I rolled my eyes. "*Technically* is a good word for it. When was the last time you slept in your own place?"

I got a jab in the nose for that one.

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No." My tongue flick out to lick the finger that still hovered in front of my face. "But, Babe, I do have something to ask you. It's been so long now, you think you might want to... you know, give up that apartment, make it official?"

She snorted. "Move in? Gods, Tommy, that was official a long time ago. We've been a package for months now. I can hardly even remember what it was like before I found my little wolf toy." She hugged me tighter.

"That wasn't what I meant, Rebecca." Gods, things were going so fast. My body was scrambling for any way out. My ears swivelled to track the sound of a scuttle out in the bushes, but I forced my mind forward.

"Babe," Stepping out in front of her, I lowered myself down awkwardly onto one knee, "I've been yours almost from the moment I first saw you. It hasn't exactly been a normal courtship, the gods know it's been anything but normal, but..." I paused for a moment to huff out a breath. When I breathed again I could smell her among the fragrances of the last of the fall flowers around us. "What I'm saying, babe, is that I don't have a ring, but..."

My ears twitched again as something moved behind me. That was the only warning I got before the back of my skull lit up with a dull, penetrating fire. I was flat on the ground before I could draw a breath. I'd heard a dull crack as I went down. On either side of me the shards of a wood pole fell.

"Tommy!" I could hear Rebecca, but I couldn't see her. All that lay before me now was a good view of the cracked and moss covered concrete ground of the garden.

My senses were starting to fight their way back from the distant fog. I could hear a scuffle behind me, two people fighting. Then a cry from someone who was most certainly *not* Rebecca.

The sound of tearing silk came to my twitching ears, then the world was coated in the smell of blood.

Oh gods.

Despite the protests of my body, I was on my feet seconds later. Rather surprisingly, I turned to see Rebecca, a sheath knife in her hand, standing over a rabbit who lay crumpled on the ground, his white fur stained with red.

"Babe?" It was all I could do to stay on my feet as I reached out to lean on her shoulder.

"Tommy, are you alright?" She stepped closer to steady me, let me lean on her, but she never

took her eyes from the rabbit.

The man's wound was little more than superficial. He lay on the ground clutching his left bicep, but the blood that seeped through his fingers was a small trickle.

"Lady, what in the flippin' name of the gods do you think you're doing?" The anger was obvious in his voice, but he wasn't stupid enough to try and make a move with her holding a knife over him.

"I think that's a better question for me to ask." Her voice was level. The knife didn't waver in her grasp. Huh, she'd gotten some more experience in this since the last time we'd been in a fight.

"I'm just doing my job." The rabbit sounded indignant. "The boss payed me to come out here and protest the mayor. That's what I'm doing."

My muscles had congealed enough by this point to let me gently push away from Rebecca and face the rabbit myself. "There's a difference between protest and assault."

I spared a quick glance at the pole he'd whacked me over the head with. It was the same as those used to hoist the placards. I could still see the shreds of a sign on it. The thing read 'No Big Bad'. I almost laughed.

My attention snapped back to the rabbit when he snorted. "Whatever. I was promised a bonus if I found something new to do. Ha!" A stupid grin spread on his face. I just realized that he couldn't be more than twenty years old. "I should be set for weeks once they hear that I actually managed to whack you!"

I backed up a step and slowly lowered myself to sit on the edge of a flower pot. The rim cut into my backside, but my legs were too weak to stand any longer.

"Listen, buddy..." He was too smart to offer his name, "You do know that the last person who tried a trick like that shot at me with a high powered rifle? They ended up dead and sent one of my friends to the hospital."

I could see the skin around his eyes pale to match the white of his coat.

"Ahh, listen, Mr. Taggert, its nothing personal, right?" He tried to scramble backwards but didn't make it further than a foot or two before running into a flower pot. "I'm just trying to make a few extra bucks, nothing more. I didn't really want to hurt you. I just wanted to see how far I could get before the cops picked me up. You just happened to be here when I climbed over the wall and I couldn't resist the opportunity."

"And what would you have done if Rebecca wasn't here, eh?" I rubbed the back of my head. The lump was painful and there were still splinters in my fur, but it was starting to go down. "How many more times would you have hit me while I was on the ground? Would you have stopped?"

He was just short of frozen stiff now, his jaw flapping up and down like an animatronic puppet.

"Really, really, Mr. Taggert, I've got nothing against you... I'm not a murderer. KDP doesn't even have a bonus line for something like that. We're just supposed to scare you, get you out of the election, that's all. I'm not a murderer," His eyes were wide as he held his hands before his face.

"Come on, dude. I'm just a rabbit, I don't even eat meat!"

I sighed. "And what does being a rabbit have to do with anything? You're just as big as me, you could have killed me while I laid there. Just because we're different species doesn't change anything. If your hand is on the knife, then you're the killer. It doesn't matter if you're a vegetarian or not."

I reached out to pull Rebecca a step back, towards me so I could whisper in her ear, "Babe, you want to get the honour guard?"

She still didn't take her eyes from the rabbit as she whispered back. "Tommy, I don't want to leave you alone."

I could see the other man's ears twitch each time we spoke. We might be whispering, but I had no illusion that he couldn't hear us.

"Yeah, babe." I squeezed her slightly. "We need a few minutes alone. Get the cops on over. But, please, take your time."

She cast another menacing glance towards the rabbit before backing away into the building. She only started moving after I smiled at her, making sure to show every single of my teeth.

The door clicked closed a moment later, but I knew for a fact that she was on just the other side of it. Listening.

"So," I walked towards the rabbit, falling to my haunches in front of him. He still sat sprawled out on the hard concrete. The wound on his arm had mostly scabbed over by now. "I thought you might want the opportunity to have a quick chat before the police arrive."

"I ain't got nothing to say, dude." He grimaced slightly as he tried to use his wounded arm to push himself to his feet. He didn't get any further than his knees before I set my hand gently on his shoulder.

"My friend." I did my best to keep my voice level, but it was hard when images of Jon slowly bleeding out from the last attack kept coming to mind. "I just want you to tell me what's going on. I can't tell the cops to let you go, they're too on edge for that, but I can get them to go easy on you."

He relaxed slightly, but not enough for the tension to fall from his muscles.

"I don't have anything else to say, dude. I sweep floors at the main KDP building down in sixth street. They're offering overtime hours to anyone who wants them if we come here and picket, bonuses if we find something new to do. I don't even know who's running it. There's a notice in the men's room. All we do is fill out a piece of paper with our supervisor and we're in." A slight grin touched his lips. "You're just lucky there aren't more people. Too many folks are still busy picking up their lives. Gods, with what being payed there could be a couple hundred people out there once things finish settling down."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at that one. Just what I wanted. The better I do at getting the city back to normal, the more people I'll have screaming obscenities at me every time I come home.

The rabbit cast his eyes down now, one of his fingers worrying at a crack in the concrete under us. "Are you serious about the cops, dude? I've heard bad things about them. Folks don't... folks don't tend to have the opportunity to make a second mistake once they get the heavy fangs involved."

I shrugged. "They do what the law tell them to, nothing more. I've got to say that I've been on their bad side before, and I never want to be there again. I've done everything I can to tone them down, but the attempts on my life have their whole 'protect the pack' thing going into overdrive."

"Heh. Yeah."

I could feel him getting ready to move just a fraction of a second before he sprang to his feet.

He was up before I could even blink. On his toes, he was scrambling away from me, trying to get enough clearance to start a full sprint to the main wall a good ten yards away.

He never made it. I was still a little bit off balance from the whack on my head, but I'd hunted down rabbits, real rabbits, a hundred times while out in the wilderness. I knew his moves better than he did. He didn't move quite like a true rabbit, but it was close enough that I caught him before he'd taken three steps.

He bolted away from me, but I followed not a heartbeat later. Bunching my legs beneath me, I didn't bother to run, I leapt straight through the air. He twisted his head around to see me, even dodged to the side, but I'd already accounted for that. I'd wrapped my fangs around far too many true rabbits to ever be distracted by his evasions.

It took everything I had not to pull him into my jaws. He even smelt like a true rabbit. Not so

much that I couldn't tell the difference, but enough to awaken the instincts of my own biff, my own wolf.

In the end I had to settle for simply digging my claws into his pelt and pulling him to the ground.

"Let me go, dude! Let me go! I don't want to be taken in with the dogs, I'll never see my family again!"

It took everything I had to hold onto him as he twisted in my grasp. I wasn't nearly so experienced at this part as the catching. They were normally dead by now.

The fact that I knew what they were going to do to the poor kid didn't help much either.

Rebecca had likely heard the commotion from the other side of the door. Not more than ten seconds later a tide of blue clothed brown fur was upon us in a massive dog pile.

The dogs moved almost too fast to watch. They had us separated in an instant. I was on my feet again, pulled there by two dogs at my shoulders, and the rabbit was face first on the ground. Not only were his arms cuffed behind his back, but his feet were cuffed too. He was so tightly bound that he could hardly move.

"Don't hurt me, bro! Please, don't hurt me!"

"Are you alright, Sir?" I dimly recognized Able as he moved to stand before me, cutting off my view of the rabbit. "Are you harmed?" Without another word the dog began running his hands across my body, searching for wounds. Thankfully, the bump on the back of my head had gone down enough for him to miss it. I could only imagine how the dogs would freak if they realized I'd been hurt.

"I'm fine, Able." I pushed him away to see the rabbit, but my assailant had already been carried off.

I grabbed Able by his uniform before he could usher me away. His blue shirt was exactly the same as what Jon wore. If not for the different pips on their shoulders I would almost have thought they were the same dog.

"Just... just be easy on the kid okay, Able."

He cocked his head at me. "Easy on him, Sir? He assaulted you, possibly with the intent to kill. We will not be *easy* on him, Sir. He will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law." He huffed out a breath. "If we are *easy* on him, Sir, it would only encourage others to try the same. And, speaking of which," He scratched the back of his head, averting his eyes from me, "It would appear the we have once again lapsed in your defence." His tail fell to the ground as a slight whine escaped his lips. "I would understand, Sir, if you found this to be reasonable grounds to request a replacement. I only just took over your security yesterday, but it seems I have already failed."

I threw my arm over the dog as we slowly walked back into the building. I noticed that no small number of guards were still pressed close around us.

"How about this, Able," We began walking down the hallway to the lobby, "You prove you can follow my orders, like say making sure the kid doesn't disappear into the machinery of the police department, and I'll call it square. A lot of folks seem to have it out for me right now, and I'd rather not start throwing away my most talented people. Speaking of which," I peered up and down the hallway for Baker, the other superintendent, "Where is your comrade?"

A slight smile edged onto Able's lips. "I am the senior of the two of us. I as moved into Constable Oak's position when he was incapacitated. Superintendent Baker has retained his post, dealing with the paperwork of your office."

I shrugged. "Fair enough I guess."

I could tell there was something happening on the other side of the doorway to the lobby before I'd even gotten ten feet from it. There was an charge to the air as if someone had started a sports match.

The first person I saw after stepping through was Rebecca, she was by my side in a second. The next was Renald.

The tan wolf stood just within the front doors of the building, backed by a half dozen hunters of all different stripes. Amstys among them. They and the police dogs were faced off as if ready to break into a street brawl.

"This is a secure area, Mr. Renald." One of the police dogs was speaking, yelling out as if addressing an audience of hundreds. "You are normally welcome to see the mayor, but we are currently in lock-down as there has just been an attempt on his life."

"And that's why we're here, mongrel. The hunter's alpha heard about the attempt yesterday and wishes his son brought to him."

The dog slowed down, taking on the voice of one speaking to a small child. "No, you misunderstand. There has been *another* attempt. Just moments ago."

"What?" Amstys broke from the ranks behind Renald, pushing his way to the front. It wasn't hard, the black and grey wolf was more than a head and shoulders above the crowd.

That was likely why he was the first to see me.

"Young master!" He'd had little resistance while he'd been pushing through the hunters, but that changed once he met the police dog line.

The dogs leapt and bit, trying to drag him down by sheer weight alone as he rushed towards me. Amstys brushed them away like so many leaves in the autumn wind. Behind him the hunters sprang into action, surging through the hole the wolf had made.

"Stop!" I bellowed it out at the top of my lungs.

It did little good. No one more than a few feet away even heard me.

The only other thing I could do was throw my head back and howl.

The sound was eerie and otherworldly even to my own ears. It had been a *long* time since I had last howled. My voice had changed.

The majority of people fighting around me were canine, all of the police and at least two thirds of the hunters.

They froze when they heard the howl. A howl was, unlike many non-canines thought, a sign of dominance. The alpha of a pack lead the howl. It was a claim of land, of territory. If you could hear a wolf's howl you were more than likely in his territory.

My bellow had done little, but the howl cut through the chaos like a claw through warm fat. Even the felines stopped to look up when the sound came.

I pressed the howl, a single long, hanging note, until my lungs burnt like coals in my chest.

Beside me I could feel Rebecca shiver as she clutched me tighter.

I had to pause, panting, after my cry had dyed away. It didn't seem to matter, not a soul moved or made a sound.

"Amstys, Renald." My voice was ragged. "Here. Now."

Both wolves were obediently at my side a moment later, eyes and tails to the ground. Not a single one of the dogs tried to stop them.

"Spill it." My own tail was up as I spoke, hackles raised.

Amstys was the first to speak, his voice a quiet rumble, "The hunter's alpha requested your presence, young master. He sent me and the first pack to come get you." The wolf paused for a moment before lowering his voice, "He wants to know you're safe. He is worried for you." Amstys swallowed down a lump in his throat. "We all are. You're here all alone with these dogs."

I pushed the two of them aside as, Rebecca in my arm, I began walking towards the doors to the street.

The police dogs tried to form around me the moment I began moving.

"Able!" The dog was beside me almost before his name left my lips. "Call 'em off. I have the hunters, they'll handle this run. You get your men back up to snuff and secure the building."

"But, Sir, you can't seriously trust the hunters to..."

I turned to him as I walked, never breaking stride. "*I am a hunter, Able.*" I let my voice soften slightly, "I trust you and your dogs, I really do, but we're going to the hunters camp, out in the wilderness."

He gave me a quick nod. There was no way the dogs would ever follow me outside the city, no matter what their orders were. I heard him growl something to the other dogs, I couldn't make it out, and they fell away in a heartbeat to reform at the back of the room. Every single one of them was picture perfect, pressed and creased uniforms, like there had never even been a fight.

Given the void around me, the hunters took their place. The police had been crisp, parade perfect, the hunters not so. They stalked at odd distances, each one with his or her own gait. Frankly, I'd be more afraid of the hunters in a fight.

Amstys and Renald were closest to me. Amstys on my side, Renald on Rebecca's. I'd seen just the slightest of a match between them to decide who would stand where. The larger, older wolf won.

The protesters out on the street weren't stupid enough to stand in our way as we walked past them. They might have thought to challenge a police dog, but not a snarling hunter.

I let the hunters lead. I'd only ever been to the camp once, and that was weeks ago. I just kept setting one foot in front of the other until we got there.